

NAIYER MASUD

The Heir*

MY FATHER DIED when I was a child. My mother mourned him deeply, so much so that within a few years of my father's death she too passed away. I have absolutely no recollections of my father. I have some memories of my mother. I mostly remember her sitting on the prayer rug and sometimes I can recall an image of her picking me up in her arms and carrying me upstairs. But by the time we reached the top of the stairs I would be asleep, and when I awoke I would see her sitting on the prayer rug. That's all. I have no memory of her death. My father's brother, the elder in the family, who was a celebrated *aamil* in the city in his time, raised me. He was also an expert in *jafar* and *ramal*. He received visitors in the front room of the house and a large number of people called on him. It seemed like a regular doctor's office except that one wouldn't find such an assortment of patients anywhere else like those who visited my uncle's place. They were, for the most part, men and women who were afflicted or possessed by a ghost or spirit; affected by something paranormal. Besides these, there were those who were looking for lost loved ones, some who were caught up in litigation, some looking for jobs or suffering from chronic ailments, and who knows with what other problems and long sufferings people came here. My uncle made house calls to a few important wealthy families. Mostly, however, he met people in his front room. He prescribed different treatments. In addition to writing a *taaviz* or a *naqsh*, he might prescribe, for example, that a patient stand in the middle of a river and recite mystical-magical incantations. He might prescribe trapping and releasing a number of different species of birds, and who knows what else. His conversation skills were superb. Patients were

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semi-cured just by talking with him. He wore spotless white clothing and was handsome and healthy.

In those days, the household income was more than enough. There were many people in the house. My uncle's own family was small. There were he and his wife and their daughter Nafisa. They had twin boys, but they died in infancy. If the boys had lived they would have been my age. Now there were just the three of them, but there was a whole host of distant relatives whose expenses were borne by my uncle. He had a gentle disposition, and going out of his way for others was in his temperament. My aunt was a good woman too. She had a bit of a sharp tongue though. She would get angry. But she never reprimanded me. Since I was the only child of Uncle's deceased younger brother, she cared for me just as much as my uncle did. Little Nafisa was always following me around and I adored her.

Then our circumstances began to change. My uncle's health deteriorated. He lost interest in his work. He stayed in his room inside the house, mostly lying in bed. People needing his help would come and then go away. Sometimes my aunt would urge him, "At least *ask!* Who knows what's ailing the poor fellow?"

Once in a while, Uncle would emerge sluggishly, go to the front room, ask some routine questions of the visitor and prescribe a *naqsh*. Most often he would send a message saying he wasn't well and ask the person to come another time. Eventually, after many months, my aunt's suspicions were aroused and then her hunch that Uncle had an addiction was confirmed. It could have been opium or something else.

I was twenty years old then. My education was still incomplete. Uncle had not taught me his art. My aunt had said to him many times, "Teach the boy a thing or two. He'll assist you. Your days are over now. After all, don't we have to live?"

But Uncle didn't pay any attention to her. I tried to find jobs here and there. But I was unsuccessful because I was young and had insufficient education. The household income was dwindling. Most of the distant relatives who lived with us went away, having tired of being the victims of my aunt's temper. Within two years our prosperous home resembled a dusty wilderness.

At that time I did something odd, or, I should say that an odd thing was done by me.

One day an old acquaintance of Uncle came to visit. This person was known as a "courtroom freak." At any given time, he would be contesting several cases and filing new cases against others. This was his pastime. He

would plead cases on behalf of other people as well. He would earn something from doing this. It was in connection with these court cases that he would come to see Uncle and ask for a taaviz, etc. A few years earlier he had stopped visiting Uncle. Meanwhile, Uncle too was no longer what he used to be. Now, that gentleman came to call and Uncle refused to see him. But the visitor was stubborn. He announced loudly from the foyer that he wouldn't leave without a meeting; that it was an urgent matter. Meanwhile my aunt insisted and Uncle got up mumbling to himself. He asked me to unlock the front room and went to wash up. Then he called me into the room. The visitor was sitting there, silent. Uncle said to me, "Do you know him? Go with him and ..."

He gave me a small glass bottle and a skillfully folded paper sachet.

"This is special water. Keep giving a little from it, half a teaspoon, straight down the throat until the patient sleeps, and now and then provide medicinal smoke inhalation," he said pointing towards the paper sachet.

The visitor got up and said to me, "Come along, *miyan*."

I received only parts of the picture. Some of it I didn't understand. Nevertheless, I accompanied him without a murmur. His house was in a distant neighborhood. Along the way we had to cross a couple of obstacles. It was evening when we finally got there. The house was large but its shabbiness was obvious from the outside. The wooden main door was missing one side. The visitor left me at the front door and went in. I stood there taking in the moldiness of the foyer. Eventually a woman appeared and invited me in.

The inside of the house was worn out too, but one could tell that it had seen better days. A large portion of it wasn't fit for living and the residents had confined themselves to two or three verandas. I was seated in one of those. No one spoke for some time. It was clear that they were disappointed to see me. I did not think it was appropriate to waste more time with small talk, so, I asked, "Where do we have to go?"

There was a door in the wall. I was asked to go through that door. God knows where the litigating gentleman I came with had disappeared. The family members stopped at the door. I stepped in. It was a small room, poorly lit. There was a bed and someone was lying on it. When my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I saw a chair by the bed and a lighted coal brazier burning by its side. I heard sounds of sobbing coming from the bed. I dropped a little powder on the coals from the paper sachet. The room was filled with fragrance. The sobbing intensified and then ceased.

Someone asked in a deep voice, "Who are you?"

A girl perhaps eighteen or so years old was lying on the bed in front of me. Her face was flushed and her hair somewhat disarrayed. She looked at me intently and offered some name in the same deep voice. Then the voice said that the girl was his and uttering my name said that I should clear out of his way. I got the picture. Such patients were often brought to my uncle's dispensary. It was alleged that some jinn possessed them. They would respond quite well to Uncle's treatment. I dropped some more powder on the coals. The voice inquired somewhat agitatedly, "What are you doing?"

But instead of replying, I uncorked the bottle. Uncle had not forgotten to include a spoon with it. I gave half a teaspoon. I had imagined that it would be hard to make her swallow the liquid but there was no protest from her. After drinking the liquid she began sobbing again. She shuddered a few times and asked for more and drank some. She also asked me to drop more of the powdery stuff on the coals and ultimately fell asleep, contented. The night was still young. I stepped out into the veranda, handed the sachet to an elderly woman and informed her that the girl was sleeping. "If she has any problem during the night, liquid from the bottle and smoke inhalation should be administered." But I had hardly finished my sentence when sounds of weeping came from the room. The elderly lady rushed in with the bottle and the sachet. She had barely entered the room when a masculine voice scolded her so soundly that she came back obviously shaken. The sound of weeping could be heard again. I went inside. The masculine voice said, "My rival is here."

Then the girl began to cry and sob. I gave her the liquid and added some powder from the sachet to the coals. She went back to sleep. This happened over and over again and soon it was 10 P.M. It was a distant neighborhood. It would have been difficult to find some form of return transportation because of the lateness of the hour. The gentleman who had brought me here and gone away now returned. He made detailed inquiries about the patient from the women, sat down to dinner and made me sit down to eat as well. At first I didn't quite comprehend what he was talking about, but before long I realized that he was talking about marriage. He was saying, "Its vital for the girl's life. The ceremony can be performed discreetly. You can visit her whenever you like. The girl will stay here. You're a sensible person."

I hadn't up to that minute ever thought of marriage. But now it seemed that all along it had been my ardent desire to enjoy the pleasures of married life.

Without another thought, I agreed. It was also decided that I wouldn't inform the people at home about this arrangement. The marriage was to be a secret. The gentleman took the women aside and spoke with them. Then he went outside. He returned in a little while with a few men. Two of them looked like maulvis. I have no recollection of the ceremonies that were performed. All I remember is that one of the gentlemen represented me as my advocate and another the girl's, and the nikah was solemnized. I didn't even catch the girl's name properly. It was midnight when I was shoved into the girl's room.

The girl was a little made up now and she was sitting up in bed in a normal fashion. I was really unaware of the night's passing. I don't remember when I fell asleep, but when I awoke the sun was high in the sky. The litigating gentleman had disappeared again. The women were graciously carrying out the chores of hospitality. Upon inquiring, I learned that the gentleman was busy in some litigation. Then I don't know what came over me. I began to insist that I wanted to take the bride with me. At first the women made excuses but when I refused to give up, they were compelled to give in. I had gone there to treat a possessed woman and married her. I didn't seem to find that odd. And bringing the bride home after marriage was natural. The women couldn't argue with me, and I set off for home with the bride who was accompanied by her tired looking relative.

When our carriage stopped in front of the house, Nafisa was the first to come out to the foyer. She was surprised to see women in the carriage and looked at me. I said, "This is your sister-in-law."

She leapt forward and lifting the bride's veil scrutinized her face carefully, then she said, "Oh my God, she's so sweet!" and took the bride inside. My aunt was astounded on seeing her. A couple of female relatives who still stayed with us came around to look as well. I briefly informed my aunt that I had married and brought the bride home. Nafisa was with the bride and was engrossed in lifting the bride's veil and looking at her every so often. Aunt said, "Nafisa, take her upstairs."

Nafisa accompanied the bride and her relative upstairs. Meanwhile Uncle was summoned from his room. Now I was asked to give the details. I repeated whatever I could recollect and, as I was telling the story, it began to dawn on me that I had behaved irresponsibly. My aunt and uncle made no comments. They were utterly shocked. Eventually, Uncle said, "I don't understand any of it."

Now I was feeling dizzy and I had no explanation for what I had done the previous night. Uncle asked me very gently, over and over again,

but I was unable to give an explanation that could satisfy him. At this point a few neighbors also came by. Uncle went to the front room to receive them. Some of the neighboring women had come along too and my aunt sat in their midst. After some time, Uncle came inside and began conversing in a low tone with my aunt. I only caught one phrase, "Send her back at once."

Then he went to his room. Aunt went upstairs with a couple of women. I remained sitting quietly where I was. I heard voices being raised upstairs. I still kept sitting. Then I heard the women come down the stairs. My aunt came first. She was grumbling, "Such tantrums on the first day!"

The other women followed. In a few minutes the bride and her relative came down, and finally, Nafisa. The bride was in a flaming temper. She kept repeating, "Did I plead with them?"

I was sitting right there. But she didn't look at me. Leaning on her relative's arm she continued towards the hallway. She stopped short and looked back at Nafisa. She was crying. Then she drew close to Nafisa, embraced her and stepped out into the hallway.

In the evening, the litigating gentleman called on us. He was both embarrassed and angry. Some neighbors joined us. Uncle sent me inside. Nafisa wanted to find out from me what was going on in the front room. I told her that I didn't know and also added, "I won't leave her."

At night Nafisa tried to find out from my aunt but was brushed off, "Don't you interfere in these affairs. What is being done is right."

Aunt did not talk to me at all. On the third day the litigating gentleman came again and went away after several hours. On the fifth day he came and left shortly thereafter. When he had gone, Uncle called me. I was a bit scared but he didn't scold me. There were a couple of people in the room. Uncle passed me a paper and said, "Put your signature on this."

I signed without protest. Uncle took the paper back from me and said, "Now just forget everything that happened."

"I'll never forget," I said to myself, and then got up and left the room.

The following day I got a routine, temporary job at the city court and I became caught up in the formalities of a new job.

Uncle's health was going from bad to worse. My earnings helped maintain the household a little. But Uncle's addictions were getting more intense. He had begun disposing of the family belongings. But he never indulged in his addiction with my money.

One day he sold off his books on divinatory and magical practices. For a few days he lay intoxicated. Afterward he sent for me, sat me by his side, and began in a weak voice, “I did nothing for you. I didn’t teach you my art. Now the books are gone too. I’m going. *Bhai* is there as well—what will I say when he questions me?”

“You brought me up from a child to a young man, educated me, helped me stand on my own feet. What more could you have done?”

“The books are gone,” he said again, “but two or three of my notebooks are still lying somewhere. If you don’t get a decent job then ...”

Then his condition became really bad. The next day he died before sundown.

Aunt didn’t live long after his death. A relative who had been persuaded to stay on looked after her. She wouldn’t allow Nafisa to do the work. She would hold Nafisa close several times a day and cry a lot. Nafisa would cry with her. Sometimes she would ask me, “*Bhai, amma* will get well, won’t she?”

I would reassure her. But one day Aunt died. Nafisa began suffering from depression. I spent all my free time trying to cheer her up. The relative who had looked after my aunt tried to revive her spirits, but it seemed obvious that Nafisa was not going to live very long.

Nafisa’s death, and my dismissal, occurred on the same day. The two tragedies together had a numbing effect on me. I was overwhelmed by a kind of sluggishness and didn’t grieve in any meaningful way.

A few people continued to find their way to our place hoping to meet with Uncle. At first I would turn them away. One day I saw Uncle’s notebooks. Inside, there were many different *amals*, carefully written. I cleaned out the front room and took his chair.

Uncle’s notebooks have stayed with me. Slowly, patients have started to trickle in. Uncle’s well-known name helps too, and I’m making good progress.

I met the bride one more time. A neighbor’s boy came to me and said, “A woman wants to meet you.”

“Send her here,” I said.

“I told her to do that,” he said, “but she refuses to come in. She was in fact asking for Nafisa *bibi*.”

After a little hesitation I went with the boy. She was sitting on a broken bench in a deserted park near my house. She was wearing a black burqa, her face barely visible. I recognized her. Faltering, I asked her to come home. But she did not consent.

“I was longing to see Nafisa,” she said, “but this boy tells me that she also ...”

“Yes, she too,” I said, “she was the last to go.”

She sat and cried for a while, then inquired about Nafisa’s illness, etc. After that she got up to go. It all happened so quickly that I couldn’t talk about other things, and walking with measured steps she left the park. □

—Translated by Mehr Afshan Farooqi

Glossary and Notes

aamil (*‘āmil*): an occultist, a practitioner of magical charms.

jafṛ or *jafar*: The art of making prophecies based on the book of *Jafṛ* said to have been written by the Shi‘a Imam Ja‘far aṣ-Ṣādiq.

Ja‘far aṣ-Ṣādiq (circa 700–65), son of Muḥammad al-Bāqir, is regarded amongst Shi‘as as one of the greatest of the Imams and as the teacher of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) par excellence. To Imam Ja‘far have been attributed numerous utterances defining Shi‘a doctrine, as well as prayers and homilies. He has been ascribed authorship of numerous books dealing especially with divination, magic and alchemy, of which the most famous is the mysterious *Jafṛ*. The use of *jafṛ* was probably first connected with apocalyptic speculations about the return of the Hidden Imam, Muḥammad al-Mahdi—who disappeared in 874—and similar events. Later it grew into an art in which the mixing and substitution of the numerical value of letters was used to veil or reveal hidden matters or guarantee success in prayers. For example, the numerical value of Allah is 66; thus the Divine Name had to be repeated 66 times in a certain prayer, and so on.

naqsh: a delineation, an imprint, usually with invisible ink or special ink, when used for making a magic square or a charm. There are vessels inscribed with quotations from the Qu’rān that are filled with water (which is then regarded as blessed) to be used in case of illness. Similarly, ink washed off scraps of Qur’ānic verses or prayers when immersed in a cup of water is believed to have a soothing effect.

raml or *ramal*: the art of divining by drawing lines or figures in sand or on the ground.