

NAIYER MASUD

Custody

I

THERE'S NO LONGER ANYONE around now who can even tell what exactly was sold at Nauroz's Shop. It can be surmised though, on the basis of a few scattered oral traditions and some true or false stories, that when this town was just a small hamlet, Nauroz's Shop had already been in existence for quite a long time. Back then it was right in the middle of the community so the residents of the hamlet could pretty much buy whatever was needed there. If this was really the case, one might also surmise that it was the hamlet's only shop in those days.

It remained in operation for several generations, and in each generation the owner's name remained Nauroz. Even though he had a different name before taking over the shop, after taking it over everyone called him Nauroz, probably because the shop was called Nauroz's Shop. These people had some genetically inherited condition which caused every Nauroz to eventually lose his mind. When this happened to one Nauroz, another Nauroz took his place at the shop, losing his own mind in turn, followed by another Nauroz who worked there until he also lost his mind. This continuing streak of madness was considered to be the result of some curse. People who believed in this sometimes got into spirited discussions about whether the curse was on the shop, the owners of the shop, or the appellation "Nauroz."

When a Nauroz would stop showing up at the shop, one knew he'd gone mad. But there was also one Nauroz who clung to the shop even

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after losing his mind, with the result that within a few days the shop itself began to look crazy. I belong to the time of that Nauroz.

At first, nobody suspected that that Nauroz had gone mad. Although, if they had given it some thought, it wasn't something that was hard to figure out, because, in a matter of just a few days, the shop's condition became such that when it opened one day it would be chockful of clay toys. The next day it would be filled with domestic birds, and it was selling their meat on still another day. One would see herbal plants on one day and piles of firewood on another. But instead of suspecting that something was the matter with Nauroz's mind, people became fascinated by the changing merchandise, indeed to such an extent that they started betting among themselves about what item was likely to be on sale the next day when the shop opened. Only when this fascination had spread like an epidemic did some people, who had repeatedly lost their bets, suspect—the suspicion itself spreading like an epidemic—that Nauroz had gone crazy. Then it became a routine that people would gather outside the shop every morning and, when it opened and its curtain was lifted up, they would distribute among themselves whatever merchandise could be had and they would leave whatever they thought its price was on top of the high takht with heavy posts, in a corner of which Nauroz sat huddled.

One day, when the curtain was lifted, Nauroz couldn't be found anywhere. The takht was empty and two baby girls, who hadn't yet learned to sit properly, were playing with two clay balls on the floor. Naturally, this became the talk of the town. And also, naturally again, neither the girls nor the clay balls, which were perhaps their toys, were considered the shop's merchandise. So, it could be said that that was the first day Nauroz's shop had nothing at all to sell.

After searching unsuccessfully for Nauroz people began to look for somebody who could take care of the girls, because, so far, they had remained unclaimed. People also looked for a new Nauroz. The absent Nauroz did have a brother, but he was already mad and, according to some, mad since birth. Even so, he was brought in and repeatedly made to sit on the shop's takht, but, each time, he fled the minute the opportunity presented itself, finally disappearing altogether one day like his brother had done earlier. During this time the girls stayed with me because I used to live above Nauroz's shop and one of the staircases to my place started inside the shop. Also, nobody else agreed to raise them.

And, although the shop was no longer in business, people had meanwhile also started calling me Nauroz. Then, one day, I took stock of the shop.

The shop became visible immediately upon reaching the last bend in the road which ran along the edge of the jungle by the ruins. In place of a door it had a heavy curtain which was raised onto two bamboo poles like a canopy during business hours. At that time, from a distance, it sometimes looked like a child who had just woken up and was yawning, and sometimes it looked like a ferocious animal opening its mouth before making a sound. I was interested in both of these similarities and occasionally, in moments when my mind was wandering, I would think about them.

The shop's floor was somewhat lower than the ground outside. The space inside the shop was much bigger than that of any other shop in town. Its high walls had compartments and shelves in several places, or thick wooden pegs and heavy iron hooks. There were also many criss-crossing rope webbings that were tied to these hooks. Bamboo poles and chains hung from the rafters with hooks on either end. In many places the floor also had recessed compartments of various sizes which had been reinforced with bricks and then covered over with fitted boards. Brass rings were attached to these boards for lifting them up. There were also brass rings in quite a few places on the unpaved floor, but there were no compartments beneath them. I pulled these rings up one by one and examined them closely but detected no movement around them. Just foolishness—I thought; then I counted these pointless rings. Could it be, I wondered, that their number corresponded to the number of generations that had run Nauroz's Shop? I examined the entire shop again. Wall compartments, floor compartments, pegs, webbings, bamboo poles and chains suspended from the ceiling, all manner of empty jars and baskets lying about on the floor—they all revealed that the shop had seen many generations, but they gave no clue as to what object or group of objects was, in fact, sold there.

I sat down on a corner of the takht with the heavy posts which the last Nauroz used to sit on before his disappearance. Although bereft of saleable merchandise, the shop still looked so full that it was impossible to move about in it freely. As I continued sitting on the corner of the takht, I felt that all the objects scattered around me were more precious than the merchandise that had been sold here. But, I would not, I resolved, let a single one of these objects be sold, at least not as long as I'm called Nauroz. Meanwhile, I remembered the original intent with which I had come to examine the shop. Once again I looked at each and every object and finally felt assured that there was nothing here that could possibly harm small children. I climbed the staircase inside the shop returning to

my place where both girls had by now woken up. The minute they saw me they both started pushing themselves toward me, but without making any noise.

They had now learned to sit. In fact, for several days already they had even started to crawl forward a bit as they sat, only to fall down after going a distance of one or two lengths of the hand. I sort of liked the way they tumbled over silently and remained silent after falling. I sometimes sat them up and started to back away slowly, snapping my fingers. They would crawl forward with their eyes fixed on my hand and eventually tilt to one side and fall. This was my only game with them up to now. After playing with them for a little while I would pick them up and carry them downstairs to the shop. There, I sat them on the unpaved floor and, all of a sudden, they would come to life as though a fish's young had been released into water. After pushing their tiny bodies toward everything at first, one started off in the direction of the jars while the other aimed for a basket. They only went a short distance and then both toppled over on their sides, picked themselves up again and moved, then again fell back down. This time though, as one of them tried to raise herself, her eyes fell on the hooks hanging from the ceiling. In trying to reach for them she fell on her back on the soft dirt floor. I picked her up and sat her down. Then I brought a basket over to her. The other girl had come upon the ring handle of a board and was trying to eat it. I sat her beside the basket too and one of them got involved with it. At that point I looked at them closely. Their faces and bodies were so similar that they could be considered twin sisters. The thought struck me that I might have given water, etc., twice over to just one of them on several occasions. Only after a close and protracted inspection could I perceive some slight difference in their features, but what stood in the way of identifying each of them individually was their eyes. Their eyes were absolutely identical.

These belonged to a race I wasn't familiar with. I even thought that eyes such as these were only seen in paintings, although, unlike the eyes in a painting, soft lights seemed to glimmer somewhere deep inside of them. After watching them for some time it occurred to me that I had absolutely no connection with these girls and I had been made responsible for them for no reason at all. As a result, some of my habits had been changed and certain routines had pretty much been done away with. I realized that because of these girls I had had to stop going to the jungle, or even observing it sitting inside my quarters. So I thought, in fact I

more or less decided, to keep them at Nauroz's house which I could see clearly from my place. This was a small, old but strongly-constructed building that stood a little ways from the shop and it was where Nauroz had lived with his brother. I'd never gone there, and even Nauroz himself had never spent much time there. I remembered him. As long as he had remained of sound mind, he had routinely closed the shop at sundown and walked off toward some place outside of town. He would return late at night, sometimes even the next day, empty-handed or with some merchandise for the shop. Besides his brother, he had no relatives, at least not in this town where he had his shop. His dealings with the townsfolk didn't go beyond what was required by the business, and with me they were even less. Nevertheless, I looked over his accounts now and then, and he had given me the space above his shop to live in. He sometimes wandered in there of his own accord, but it never seemed that he had come to see me, so I didn't attempt to talk with him much. Still we did converse a little and then he addressed me as Saasaan, informing me that that was my family name. He always took a place near the window which stood directly above the entrance to the shop. If he spotted an approaching customer from there, he immediately got up and went quickly down the inner staircase, arriving in the shop before the customer.

My own favorite place to sit was by this same window because the trees in the jungle by the ruins were clearly visible from that vantage point.

I sensed a faint glimmer of those trees before my eyes and realized that I had actually been staring at the girls' eyes this entire time. They had stopped playing with the basket and were feeling frightened watching me staring at them so intently. When I straightened up, they started to crawl toward me with halting steps, their frightened eyes still glued to me. I felt that even though they were frightened of me, they still wanted to rush over to me. I took a few steps backwards; they started to crawl faster. Before they tumbled over, I lunged forward and picked the two of them up together. Their tiny hearts were racing. I succeeded in making them smile, but only after a long time.

I had no experience with raising children. Nonetheless I was raising them, somehow or other. At first I had thought that the people who lived in the area around the shop, whom I knew quite well, would help make my job

easier. Because I read and wrote for them, they cared for me a lot and were also quite mindful of my needs. But when I brought up the subject of the girls around them a few times, they took off in other directions.

One day a nice breeze was blowing so I took the girls out as far as the bend in the road. After playing with them on the soft grass at the edge of the road for a while I was taking them back when I saw four or five important townsmen standing in front of the shop's curtain. I asked about a few ordinary things, to which they gave cursory answers and then became silent. They remained silent for quite a while. Then one of them, without pointing at the girls, said, "Nauroz, don't bring them out."

"Why, is something wrong with that?" I asked.

"Not really, but ..." he said, "Who knows who they are."

"Why," I asked, "couldn't he have had daughters?"

"Daughters?" he said. "Then why did he abandon them?"

"He had gone mad."

"So does every Nauroz, Nauroz. But even a mad man ..."

After that all of them stared at me for a long time without speaking.

"Even so," I said finally, "is there something wrong with bringing them out?"

"Who knows who they are?"

"No one has come forward to claim them?"

"None at all," he said. "But does that mean there isn't any claimant?"

"I'm taking care of them," I said, "all by myself, and I think their claimant is Nauroz."

"Which Nauroz?"

Several answers came as far as my lips and stopped. All of them, perhaps expecting an answer, had their eyes fixed on me.

"All right," I had to say, "From now on I won't bring them out."

That very day I removed the curtain from the shop's entrance and installed a regular door in its place, making doubly sure that it could be closed from both inside and out. The townsfolk helped me a lot in this, just as they always had in everything else.

After making sure the door was secure I decided, first of all, to make a visit to the jungle by the ruins.

I used to go there fairly regularly, almost daily, before Nauroz's disappearance. I did this to survey the interior of the jungle, but mostly I ended up just enjoying the sights of the ruins, though not completely, since they couldn't be seen clearly because of the tremendous density of

the trees. The trees' serpentine growth along the stone balconies that were drooping over dilapidated columns made it well-nigh impossible to determine the true form and character of their crooked trunks or their cracked bark. The vines, running recklessly here and there, going up and down trees, brought to mind children playing in the garden of a home and prompted a person to touch them involuntarily. Sometimes these vines seemed to be laughing and crying without even breaking the silence of the jungle. Dense straw bushes, sprouting from the dirt which stuck to the surface of the rocks, soared higher and higher, while the aerial roots of ancient trees seemed in need of help struggling to find a way to the soil through the crevices in the rocks.

It was impossible to gauge the dimensions of the exterior of the jungle from this vantage point, but the window above Nauroz's Shop where I sat—and Nauroz as well—did offer a clear view of the jungle's treetops, so there one could get some idea of the jungle's outward form, at least someone who had also seen the jungle from the inside while wandering through the ruins.

This wasn't a real jungle, just a cluster of old trees and wild bushes growing through the crevices of the ruins' massive walls, whose exact height or depth it was impossible to ascertain. Wherever the crown of one tree was found, the root of another tree started up in a crevice nearby. More trees grew in the lower area, taking on bizarre forms in order to escape from the shade of the trees growing in the areas up above. These lower trees went straight up for some distance, then bent to one side and continued along parallel to the ground, and then straightened up again after passing the perimeters of the shade. To the eye, this multi-storied jungle looked like the garden in a scenic photograph which had wrinkled in several places. When the wind blew quickly, the fluttering sound of paper, like the pages of a book being riffled, could be heard. But when the wind changed into a dust storm, the sounds of the jungle also changed, frightening the townsfolk at night. Strange noises rose and fell in the fluctuating gusts of the storm and a man could, if he used his imagination, find similarities to other sounds. Perhaps the townspeople did just that. Why, without trying even I heard cackles, sobs, laughter, cries of joy and pain, reprimands and laments in the sounds of the jungle on several occasions while I was sitting by the window above Nauroz's Shop.

Sometimes, right in the middle of these sounds, suddenly a sound as if somebody was screaming something could also be heard. This may have been the sound of large limbs snapping and their barks splitting. At least I

thought so. But people spun stories about that sound. These stories had been circulating for generations and were perhaps as old as Nauroz's Shop. Each story invariably ended with the sound definitely being heard just before the onset of madness in a Nauroz. Nobody could ever figure out what the sound said, but it was rumored that every owner of Nauroz's Shop understood it sometime or other, after which he stopped taking care of the shop and went mad, or went mad and stopped taking care of the shop.

However, this sound was not heard by the Nauroz of my time—the one just prior to me. Several times, of course, the sound was heard and no Nauroz lost his head, but the townsfolk maintained that this was the first time a Nauroz had ever lost his head without the sound being heard. Perhaps this was why people at first didn't think that he had gone mad.

That day I didn't enjoy my excursion in the jungle and came out rather quickly, yet it was evening by the time I reached home. When I went down the inner stairs I found the shop dark and still. I strained my ears and detected the sound of breathing. Standing by the staircase, I snapped my fingers a few times and strained my eyes to see two tiny blurred figures crawling toward me. A short while later I felt the touch of their slender fingers on my shins. Before long their arms were wrapped around my knees. And so, holding onto me, they stood up for the first time ever.

In a few days they'll be running around, I thought, and carried them upstairs. From that very day I started to have them sit with me by the window. The season of strong winds had just set in. With their painting-like eyes they could see the trees of the jungle swaying from side to side and they felt happy hearing the flutter coming from them. When, however, the wind became a gusting dust storm for the first time, they became frightened. But I didn't take them away from the window. In a little while they started to listen to the strange new sounds of the jungle with even greater interest. Apart from those occasions, I usually kept them down in the shop and listened to them play, laugh or shout from my quarters. When their noises started to grow faint, I understood that they were feeling tired. I would then go down and bring them up. Watching me with the twinkling lights of their eyes, they would soon fall asleep.

They slept through and didn't wake up until very early in the morning. Well before that I would go downstairs and open the shop's door fully. After making sure that the fresh breeze outside had filled every cor-

ner of the shop, I would close it securely. Then I would bring them downstairs, where there was nothing to harm them.

3

Those days were such that I began to think they would never change, nor even the seasons, although now, on the far side of the jungle, where the sky met the earth, a dusty greyness appeared in place of the twilight red, and, at times, the entire sky had a dull muddy color. Somewhere high up the gusting storm left small silent flashes of lightning in its wake. I looked at them and thought of them as a common occurrence because in Nauroz's Shop everything from top to bottom remained intact.

But late one evening when the sounds of laughter and playing had grown progressively fainter and finally stopped, I padded quietly down into the shop and stood by the staircase snapping my fingers. Without straining my eyes I saw the fuzzy shapes crawling toward me, felt a touch on my shins and then a grip on my knees, and I bent down to pick both of them up together—but only a single body came into my hands. I extended one hand and groped around thinking one of the girls was just running away from me as a game. I then turned the lights on in the shop and I knew immediately there was only one girl there. I searched for the other like a madman. I stuck my hand in the empty jars, turned the baskets upside down, lifted up the boards over the underground compartments, and even tugged on the rings which I knew for a fact had no compartment underneath. I looked at the ceiling and the hooks hanging from it, and three times I climbed the staircase which I myself had come down in the first place. The shop's curtain was rolled up in a corner. I unrolled it and spread it out on the floor tapping on each of its folds. Finally, I shook the shop's door, only to discover that its panels were not closed tightly. I didn't remember closing the door that morning, or even opening it, but it was open now.

They were just here, I thought. I went out of the shop and started walking straight ahead. It occurred to me that I had left the door wide open. I scurried back. By the time I was halfway I had already begun to convince myself that I would find them both there when I got back. However, I only found one of them sitting there looking at me. Her eyes were heavy with sleep and she appeared to be waiting for me to tuck her in. I picked her up, brought her upstairs and lay her on my bed. I started patting her clumsily as though I wasn't trying to put her to sleep but

rather to wake her up by shaking her vigorously. Even so, she soon fell asleep watching me. I looked at her closely for a moment and then, after covering her, I went out. I had only walked a few steps when it struck me that I had again left the door open. I turned on my heels, closed the door securely, and started off.

I stopped at the bend. Here, the road curved sharply to the right and continued on to other small towns. On my left, the jungle's entrance looked like a crumbling black wall. I had walked some distance along the road when I imagined that I heard a sound in the jungle and, without thinking or planning, I just plunged into that maze of rocks and vegetation. Never before that evening had I ventured into the jungle at night; it was pitch dark inside. I heard a sound like the fluttering of paper. The entire jungle reverberated with it, and it didn't have any significance. As I was thinking of getting out of there, the wind developed into a storm and sounds inundated me from all sides. Somebody said something loudly somewhere quite far away, and all the other sounds immediately grew louder. In the middle of all these sounds, I repeatedly imagined that I heard the sound of a child, but sometimes this sound came from on top of the crowns of the trees growing at the highest elevation and sometimes it appeared to be flitting through the rustling bushes. I was hearing quite a bit more besides. I just kept climbing up and down the piles of rocks as I made my way pushing aside the vines and shoving the bushes apart. Meanwhile, at some point I suddenly realized that the dust storm had passed and the jungle was quiet. I also stopped and stood in complete silence for a while.

There's nothing here, I finally told myself as I peered out into the darkness here and there. In the distance the jungle's entrance appeared like a big bluish blob. I came out, stared down the road that headed toward other small towns for a while, and then I headed back to the shop, but I stopped near it. It wasn't yet late at night so I turned toward the streets of the town and knocked on the door of whatever house I found in front of me. I gaped at the residents of the house with suspicion, queried them insanely, and, by midnight, had earned the displeasure of the entire town. My own displeasure was no less. When I mentioned at the very first door that one of the girls was missing, I was asked, "Which one?"

After that everyone asked me the same question. In answer I grilled them with senseless questions and then pushed on to the next place after making them terribly unhappy. Finally, the important men of the town stopped me at one place and asked me the same question: which girl had disappeared? and then they started to grill me. They also said that I

shouldn't have left the girls alone in the shop in the first place, at which I said, "They weren't alone, I was."

They looked at me the way someone looks at a madman. Then they tried to make me believe that I hadn't been negligent and that, therefore, I shouldn't let it bother me. At this I looked at them the way someone looks at a madman. I did give them some answer or other to every one of their questions, but when one of them, who had been especially kind to me, said, "Nauroz, you shouldn't have been suspicious of everyone like this," I remained silent. And when another man said, "And as far as suspicion goes ... well, we can ask what did you do with her too, can't we?" Still I remained silent.

Whatever they said subsequently, I didn't respond. They interpreted my silence in different ways and talked a lot trying to put me at ease. Nevertheless, I continued standing there in silence. At last, the kind man stepped forward, almost embraced me, and said, "Perhaps this had to happen, Nauroz. And ... in a manner of speaking ... look at it this way: only *one* has disappeared."

"Only one ..." I said, "but which one?"

Naturally, he had no answer, and yet he was about to say something, but, before he could do so, I freed myself from his grasp.

"I've been out here for quite a long time ..." I told him in a tired voice, then returned home.

The only girl was sleeping on my bed as before. I spent the rest of the night watching her. I became convinced that the one who had disappeared was exactly like her; so I couldn't tell, even with one girl sleeping right in front of me, which of the two had, in fact, disappeared. This question was gnawing at me in a million different ways, but the question of which one was the one who was still with me, bothered me even more. While I was still grappling with these questions morning dawned. The girl began to squirm and I became busy taking care of her.

For the next three days I kept her near me constantly. For three days the townsfolk dispatched men to other small towns. For three days these men kept coming to me again and again to look at the girl so that they could describe her to others, and the girl kept clinging to me looking at the outsiders. On the fourth day I noticed that her face was changing: it had become longer, her eyes had become larger than before, and the lights deep inside her eyes now appeared dimmed. She remained absolutely silent at all times, unwilling to let go of me even for a minute, in fact, one of her

hands continued touching my body even when she slept. Some times a faint sob escaped from her lips, as if she had been crying for a long time, although I had never seen her cry, and I wondered whether the other girl might also be in the same condition. Thinking such things I went down the stairs and out onto the road at night, peering everywhere without feeling any curiosity. Soon I heard the sound of crying upstairs. But when I got back, stomping up the stairs, I found her still asleep and silent.

4

Those days which I thought would never change, had changed. And now, to me, these days, these new days, didn't seem likely to ever change. I remembered what the kind man of the town had said, "The disappearance of a child is far worse than its death, Nauroz."

I hadn't said anything in response, but I could tell now why it was so. There were times when I longed for the news of her death to arrive, and there were times when I only wanted to hear that she was alive. I could see that the one who was still with me had gradually begun to wither away.

At last, when a strong desire to do something had arisen inside of me, although I didn't quite know what to do, then, late one night, Nauroz turned up.

He had concealed himself inside of a big blanket and couldn't be seen clearly in the darkness. He knocked gently at the shop's door three times and softly called out Saasaan to me. I peered at him from the window and then went down and opened the door just a little. He didn't come inside. When he sat down on the ground a short distance from the threshold, I realized that it was pointless to try calling him in, so I sat down near him on the threshold.

"One disappeared," I informed him as soon as I sat down.

After that, without asking him anything myself, I told him everything: from the moment when my groping hand had found only one body inside the shop, to the moment when Nauroz, wrapped in the darkness of the town's night and a big blanket, sat down on the ground outside the shop—I didn't neglect telling him anything.

Nauroz heard me out in silence and remained silent for quite a while after I was finished. Then he said, "You aren't willing to give her up."

And, without waiting for my answer, added, "And she isn't willing to stay with me."

Then a tiny body slipped under my arms.

"She looks a little sickly," Nauroz was saying, "but she'll get better living with you, and with the other one."

"You took her, Nauroz?" I couldn't say anything else.

"You guarded her well, but ..." he stopped and touched the door, "it isn't good for doors that are usually closed to be left open one day."

He drew a deep breath, passed his hand over the door, and said, "That's why a curtain always hung over the entrance."

"I've saved the curtain," I told him, then asked, "Shall I get rid of the door?"

"No," he said, feeling terribly distressed, "it's already installed."

"Go now," Nauroz said, "take her to her."

I stood up, and said as I was leaving, "Don't go yet, Nauroz."

"I'm here."

The girl pressed against my chest was sound asleep, nevertheless, I heard her sob faintly. I walked quietly upstairs and laid her down on my bed too. The other girl was crying in her sleep. I patted her gently, and placed each girl's hand on the body of the other. Suppressing a desire to stay there and watch them for a long time, I went down to Nauroz. He had stood up meanwhile and was rubbing his hand over the door. When he saw me he turned around and started going away slowly. I lunged forward and caught up to him and he stopped.

"How is Brother?" he asked.

For a while I struggled with whether to answer his question or not, and then said, "He's disappeared too."

"They didn't search for him?"

"No."

He started walking again with slow steps. Seeing that I was walking along, he touched my shoulder and said, "All right, go back to them now."

Knowing that I wouldn't get an answer, I still asked him, "Where did you go, Nauroz?"

He kept walking forward without saying a word. I asked, "Where do you live?"

I realized that this was more or less the same question, and Nauroz didn't answer this one either. Instead, he started walking faster. I again rushed forward, caught up and walked alongside of him for some ways.

"What are they to you?"

“Merchandise,” he answered in one word and then became quiet.

“Who was their mother?”

“They don’t have a mother.”

“What was she to you?”

“Merchandise,” he again replied with the same word and became quiet.

Will he keep this up forever? I wondered, and asked, “Why did you abandon them, Nauroz?”

“Why, you were there, Saasaan?”

“Saasaan,” I repeated, and told him, “My name is now Nauroz.”

His feet slowed down.

“Two Naurozes at one time ...” he said thinking something and said faltering, “Then one of them has to be crazy.”

I realized without a shred of doubt that he hadn’t lost his mind, but just then his tone took on a wild quality, “Go back!” he howled, “What you’ve installed and forget to close is open.”

I grabbed his hand, “Nauroz, if I need to see you urgently ...”

“At the mouth,” he answered, again with a howl, “sometimes and only ...”

“You live in the jungle?”

“In the jungle, only ... humans don’t live in the jungle.”

He jerked his hand free and concealed it under the blanket. I clung to a corner of the blanket and asked like an obstinate child, “Why did you abandon the shop, Nauroz?”

“It was time to become mad,” he answered, and the blanket was no longer in my grasp.

He was walking so fast now that I couldn’t keep up with him. I also remembered the shop’s door which had been left open and I spun around and went back, walking more or less as fast as Nauroz was.

Both of them were sleeping, with the hand of one resting on the other. I bent over them and watched them for the longest time. Now their two faces looked different to me, but even that night, very little of which was left, I couldn’t figure out which one of them had disappeared. The faint sound of their sobs was also identical.

“Where did you find her, Nauroz?” the kind man asked.

“By the ledge of the shop’s door,” I answered.

“Surely somebody had kidnapped her,” he said, “but then why did he bring her back?” He started to think of something.

“Perhaps he couldn’t keep her amused.”

“Children aren’t kidnapped to be kept amused, Nauroz,” he said and went off still lost in some thought.

That was the only conversation concerning the girl’s return that I had with the townsfolk, although I had feared that I would get tired of responding to a barrage of questions and eventually having to repeat myself over and over. I had imagined that the stream of visitors coming to see her would continue unabated for several days, leaving me little time to attend to the needs of those tiny patients. But no one besides the kind man turned up at the shop, and the girls recovered so expeditiously that I was truly amazed. Before long everything was back to the way it had been, except that I no longer opened the door to let some fresh air in. I looked out the window at the jungle as before and I also brought the girls to the window for longer stretches of time. They mostly played downstairs in the shop as before, while I, in the comfort of my quarters upstairs, listened to them laughing and screeching.

I not only took strolls through the town, I also headed off to other towns, and roamed around in the jungle as well. Many times, I went to the mouth of the jungle at midnight and returned only after going some distance into it in the dark. Nauroz had said that humans didn’t live in the jungle, but in this one, by the ruins, I didn’t even see an animal, and yet I suspected that Nauroz’s place was there somewhere. I even tried to search for him several times during my daytime strolls, but I never did find traces of anyone living there. I did, however, develop some ideas about the ruins during these searches.

At first I had thought that these were the ruins of some large building, but now I was absolutely certain that they were from some hamlet that, without having been visited by any heavenly or earthly disaster, had been progressively deserted over the course of time. Later on, the pressure of the growing trees had shaken its foundations and hidden most of it, and various dust storms had rocked the trees violently causing the hamlet’s remains to crumble. How long it might have taken, I didn’t try to guess because I couldn’t stir up enough interest in me for these lifeless ruins; and I didn’t try to imagine how they might have looked in their original condition. I didn’t even slow down when I passed by the crumbled walls, drooping columns, and piles of rubble. One day, though, quite a distance in from the mouth, I mistook one of the small ruins for Nauroz’s Shop.

The parapet wall of an elevated passageway arching over the depressed ground had become so twisted that, from a distance, it created

the illusion of an open mouth. I walked over to it quickly. The passageway seemed rather dark; I called out softly, "Nauroz!"

A feeble echo of my voice was heard from inside the passageway, and I entered it. There was absolutely no trace of anyone living there. The area of uneven and unpaved ground was more or less about the size of Nauroz's Shop. The natural round- and oval-shaped pieces of stones were strewn here and there. I carefully evaluated everything and made sure there was nothing there that could harm children. The thought occurred to me by chance that, if it became necessary, I would bring them over here. After that I came out of the jungle.

That day there was a small fair going on near the road that ran right in front of the shop. In one area some shows for children were taking place. I noticed these children were laughing loudly and calling out each other's names. One of these groups was singing some song over and over in their less than perfect language. I could vaguely understand some of the song's words. As I listened, a thought suddenly crossed my mind, but I couldn't decide whether it was merely a suspicion or if it was a revelation, so I left the fair's shops behind and went toward Nauroz's Shop.

They were now running around inside the shop, the impressions of their tiny feet forming and dissolving and forming again all over the dirt floor. I didn't have to snap my fingers to call them to me. Hearing the sound of my footsteps, they themselves came and stood at the base of the staircase. I bent over to look at them and went up a few stairs backwards. They tried to climb the stairs too, using both their hands and their feet, and one of them fell down softly on the ground. I picked them up.

I'll have to install a barrier here—I thought, and started climbing up. At the top of the stairs I halted. And one here too—I thought again as I stood the two of them on the floor. Then, placing my hands on their shoulders, I talked to them for the first time, the kind of talk one does with children, but instead of saying something in response they merely laughed and clung to me as they looked at me again and again. I called out the names of several common, everyday objects that were around and they kept laughing and holding onto me.

This is the limit, I told myself.

I used to listen to their sounds coming from downstairs, but I never thought about the fact that they were just prattling, not really saying anything. I rummaged around and eventually located the two clay balls that were found in the shop with them. They had been fashioned by baking

fermented grey-colored clay and they were much lighter than their size suggested. It seemed that, if they were dropped, they would bounce on the floor for a long time. I twirled them around and inspected them. All this time the girls' eyes remained fixed on my hands. I maneuvered the balls on the floor in front of them for a while. Then I rolled them from side to side, and both of them immediately became interested, more interested than they had been in anything up until then. I raised the barrier at the top of the staircase and, leaving them to play with the balls, went over to sit by the window. Pretty soon they started to make laughing and screeching sounds and I thought about those sounds.

They could imitate sounds. Just about every sound of the jungle during a dust storm, and also that other sound of someone saying something in a loud voice, could be distinguished in their shrill sounds. Then I realized that they were also uttering some meaningless word-like sounds. I got up and went to them. Whenever they uttered such a sound, I showed them one of the objects that was around and repeated the name of it over and over again myself, and I also let them say it. I did this so much that before long, when I uttered the word, they would look at the object and repeat the word themselves.

In a matter of days they'll start talking to me, I assured myself as I sat them on the bed. They were happy and insistent on continuing their verbal word game, but I went on looking at them wordlessly.

Suddenly one of them let herself fall backwards on the bed and then closed her eyes. Her lips opened and closed two or three times. I bent over and looked at her. Her lips opened and closed again. I placed my hand gently on her head, and she, her eyes still closed, uttered in a slightly heavy voice, "Saasaan."

Then she opened her eyes, sat up, and looked at me laughing innocently and mischievously. I stepped back a few steps and looked at her. Then I came near her, placing my hand on my chest and saying, "Nauroz!"

Without shaking her head no, she said, "Saasaan!" and looked at me laughing as before.

"Nauroz!" I said again, pointing at myself with one finger, "Nauroz, Nauroz!"

She lay back on the bed again, shut her eyes and repeated, "Saasaan! Saasaan! Saasaan!"

Her voice sounded somewhat like a moan, and she had her hands folded over her breast, just as I did when I slept. Sleep came over her even

as I watched, still her eyes opened just a little and then closed, and I heard her drawn out whisper, “Saasaan.”

It was a brief sound and a soft whisper, but to me it seemed as if the wind was howling accompanied by all the other sounds heard among the trees of the jungle.

5

It appeared as though I was the slow-witted pupil of two tiny female teachers. In naming objects and remembering those names they were so quick that I couldn't keep up with them. Still, just like the moves of a game learned by a new player hover in his mind day and night, so too their voices echoed continually in my ears, even when—in fact, even more so when—the two had gone to sleep. Just before falling asleep, one by one, each would shut her eyes and utter in a prolonged whisper, “Saasaan.”

Afterwards, until they opened their eyes and broke into laughter, I would continue to feel that, instead of two tiny girls, two small women lay before me.

After they had fallen asleep I tried to remember the names they had spoken and I jotted them down on a piece of paper. Then, looking at the paper, I memorized those names. Slowly the number of pieces of paper was increasing and in my free time I nearly exhausted myself poring over them.

Meanwhile, I had stopped paying attention to other sounds. But one day I heard a loud, unfamiliar voice under the window, “Is this Nauroz's Shop?”

The voice of one of the townsfolk came from a short distance away, “It surely is, but it doesn't sell anything now.” And then this voice also moved under the window.

The first voice mentioned a couple of everyday items, and the local man gave the names of several shops in town and directions on how to get to them. Then another voice said something softly in an unfamiliar language and the first voice said, “Up there, in the window, there was a girl just now.”

“There are two,” the local man pointed out, “Nauroz's daughters.”

The unfamiliar voices exchanged a few words with each other, after which the first voice said, "And their mother?"

"I haven't seen her."

"When can one meet with Nauroz?"

"He's gone away somewhere. He had become mad."

"Does he have a relative?"

"I don't know much. The other shopkeepers, perhaps they would know."

The unfamiliar voices again talked to each other, and the first voice said, "Who's raising the girls?"

"Nauroz ... I really don't know much, please ask the shopkeepers. Come, I'm going that way."

Then all the voices receded into the distance and disappeared. Just then the girls, who had been silent up until then, attracted my attention toward them.

I couldn't quite figure out the conversation that had transpired below. I decided that it was accurate to think that that conversation, any sentence of it, or rather any word of it, was totally without meaning. Nevertheless, that day, at midnight, I found myself at the mouth of the jungle. After staring at its howling darkness for what seemed like an endless stretch of time, I returned home. I was back at the jungle's entrance again the following night, waiting in vain. The third night I prolonged my stay trying to hear something. I felt the entire jungle was filled with some sort of fanciful hissing sound. This was not the sound of wind; it wasn't the sound of any kind of movement at all. Perhaps then, the sound of the ruins—I wondered, and I felt as though what I had in front of me was not the mouth of the jungle but some eye, and the ruins, hidden in the darkness, were staring at me through its black socket. Even so after going through the futile exercise of staring into that hissing darkness, I returned home.

On the fourth day, about mid-afternoon, I stepped out. When I was returning, after wandering aimlessly along the straight road, my eyes fell on the open door of Nauroz's house. It usually stayed open and from a distance it looked like the door of an empty house. However, that day I spotted people moving around inside. I'd never seen them in the town before. Two or three were also pacing about outside the house. They glanced at me briefly; the real focus of their attention was the shop which they were looking at up and down, up and down, over and over. This

may have been the reason why, when I started to climb up the outer staircase to my place, I felt several eyes creeping along my back.

The two were waiting for me. As soon as they saw me they leapt toward me and, in order to please me, started doing all the things that only children can do; I too did all the things a grown-up can do only to please children and no one else, which don't necessarily indicate his own pleasure. But I didn't let them go anywhere near the window, although I myself did go to it several times. Each time I observed that a strong, steady wind was bending the trees of the jungle to one side, and one eye or another in Nauroz's house was glued to the window.

Today I'll find him no matter what, I decided, even if I have to set up fires in half the jungle. But I was still asleep after midnight. I was awakened by a knock at the shop's door. I waited for a while for someone to call out, then I got up and looked down from the window. I recognized the blanket-wrapped Nauroz and went downstairs. He held my hand gently and let go of it, turning around to go. I closed the door securely and started walking behind him, leaving some distance between us.

His stride was chaotic and uneven. Had I not firmly resolved to see him, I would probably have hesitated to go with him. I noticed that in spite of the uneven strides he walked along soundlessly. I started to walk carefully, my own strides becoming uneven in the effort. If anyone had seen us then, he surely would have wondered who we were and why we were out at that hour. Such an observer, I concluded, wouldn't have been likely to think anything good about us, and I wasn't thinking anything good about Nauroz either.

Meanwhile the mouth had appeared. The space inside looked a little brighter to me even though there were no signs of morning. Nauroz grabbed my hand and entered the jungle. Bending along several curves, we passed by a row of crumbled columns, arrived at a hexagonal platform, and halted. A small pile of wood was burning in the center of the platform giving off the scent of some medicinal oil and sending up curls of smoke.

Nauroz gave me a look.

"Both are OK," I told him. Then I said, "Some people have arrived at your house."

"They are my relatives," he said, "foster relatives."

"Have they come looking for you?"

"No. They've come after making sure that I've disappeared."

"Why have they come?"

“That they will tell themselves,” he said, and then asked, “Is Brother with them?”

“No,” I said, “but maybe he is. I didn’t see him.”

“Also some very old man?”

“I haven’t seen him either,” I said, feeling embarrassed without cause.

Nauroz sat down on the edge of the platform. I too sat down, a little ways from him. In the dim glow of the fire I observed a trace of madness on his face, although it was also apparent that he was living in hardship and shadows of that flitted across his face every now and then making it appear as if his madness had vanished.

“They haven’t come to the shop yet, have they?”

“Well, yes they have,” I said, “three days ago.”

“Three days ... No, those must be some other people,” he said. “They must have come to buy something.”

“Yes, they had some things to buy,” I said, “but they also wanted to see you.”

I gave a full account of those unfamiliar sounds, in as much detail as I had done earlier when I reported the disappearance of one of the girls. Nauroz listened to everything with his head lowered. Even after I had finished, his head remained down for quite a while, until the night came to its end. I was waiting for him to say something, but he was thinking, who knows what. A strong odor of burning wood was wafting from the platform. I looked that way. Thick smoke was rising from the platform. Soon the smoke burst with a soft noise, and flames leapt upward. I felt as though we were sitting inside of a deserted place of worship. The flames arched over to one side and a loud rustling sound was heard. I lifted up my head and saw that the tall peaks of the trees were being buffeted about so much that I could often see the increasing blueness of the sky between them. After quite a long time I looked at Nauroz. He was still sitting in the same position as before and the light from the burning wood was beginning to grow dim.

“Nauroz,” I called out to him softly.

“They are different people,” he said. “They’ve come from some distant place. They’re not bad. They’ve come for the ruins.”

“Why did they want to meet you?”

“They have come to learn something about the ruins. And now they want to know more—perhaps everything.”

“But why did they want to see you?”

“They’ve also come to learn something about the race that built these ruins ... or rather, that built the buildings whose ruins these are.”

“But why did they want to see you?” I asked again; at the time I couldn’t think of any other question.

“Both belong to the same race,” Nauroz said in a soft voice. “Haven’t you looked at their eyes?”

I remembered how lights glimmered in their painting-like eyes. Then some other questions came to my mind.

“Who was their mother, Nauroz?”

“She had the same eyes,” he whispered.

“Who was she?”

“She is no more,” he said, a wildness appearing in his tone, “I’ve already told you.”

“What was she to you?”

“I’ve said that too.”

Then he looked at me with tremendous goodwill and placed his hand on my shoulder. “She is no more,” he said it again. “Her people too have all perished, except for the two who are with you.”

“Why have your relatives come?”

“Perhaps those ruins-people have made it to them.”

“To them ...” I checked myself.

Nauroz took close stock of me. He was completely visible in the growing light of the morning. In appearance he usually looked absolutely like a madman, but in that light, with his eyes lifted upward, he looked more like the sage of some untamed nation, and exactly in the manner of a sage he said, “One must endure everything.” And then the wildness returned to his eyes and the howl to his tone, “Because one has to endure everything.”

He began to look very tired. I suspected that he hadn’t slept for several nights. Still I asked him, “Your relatives ... would you like to see them?”

He didn’t answer.

“Will I have to talk with them?”

Nauroz remained silent.

“Shall I tell them about you?”

He continued to sit silently. I called out to him softly, “Nauroz!”

Still he didn’t open his mouth.

I stood up and walked over to him. He got up too. He repeated, without any wildness this time, and entirely like a sage, “One has to endure everything.”

He turned, and I didn’t even suspect that this was the last time I was to hear his voice. He wrapped the blanket around himself securely and

walked away with a perfectly even stride toward where there was, perhaps, another exit from the jungle.

I too turned around after he had disappeared and walked out of the jungle.

6

Shortly after my return, although it was still quite early, I was informed that Nauroz's relatives had arrived and a meeting had been called, in which I too had to participate, to settle the matter of his house, shop and other effects. I hadn't had a full night's sleep for several days and could hardly remember, except for his last sentence, anything of my conversation with Nauroz in the jungle a short while ago, so this information didn't make any particular impression on me and I spent the time before the meeting taking care of the girls' needs and making them laugh a bit.

"We've abandoned hope of ever finding Nauroz," the kind man said to me.

"You won't find him anymore," I said without a shadow of a doubt, and I believed it just as fully in my heart.

"These people aren't at all hopeful either," he said, pointing toward Nauroz's folks.

We were all gathered behind Nauroz's house and all those people were sitting leaning against the wall of the house. I couldn't make a good estimate of their number, but Nauroz's brother was among them. I looked at him for a long time. His face bore traces of wounds that had healed. Even though two burly men standing on either side of him held him tightly, something welled up inside of him that staggered his restrainers now and again.

Sheer power of madness, I thought, and the kind man, seeing that I was looking at them, said, "He's under the supervision of these people, and so is that one," he pointed at the man who sat in the middle of those men but a little ways from the wall.

He was a very old man, completely toothless and bald, and without eyebrows either. His eyes were so devoid of luster that it was difficult to know whether he was blind or not. He was counting something on his fingers, jotting something down on the palm of one hand with a finger of the other hand as he went along, and making a point of looking at the sky

each time before making an entry. He was wrinkled from head to toe and even though I was looking at him with my own eyes, I was having difficulty believing that a man could be so old.

“He’s an old Nauroz,” I heard the kind man say, “from two generations ago.”

I was somewhat amazed to see that he was sitting with absolutely no support. Sheer power of madness, I thought again.

“And if the present disappeared Nauroz could be found, these people would watch over him too,” the kind man said, “as they should.”

“Naturally,” I said.

I had guessed that the kind man would be talking on behalf of those men, so I kept looking at him. One of the relatives moved forward and whispered something to him. He nodded in reply and said to me, “Now there’s only the question of Nauroz’s daughters.”

“How can anyone say they are Nauroz’s daughters?” I said.

“But no one has come forward to claim them.”

The answer came to my lips but stopped there. The kind man, finding me silent, said, “After all they must be related to someone in some way.”

“They are merchandise from Nauroz’s Shop,” I said.

“And Nauroz’s Shop—whose property is that?” one of the relatives blurted out unexpectedly.

“Anyway,” the kind man made a sign to the speaker with his eyes and then informed me, “they have decided to close down the shop; this decision too is theirs to make now.”

“Naturally,” I said again.

“Now a decision has to be made about the girls, Nauroz.”

“My name is Saasaan,” I said.

“Ah, your family name,” he said, feeling a little melancholy, “I know. Anyway, now the decision about them ...”

“The decision about them too is the right of the relatives,” I said.

“You’ve taken good care of them. They are all grateful to you.”

“They are kind.”

It seemed that he was finding it difficult to know exactly how to proceed further. Even I, because of lack of sleep, was beginning to feel weary. Since he had been kind to me all along, I said, “They were given to me temporarily in the hope that Nauroz would turn up. Now his relatives have rights over them, and their further upbringing is also the responsibility of his relatives. If they like, they can take them right now.” I didn’t feel surprised that I had said it all so easily. “But they aren’t accustomed

to seeing anyone other than me.” I said that just as easily. “If they had been allowed to go out with me ...” Perhaps there was a slight tone of displeasure in my voice.

The kind man moved forward and embraced me. “They’ll get used to it,” he said. They’re still very young. After all, they became accustomed to you, didn’t they?”

I quietly freed myself from his grasp, and he said, “We think they should first be kept at Nauroz’s house, and then ...”

“But for two days, at least, no one should go near them.”

“Absolutely. These people will stay somewhere else during that time. Whatever you say will be done,” he said and tried to embrace me once again, but I left.

I made several trips up to my quarters, each one from inside the shop, collecting their playthings and the other items they needed and then I carried those over to Nauroz’s house. This took longer than I had expected, perhaps because I checked out Nauroz’s house a little on each trip. It was constructed entirely of stone and was very sturdy. The ceiling and walls of the shop and my quarters, on the other hand, had become decayed and didn’t look like they would last long. The thought struck me that I should have kept them in the house from the very beginning. Then I went and brought them over too.

As I had expected, they became happy when they saw the new place and so many other new things at once, and they became so engrossed in playing that they didn’t even notice that I was leaving and closing the door behind me.

The big dust storm also struck the same day. A few of the townsfolk were expecting its arrival for several days already. They were weather experts and they could, just by looking at the color of the sky and the pattern of the winds, predict even the time of ordinary dust storms. The past two or three days I was also noticing how in the lightening and darkening dusty-colored sky, the sun sometimes looked faint yellow and sometimes it was as white as the moon; how the wind stopped blowing, then suddenly picked up with a gust restoring the blue to the sky; how the wind then moved erratically, as if stumbling every step of the way, and then the sky turned dusty. But I didn’t know, nor did anyone tell me, that these were the signs of a big dust storm.

After closing the door of Nauroz’s house, I walked slowly until I came to the bend. At the mouth of the jungle I saw a vehicle of some new

style from which baggage was being unloaded. Besides small tents and other essentials, the baggage included tools like the ones used for measuring land and timber. Two men from a neighboring town were giving directions to the laborers who were doing the unloading. Watching all this without much enthusiasm, I moved on. I was taking slow strides and I had no idea how far I had gone until my feet began to ache. Only then did I realize that I had walked all the way to the outskirts of the next town and that sundown was fast approaching. The breeze had stopped completely and, partly because of the stagnant air and partly because of my having walked without interruption for quite a long time, I began to feel hot. I turned around and started walking back, but it soon became very difficult for me to walk at all. I flopped down on the grassy area by the edge of the road and I might have dozed off there were it not for the fact that, with the first blink, it felt as if somebody had pushed me to one side. Startled, I opened my eyes. There was no one around. Must have been a dream, I thought and stood up. I had walked only a few paces when somebody gently pushed me sideways. I realized that it must be because of the wind, which was blowing in gusts. Suddenly it started to blow faster and faster. I was moving forward without putting much pressure on my feet. I knew now that I was in the path of a dust storm and it was no ordinary storm. The mouth of the jungle and, from there, my home were not very far, but the wind suddenly changed direction and my feet strayed off the road. Then the wind changed directions several times and the dust also began to rise so it became difficult for me to keep my eyes open. I had no idea how far I had walked along with the wind nor how many directions I had gone in. Sometimes the wind gusts swirled downward and then spiraled upward with such violent force that it became difficult for my feet to stay on the ground. It seemed as if those dreams in my childhood, the ones in which I soared like a bird, would come true that day. Just then the gusts let up a bit. I heard the sounds of the jungle, some branches crackled, and the smell of medicinal oil wafted into my nostrils. The wind changed direction again and the smell disappeared.

My back struck against something hard and I saw that I had come to the place, a short distance from the road and on the other side of a small, grassy slope, where a series of dry, flat-topped low hills began. The road lay in front of me and, parallel to it, the breached wall of the jungle's outer trees swayed, appearing as though it would collapse any minute. My fatigue had vanished. I continued on, ascending one of the hills. The force of the wind was lessened here because the neighboring hills were

somewhat taller and the hilltop was shaped like a platform with a dip in the middle. Feeling safe from the storm's onslaught, I sat there and began to look at the road and the jungle as if I were a spectator.

Two small tents went rolling down the road with those measuring instruments caught in their ropes. After one of them had rolled some distance, it got stuck on something on the side of the road, while the other puffed up a little and was swept up by a large spiral of wind, disappearing in a whirl. Then my eyes fell on the carriage I had seen at the mouth of the jungle. It was moving along on its own in the middle of the road. Heading straight toward me, it faltered, as if trying to remember the way. It spun around in its place a few times and then went hurtling back in the direction it had come. Just then a violent gust of wind touched down near the carriage causing it to swerve sharply to one side of the road and then leap to the other before overturning and somersaulting down the slope. Only one of its wheels remained on the road spinning like a potter's wheel. Finally it too disappeared.

I looked at the jungle. I had never seen it from this angle and this elevation before. However, at that moment I was unable to determine its outward appearance because the jungle, along with everything in it, was in a terrible state of turmoil. Sometimes the treetops became flat and fluttered like green flags, and sometimes they separated into small clusters colliding with each other. Tall bushes were pressed down, allowing a clear vision of the ruins through the openings in the wall of trees. Sometimes it seemed that the wind had gone completely mad or was frolicking with children, sometimes that there were many different winds, all vying with each other for possession of the jungle's trees. The wind paused briefly, gathering strength, and forced itself up from the ground. Now it looked as though the hairs on the jungle's entire body had stood on end. This was just the beginning. Later on it sometimes felt as if the sky, like some hissing python, was trying to sweep up the entire jungle with its breath and devour it; sometimes as if the trees, like eagles, were about to snatch up the ruins with their talons and take off. But the ruins held their ground tenaciously, although quite a few trees with slender trunks and dense umbrella-like crowns were uprooted and flung into the distance, raining down the soil clinging to their roots. A gust of wind lunged toward me. Some of the dirt from the tree roots hit my face and the smell of medicinal oil drifted into my nostrils once again.

There were many kinds of sounds, but they were drowned out in the howl of the wind, the sound of which made me start to doze off, or perhaps lapse into unconsciousness. Before my senses were completely over-

whelmed, I heard the sound of the houses of the town collapsing and a subconscious question surfaced in my mind: how did I end up on this hill and what was I doing there?

7

The heat of the sunshine woke me up. After a while the fog lifted from my mind and I began to remember everything. The ruins, covered over by greenery in some spots, were spread out right across from me for quite some distance. Here and there small trees stood motionless in between the ruins, as a gentle breeze flowed smoothly and soundlessly through their branches. I glanced at the ruins. It was difficult from such a distance to distinguish between the broken stone columns and broken off or stunted tree trunks.

Had these buildings been intact, I thought, they would now have looked like the site of a terrible disaster. Then I descended the hill, and it didn't take me long to reach the town. Coming to the last turn in the road, I saw that the mouth of the jungle had altogether disappeared, but up ahead Nauroz's Shop could be seen with its mouth gaping wide. But, before going there, I first went around the town and talked with people. Although the damage to trees and houses had been enormous, most lives had been spared, except for a few cattle. This was because the area had always lain in the path of dust storms and people were well prepared. At the moment almost everyone was busy making temporary repairs to their houses and clearing the paths. I just strolled through, and then started back.

Nauroz's house showed absolutely no sign that it had been affected by the storm at all. Its door was still closed, exactly the way I had left it. I went to the front of Nauroz's Shop. Its door had been plucked off its frame by the wind gusts, although who can imagine what kind of gusts they were that the door, instead of falling inside, was lying outside the shop. Then I inspected my quarters.

They were there all right. But it seemed as if somebody had picked them up and then put them back in their place after shaking them about violently, so now they looked like an unsightly turban plopped up on top of the shop's head—scarcely livable. I tried to remember what all had been there. Just then I felt the touch of a palm on my back.

"There has been damage everywhere, Saasaan," the kind man was standing beside me. "Mercifully, lives have been spared."

He stopped, looked at me, and then continued, "And mercifully too, those people had left here before the storm hit."

I glanced at the closed door of Nauroz's house and then at the kind man.

"Where they come from is not in the path of storms," he said, "so they were quite apprehensive. They aren't used to strong winds. They would have left much earlier but they were delayed somewhat on account of that old Nauroz. He didn't want to leave. He said that he wanted to see the big dust storm. And you know how difficult it is, Saasaan, to make a mad man agree to something."

"One has to become a little mad oneself to do that," I said, and then I asked, "How did they bring him round?"

"Who knows? They had taken him off to one side," he said. "Then there was also some delay because of the stupid women here."

I wasn't particularly aware of the women's presence in the town, so I asked rather inquisitively, "The women—how so?"

"When they saw your ... when they saw the girls they stirred up quite a fuss saying that they wouldn't let them go. And women, you know ... Anyway, they started to cry and wail. You weren't here and ... how shall I put it? ... well, it seemed like a small earthquake had struck before the dust storm."

"I was out at the time," I said.

"Yes. We did come to call you."

He peered at my face for a long time, then grabbed my hand and led me into the shop. Here, no trace of the storm could be seen. Even the dust, still moving about outside, had not reached here. Who knows what kind of wind that was, I wondered, or what kind of shop this was? I turned to the kind man. He pushed down on both of my shoulders and made me sit on the takht, then he took a place beside me himself.

"At their place they'll cheer up the girls in a few days," he started. "They've been taking care of two mad men after all, it won't be too difficult to manage two little girls. In fact, they had tried to cheer up the girls while they were still here, but when they found out ..."

He stopped. So far he had been simply informing me, but now he asked me somewhat dismayed, "Saasaan, you didn't even teach them to speak?"

"They speak," I replied, with a little dismay of my own.

"Your name, but nothing else."

I didn't say anything.

“They don’t even know how to say the names of things. But never mind. They’ll teach them themselves.” He said that as if to reassure me.

Afterwards, for a while, he looked at the jars, baskets and other things that lay scattered around, then his eyes glanced at the dirt floor and he abruptly got up. “Let’s go out.”

“They’ve left the shop for you,” he said. “They acknowledge your good deed. As for the upper part, we’ll fix it up for you, enough so that you can live in it.”

“I also had my papers there,” I said.

“They went flying out the window,” he replied. “But they were all picked up. They’re safe with me.”

He looked at the shop’s open mouth for some time and then said, “There’s no merchandise in the shop, but whatever there is, it’s yours. Now they only want ...”

“What do they want now?” I asked.

“That you won’t go to their place to see the two until they have completely forgotten you.”

I remained silent. He waited for my reply for some time, and then lapsed into something resembling a bout of melancholy.

“OK, I’ll come back some other time,” he said in a weary voice. “A lot of work needs to be done and we’re short of men as it is. I’ll bring over your papers.”

He turned around to leave and said on his way out, “They’re very small right now. They’ll forget everything in a few days. Those people—they’ve promised to send for you themselves later on.”

8

The tiny girls must have forgotten everything. Tiring of my papers, I sometimes lift up my head and think: no one has come to call me so far, nor has there been any news.

I bend over my papers again. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*