

NAIYER MASUD

The Big Garbage Dump*

I

THE BIG GARBAGE DUMP was located inside a building dating from royal times. It couldn't be said who owned it, or what its original purpose was, or precisely when it was converted into a garbage dump. All that could be said with certainty was that now it was the personal property of no one, that it was not built for the collection of garbage, and that no one had seen it in its pre-dump state.

It was difficult to even call it a building because what little could be seen now was something like a *dalan* with five small passageways and with three serrated arches visible behind it. These arches were also so filled with garbage that only their uppermost serratures were left open, a yawning darkness apparent behind them at all times. New garbage was dumped in this very *dalan*. Whatever had lain on the *dalan*'s roof and behind its arches had been used as filler for the main highway which passed right above the building. It was the longest and the straightest thoroughfare, starting in the north, continuing for a long distance, and disappearing in the deserted areas of the south. In royal times, when the crowded neighborhoods located in the low-lying areas and those standing on the elevations were connected by narrow twisting lanes that rose and fell, one could not even imagine such a long, straight and level highway right in the middle of the city. It was built after the demise of the kingdom and extensive demolition took place to reclaim space in order to build it. All the residential neighborhoods—and they were large in number—standing in its path were torn down, and all the houses standing on the elevations were toppled onto those in the low-lying areas to ensure

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that the surface was perfectly level, so now the highway passed over them easily.

The demolished neighborhoods survived only as names in old writings and official documents, but many old neighborhoods that had not fallen in the highway's path still endured. All these surviving neighborhoods were located in the low-lying areas of the city and were connected by a network of new and old lanes. Some neighborhoods were situated in such low-lying areas that the lanes leading to them had been built in the form of broad staircases, and such was the narrow lane that came to its end in front of the Big Garbage Dump. The stairs always appeared wet, but nobody knew where the water that dampened them came from. The lowest staircase eased into a long lane which, although it eventually headed south, proceeded in a westerly direction parallel to the highway but a little lower than it. Some distance up ahead this lane merged with a paved road that forked off from the highway toward the west. Like the staired lane, this lane was also usually deserted. Even children, big and small, who created a ruckus from morning until evening playing in the other lanes of the area, didn't step into this one. Why, even their noise didn't reach here. The only exception was that at first light some grubby-looking kids, with large jute sacks slung across their backs and carrying sticks in their hands that had hooked wires attached on the ends, emerged from the two lanes and converged on the Garbage Dump. They poked through the garbage using their wire hooks to pick up plastic bags buried under the trash and then they deposited these in their sacks. The only other visitors to the lanes were the stray cats, dogs, and unwanted cattle that came to the dump foraging for food. Their numbers increased significantly after the leftovers from a banquet had been thrown out there, with crows joining in.

Just now, though, nothing fit for eating could be spotted, yet a gangly dog, half buried in the garbage piled up in the lowest passageway, was frantically trying to pull something out from underneath. It was jerking its body repeatedly and rapidly wagging its tail as it attempted to hold its ground firmly with its hind legs. As a result, some of the trash on the upper part of the pile had begun to slide down. Suddenly the wagging stopped. The dog shuddered slightly and, jerking its body forcefully one last time, pulled its mouth out of the garbage. But the mouth was empty. The dog backed off a few steps and barked repeatedly, snatching at the trash over and over. Then it quieted down and, with its neck hung in humble resignation, it climbed up the stairs of the lane and dropped out of sight. Moments later its piercing howl rose from near the last stair at

the very top and a man with a muffler wrapped around his neck was seen slowly coming down the stairs.

Carrying his briefcase in one hand and pulling up the bottoms of his trouser legs with the other, he passed by three passageways of the dump, but at the fourth he began to shudder and came to a halt. Standing perfectly still for a few moments, he twisted his neck around and looked toward the dump. His body turned slowly and he took a couple of steps toward the stairs, but then stopped again. He looked first at one end of the dump and then at the other. His body turned around again and, walking briskly forward, he went into the other lane. He turned left and walked even more briskly. Suddenly his feet slowed down. He let go of his trouser legs and shifted his briefcase to his other hand as he proceeded slowly toward the lane's southern exit. The gangly dog's bark rose behind him. Perhaps it was back at the dump.

By now the man in the scarf was coming up on the small paan and cigarette shop located right at the lane's exit. Opposite from it was the government office building that had no name and seemed in need of repairs. He acknowledged the greetings of the paanwala, glanced down the street in both directions, shook his head no without there being any solicitations from the paanwala, crossed the street and entered the office. The old attendant who was sitting on a long bench next to the door of the room on the left-hand side stood up immediately and greeted him. Taking the man's briefcase from his hand, he dutifully opened the door for him. Walking behind the man, he entered the room and cleaned off the desk with a rag that was draped over his shoulder. By then the man had already taken his seat behind the desk. The attendant placed the briefcase before him and said, "Sahib, it's very chilly!"

"Yes. The chill has increased somewhat today," the man answered. Then he said, "Rahmatullah, bring some water."

"Water, Sahib?" the attendant said. He wanted to say something more but didn't. Turning around, he went out of the room.

The man pulled the briefcase closer and placed his thumbs on the clasps. The jarring noise of both fasteners opening almost simultaneously was heard, followed by the muffled sounds of their being closed one at a time. He pushed the briefcase to one side and then removed his scarf and wiped his face with it. He looked at the attendant walking in with the water, took the glass from his hand and drank all of it, one mouthful at a time. He put the glass down on the desk and said, "Send Ghayas in."

The attendant picked up the glass and wiped away the wet spot with his rag. Just as he was going out the door, in walked a young man.

“Ghayas Babu, Sahib would like to see you,” he told the young man as he went out. The young man greeted the other man and said, “It has really become quite cold, Sir.”

“Yes, yesterday already.”

“Looks like it’s going to rain too.”

“Yes, already yesterday the clouds started to gather,” the man said and pointed to the chair in front of him.

After the young man was seated, the man at the desk continued opening and closing the fasteners on his briefcase for some time. The young man looked at him with inquiring eyes and asked, “Sir, shall I send for tea?”

The man shook his head no. He snapped open the fasteners once more, lifted the flap and looked at it for a while, and then turned his attention to the young man. “I’ve brought the papers along,” he said, patting the briefcase. “I’ve arranged them all in separate files. Now we need to make a list of the items. You may do it here or at home, your home or mine.”

“Wherever you say, Sir.”

“First study them,” the man said, pointing to a chair on the right side of the desk.

“Yes, Sir,” the young man said as he got up from his chair.

“They’ve really added up to quite a volume,” the man said glancing at the files stuffed in the briefcase. “You’ll probably need to make a fairly long list.”

“Consider it done, Sir,” the young man said, and then he asked, “By when, Sir?”

“Whenever it’s finished,” the man said. “You’ve already seen the papers, but ... you must study them. First of all ...” he pulled a file out of the briefcase, “these are complete now. Make a list of these first. Have a look at the papers on top too.”

The young man took the file from him and opened it. He examined the papers that lay at the very top for a while and then said rather playfully, “Well, now nothing stands in the way of gaining possession. Congratulations, Sir!”

“On gaining possession of a garbage dump, Ghayas?”

The young man felt a bit embarrassed. Placing his hand on the top-most paper he said, “But, Sir, it wasn’t a garbage dump.” He lifted the paper in his hand. “This document clearly shows that the building belonged to your family.”

“You probably haven’t examined the paper carefully, Ghayas,” the man said. “In fact, it was taken from another family and then passed on to us. Today, times have changed and that other family also has a claim to it.”

The young man looked up and saw that the other man’s eyes were fixed on him intently.

“But, Sir ...”

“Read it again, Ghayas.”

The young man started to read, faltering. Meanwhile, the other man kept looking at him as his hands opened and closed the clasps of the briefcase.

“But, Sir,” said the young man after he had read the paper and was returning it to the file, “the members of that family ... they’re all gone.”

“Try to understand the difference between ‘gone’ and ‘disappeared,’ Ghayas. Why are you forgetting your friend?”

“My friend, Sir?”

“The one who disappeared ...”

“Ayaz, Sir?” the young man asked, and then suddenly became a trifle melancholy.

“He’s the lone survivor of that family, just as I am of mine.”

“But he’s disappeared, Sir.”

“Try to understand the difference between ‘gone’ and ‘disappeared,’ Ghayas,” the man said, emphasizing each word.

The young man sat speechless while the man took the file from his hand, slipped it into the briefcase and closed the flap. The young man pulled the briefcase ever so slowly toward himself. “Shall I take it with me, Sir?”

“One other thing,” the man said as he reached for the briefcase. He opened it and pulled out a bundle that was below several files. “Here, this is the list I started myself ...”

“I’ll look it over, Sir,” Ghayas said as he stretched his arm forward. But the man put the bundle back under the files.

“Listen, Ghayas,” he said softly and fell silent.

The young man put both of his hands on the desk and leaned forward a little, “Yes, Sir.”

“I ended up going there again today.”

Signs of concern began to appear on the young man’s face.

“Why did you, Sir ...” he said, “when you know ...”

“I wasn’t thinking,” the man said. “It was getting late. I’d become accustomed to taking the shorter route.”

“So then, Sir,” the young man started, hesitantly, “today again ...?”

“Yes, a slight pain started.”

“And that ... the shudder?”

“That too. It was the shudder that made me conscious that I’d wandered there,” the man said nonchalantly, “Anyway, let’s just drop it.”

“Sometimes a shadow of doubt sweeps over the heart, Sir,” the young man said, “How many times have I asked you ...”

“OK, I’ll have myself looked at by someone one of these days,” the man said, again nonchalantly. “Here, the list which I made ...”

The man stopped midway as he was pulling the bundle slightly forward from under the files. He pushed it back and closed the flap. The young man looked at him questioningly. The sound of the fasteners snapping shut was heard.

“Listen, Ghayas,” the man said once more, and then once more he remained silent for quite a while.

“Sir?” the young man finally said.

“He was quite close to you.”

“Who, Sir?” the young man asked, again feeling melancholy. “He was a childhood friend, Sir.”

“Did he sometimes talk to you about the Garbage Dump?”

“The Garbage Dump?”

“About living there.”

“Near the dump, Sir?”

“No, inside it.”

The young man’s sadness changed to surprise and then back to sadness.

“Why are you asking that, Sir?”

The man played with the fasteners for some time. Finally he said, “Ghayas, I have this feeling that he lives there now.”

“Ayaz?” the young man said. “Ayaz? Living inside the Garbage Dump, Sir?”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“To me, Sir?”

“Never mind,” the man said nonchalantly as before. “We’ll talk about it more fully some other time.”

“Nobody can live inside the Garbage Dump,” the young man said, perhaps to himself.

“How can you say that?”

The young man stared at the surface of the desk in silence. The other man shifted to one side of his chair. Pushing his body slightly sideways,

he took out a bunch of keys from the pocket of his trousers and placed it on top of his briefcase.

“A few vouchers are still hanging from yesterday and need to be expedited,” he told the young man.

The young man was now standing in front of the cabinet which stood against the right-hand wall. The faint clinking of keys colliding with each other was heard almost at the same time as the muffled voice of the man, “Never mind, Ghayas.”

The young man turned around to look and then rushed over to the desk. The man’s head was leaning against the back of the chair and his face was covered with heavy beads of sweat. Before long his body began to slump to one side. The young man moved forward quickly and steadied it. “Sir!” that’s all he could say, two or three times. Bending forward, he peered into the man’s eyes. Then he let go of the body and backed away suddenly. The man’s body slumped forward. The young man again stepped forward and steadied it as he called out loudly, “Rahmatullah, quick, bring some water.”

He peered into the man’s eyes. His grip relaxed a little. The man’s body began to fall forward and his head came to rest on the briefcase lying in front of him on the desk. Abandoning him, the young man darted toward the door, but halfway there he turned around and again tried to make the man sit properly in the chair. Meanwhile the attendant entered with some water. He stopped at the door looking at both men for a while, then he approached the desk. He bent over and looked into the man’s eyes. “Sahib is no more, Ghayas Babu,” he informed the young man.

But the young man continued trying to make the man sit properly. Perhaps he hadn’t seen anyone die before that day.

2

I hadn’t seen anyone die before that day. Looking at Beg Sahib’s eyes I could see that he was no longer alive, but I couldn’t bring myself to believe that he was actually dead. Rahmatullah was an experienced man. Before even putting the glass of water on the desk he told me that Beg Sahib was dead. Holding Beg Sahib’s shoulders, he had lowered his head until it came to rest on his briefcase. The two of us just stood there looking at him for a while and then I told Rahmatullah that Beg Sahib had been talking as usual and had been quite all right.

“He wasn’t quite all right, Ghayas Babu,” Rahmatullah said. “I was already alarmed when he asked for water in such terrible cold.”

I glanced at the head resting on the briefcase, so did Rahmatullah, then he said, “You stay with the body so I can go let other people know.”

“No, you stay here. I’m leaving.”

Rahmatullah gave me a somber look. “Won’t you stay a while longer, Ghayas Babu?” Other people will be here soon.”

I hadn’t thought about the other office workers. Before long I heard their voices coming from other rooms. Rahmatullah dashed out, said something to somebody and returned. Within minutes Beg Sahib’s office was filled with people, and Khairat Khan was among them. Before coming to the office Beg Sahib used to stop at his shop without fail to savor a paan. It was Khairat Khan who had Rahmatullah’s bench brought in and had Beg Sahib’s body placed on it. The office people had laid him out on his desk.

It took me some time to explain the details of Beg Sahib’s death to the others. I didn’t mention anything about the Garbage Dump or about Ayaz so there wasn’t much left to tell them. Nevertheless, however much there was, I had to tell it over and over, and I also had to hear it all repeated back to me. This done, I went to Beg Sahib’s house.

The news had already reached there before I did. Chairs were being set out in the lane across from the house. Neighbors had started to trickle in. Most of the people appeared indifferent to one another, and certainly to me. I myself was indifferent to everyone because I didn’t know them. And yet I watched all of them as I sat in my chair. Some people seemed quite knowledgeable about funeral arrangements so they were deciding among themselves who would do what. Just then somebody said, “Leave that to me, but first shouldn’t the body be brought from the office?”

“I think it’ll be here any minute,” some other man replied.

At that point I thought: what am I doing here? I came to give the news, didn’t I? And the news has been given. Even so, I lingered a while longer. Finally I got up and went back to the office only to find that it was already closed. Khairat Khan was also closing his shop. When he saw me he said, “The body has left, Ghayas Mian.” Then he pointed at the lane, “If you go this way perhaps you will catch up with it somewhere along the way.”

I immediately stepped into the lane and, without considering that there was no point in rushing, I walked quickly until I came to the bend in the stairs of the lane. As soon as my glance fell on the Garbage Dump, my feet slowed down. The upper layer of garbage always changed yet it

always appeared the same, and even now I didn't notice any difference. The animals and the brats who poked around for plastic bags never looked any different either. There were neither bags nor brats at that moment, but there was an emaciated dog that was doing its darnedest to yank out an empty sweetmeat box stuck in the garbage. Just above the box, two baskets made from bamboo strips were beginning to become dislodged from their place. High above all of this, a few strands had slipped down from a pile of marigold garlands. One of the strands of marigold lodged on the dog's back and he was trying to get rid of it by shaking his body repeatedly, though most of his attention was focused on the box.

The dalan was nearly filled with garbage, but the three arches in back of it were still slightly open at the top as usual. I peered into the darkness behind these openings for quite a while. I remembered Ayaz. And the days of my friendship with him. I also recalled that from the start he was my only friend. On exactly the same day, we had both entered a mediocre school run by the city administration, and we weren't just fellow-sufferers in this new calamity, we were also fellow-comforters. We received education—or rather punishment, to be more accurate—at this school for several years. Punishment because we had both developed the habit of skipping school. When we did that we sometimes went to the Garbage Dump and looked at all the cast off items there. This refuse also included perfectly useable things that had been dumped simply because they had gotten old. We fought hard against the impulse to pick up such things and consciously trampled over them with the old, decayed garbage below sinking and rising beneath our feet. At the time we imagined that we were walking over bodies, dead and alive. We felt frightened and shuddered a little, but at that age we were eager to be frightened—this same eagerness sometimes drove us to sneak a look behind the dump's arches. I thought about the day when I stopped meeting Ayaz for some time. We had played hooky from school that day. Bored from roaming around our favorite haunts, we went to the Garbage Dump and stomped over piles of trash all the way up to the arches. I was standing near the middle arch when Ayaz stuck his head into the first arch and then pulled it back immediately saying in a muffled voice, "There's somebody inside."

Fear and curiosity both enticed me to go over to that arch. But when I pushed him aside to peek in myself, Ayaz suddenly grabbed my legs from behind and jerked them up in such a way that I was plunged up to my waist, or perhaps the whole of me, into the trash behind the arch.

“Well, now you have to stay here forever,” Ayaz said. Then I heard his frightened laugh, the sound of his running feet, and the echo of heavy vehicles as they moved along the highway.

Suddenly I realized that I was standing idly in front of the Garbage Dump, oblivious of Beg Sahib’s death. I climbed up the wet stairs of the lane to the highway. It seemed as if it was going to rain soon. I started to feel even colder thinking that I would have to sit out in the open at Beg Sahib’s. But I crossed the highway and descended into the lanes on the other side and soon found myself at Beg Sahib’s house.

The body had already arrived and the lane was filled with people, including not only our own office staff but also the staffs from other offices of the administration.

3

On the fourth day I went to Beg Sahib’s home to return his briefcase. I used to go there even before I was employed because Ayaz used to live there. But back then I stood at the door and called him out. We would then go for long walks and when we returned I would say goodbye to him, again at the door, and leave for my own home. If at either of these times we spotted Beg Sahib coming along, we vanished quickly. Ayaz used to fear him, and, following Ayaz’s lead, so did I. By the time I entered my youth, my fear of him had lessened considerably. Likewise my interaction with Ayaz had also become much less. He hardly ever visited me at my home even back then. Most of the time it was I who went to his place. But after I went to see him quite a few times and was told each time that he was out somewhere, I stopped going. At that time I didn’t yet know that he had disappeared. Later Beg Sahib came to my house several times to ask me about him. It was through him that I first learned that Ayaz had gone away somewhere without telling anybody. Beg Sahib also suggested that Ayaz had gone to live elsewhere of his own accord. I clearly remember that he never once mentioned the Garbage Dump during his inquiry. It was I who told him that back when we were boys Ayaz used to go there with me to watch the trash piling up. But Beg Sahib showed no interest in this information. Instead he began to ask me about some of Ayaz’s other acquaintances. Beg Sahib didn’t continue coming to our house for long. Perhaps he had guessed our financial condition in just a few days. After his last visit, he gave me a temporary job in his office. With the office staff his attitude was strictly professional, which

they regretted somewhat. However with me he didn't just talk about work. The staff knew that I was a friend of Ayaz and had been frequenting Beg Sahib's house since childhood, so they understood his special treatment of me. Sometimes my coworkers also quizzed me about Ayaz. But, after hiring me, Beg Sahib never again brought up Ayaz with me, in fact he never even mentioned his name once. Three days ago he had again mentioned his name. The first time, though, he had stopped right after he started. And now, today, it was the fourth day after his death, and I was standing on his veranda with his briefcase in my hand.

I was given a seat in the same outer room Beg Sahib had used as an office. I had been in this room several times before. Whenever a lot of work descended on the office suddenly, Beg Sahib would ask me to come over to his house to help him expedite it. He looked more like an officer at home than he did at the office. I used to feel reticent talking with him here, although I was treated with hospitality. At least twice while we worked Beg Sahib's wife sent tea and other things for us, and sometimes she brought the tea over herself. She was a simple homemaker. Now and then she engaged in formal conversation with me. The trace of affection in her tone, although perhaps natural and meant for everyone, somehow seemed to be exclusively for me, and I considered it a godsend compared to Beg's Sahib's dryness. She was acquainted with some women who were distant relatives of mine and she talked mostly about them. Until now, I didn't know that she was, in fact, the same Hajira Begam who worked for social causes in the city. I found this out only two days ago from the local newspapers where the news of Beg Sahib's death was printed under the headline: LOSS TO HAJIRA BEGAM: HUSBAND DIES SUDDENLY.

I used to see Hajira Begam mentioned often in the newspapers. She belonged to many women's organizations and reports of their activities appeared frequently. Occasionally a statement by her on some women's issue also found its way in, but without much fanfare.

At this moment I was sitting in Beg Sahib's office-like room, with his briefcase in front of me, waiting for Hajira Begam. I could have brought the briefcase over earlier, but the way the newspaper had headlined the news of Beg Sahib's death made me feel that the proper way would be to first send Rahmatullah to his house to ask for an appointment.

Hajira Begam entered the room quietly. She sat down in Beg Sahib's chair even before I could stand up. I wondered, feeling somewhat surprised, why I had thought she appeared to be just an ordinary housewife up until then. I pushed the briefcase toward her trying to think of what I

might say in sympathy at Beg Sahib's death. Just then she asked, "How did it all happen, Ghayas Mian?"

I gave her the same account I had told repeatedly to the office staff, and she listened with her head bowed. With her head still bowed she said, "He was late leaving for the office that day." Then she lifted her head and asked, "Was he able to get there on time?"

"Yes," I said. "He was never late."

"But that day he was unusually late leaving."

"He arrived exactly at the right time," I told her, then I clumsily offered my condolences on his death and assured her, still more clumsily, that he was a very good man. Hajira Begam listened inattentively to all of this and I thought that she must have heard similar things—but expressed more elegantly—for the past several days now. Feeling embarrassed by my superfluous expressions I thought I had better take my leave. I came up with a few parting sentences and said getting up, "The office was functioning very well because of him. But let's see ..."

Hajira Begam beckoned me to sit down and said, "Yes. He always worried about the office. If he ran late he started to become angry. That day too ..." She looked at me again, "Did he get there in time?"

I was feeling confused by this rather oblique conversation so I said, "Exactly on time. He took the lane to get there." Feeling that this too said nothing I told her, "Via the Garbage Dump."

She looked at me in silence for a while and then said, "That's the way he took every day."

"But not for some time now," I said. I was expecting her to say something equally indirect so I said, "He felt a slight chest pain whenever he stood in front of the Dump. Perhaps he told you that."

"No ... yes. He did say something like that one day. I thought he was just joking."

"For some time now whenever he came near the Dump he shuddered and a pain started in his chest ... so he began coming by way of the road instead."

Hajira Begam stared at me quietly. I remembered only one of the things I had thought up for taking my leave and I was about to forget that too, so I said without waiting for her response, "If there's anything I can do, I mean at the office."

I pushed the briefcase a bit more toward her and placed my hands on the desk. As I was getting up she said, "So the Garbage Dump killed him."

"Who can it kill, it looks dead itself."

“But then ... why when he got there ... when he got there ...”

I turned around at the door. “He thought Ayaz lived there. Inside the Garbage Dump.”

I heard a protracted gasp and I turned toward Hajira Begam. Right before my eyes such dreadful shock swept across her face that she couldn't hide it in spite of being a social figure. She began to look like an ordinary housewife as she had earlier. I sat down again.

“Did he tell you about that?”

“He said very little at home.” She uttered this in a tone that sounded partly disappointed and partly displeased. “And about Ayaz—hardly ever anymore. Did he say something to you?”

“No. Only about the Garbage Dump.... He was thinking of starting a lawsuit to claim ownership of it, wasn't he? He had me work on preparing the documents.”

“He never breathed a word to me about it.”

I approached the desk and said, placing my hand on the briefcase, “All the papers are here.”

Hajira Begam opened and closed the fasteners of the briefcase for a while and then said, “It all happened so suddenly. Now these papers ... you've read them, haven't you?”

“No, I've only seen them. He wanted me to make a list of these papers.”

“Have you seen all the papers?”

“Almost all, but ... I don't understand legal matters. Have a lawyer look at them.”

“I do recall that a lawyer visited him from time to time; but I don't know whether it had to do with the office or ...”

She opened and closed the fasteners once more, glancing at me and then at the briefcase. I remembered Beg Sahib's death and said, “That day he had asked me to make a list of the papers. He'd already arranged them in separate files himself.”

I lifted up the flap of the briefcase. Hajira Begam casually looked over the papers in a couple of files at the top and said helplessly, “I won't understand a thing.”

“I'll make the list. But first you must find a lawyer ...”

“You would be wasting your time for nothing.”

“Why 'for nothing'?” I said. “It ... in a way, was his will ...”

Hajira Begam became sad and said in a hoarse voice, “He trusted you a lot.”

“He was very kind to me,” I said getting up and walking toward the door. Hajira Begam said once again, “You’ll be wasting your time.”

“Not at all,” I said, saying goodbye to her and stepping out. “I have plenty of time after office hours.”

I, of course, meant that I wouldn’t have the time for it during office hours.

Then I proceeded straight to the office where the first news that greeted me was that my term of employment had ended. Beg Sahib had had me appointed temporarily especially to help him out, and perhaps he had renewed my appointment at the end of each term. My salary, too, was not paid monthly, but daily. My coworkers, referring to specific legal requirements, began telling me what I needed to do to obtain a renewal, but I knew all too well that whatever was needed was beyond my ability to accomplish. Even so, I expressed my intention to act on their advice and, after completing my last formal office duties, returned home.

My family was rather large. Several members had jobs, but there were also quite a few mouths to feed. Alone, I made about as much as the other wage-earning members did jointly and this had begun to have its affect on the external appearance of our household. That’s why I was now feeling that both my family and my life had fallen into the path of some cataclysmic change. I spent a few days feeling pretty awful. Finally I reasoned with myself: actually the change was what had prevailed during the brief period of my temporary employment. The situation had now reverted to what it used to be. So it was like before. I accepted that, in fact, I accepted it so completely that before a month had passed I began to think of my office days as something that had occurred in dreams, so completely that I even forgot the faces of my coworkers. Even the face of Rahmatullah, whom I had seen the most, began to lose its clarity and fade, so, when he showed up at my house one day, I faltered as I said, “How are you ... Rahmatullah?”

He inquired after me in response, and, without my asking, began telling me about the office; namely, that it was functioning, but poorly, after Beg Sahib, and that he couldn’t even get the new dust rag that Beg Sahib had already approved. Then he told me that he didn’t like it there since I had left. At the very end he informed me that Hajira Begam wanted to see me.

“When?”

“She didn’t say when. Shall I go find out?”

“Don’t bother. Why make two trips?” I said. “Just tell her that I’ll visit her tomorrow in the morning. But if she would rather see me at a different time, then come back and let me know when.”

As soon as she saw me, Hajira Begam complained about my not having informed her of the termination of my job. Later she asked who had regular jobs in my family.

“And here I was thinking that it was because you had a heavier workload at the office after him that you didn’t come here.”

That’s when I remembered about the list. “No,” I said, “I just plain forgot. Otherwise the list would be ready by now.”

“Ah yes, the list. Make it and be done with it.”

She got up and went over to the cabinet by the wall, took out Beg Sahib’s briefcase and placed it before me on the desk. I opened the flap, glanced at the files and asked, “Has a lawyer examined them yet?”

“No ... yes. He looked them over briefly. He also advised me to have a complete list drawn up first. He was saying that there are quite a few papers. The list will have to be fairly long.”

“I’ll make it ...” I stopped myself from saying “Sir” just in time. “I’ll come here and make it.”

“Well then, whenever you have time.”

“I have all the time.”

Hajira Begam became somewhat dejected and hesitated a little before she said, “Let me have your diplomas, etc., sometime.”

Then she said that she usually stayed home till about noon and that I could start that very day if I wanted to.

I started work that very day.

4

Beg Sahib had prepared the files very neatly. I had seen nearly all the papers in them and I had copied many of the documents myself. As a rule, he not only read each document himself, he also had someone else—usually me—read it out loud to him. But since besides these papers, and in fact more than them, my work was with office papers, my knowledge about the former didn’t extend beyond the fact that they contained a variety of information about and references to some building dating from royal times. I never asked him about the matter but one day he himself

told me in a casual way that that building had been gifted to his family and he was now trying to reclaim it.

Working in Beg Sahib's office-like room, I initially began drawing up the list for Hajira Begam or her attorney with some degree of interest, but the papers were of many types. Most of them were things that had been filed in Beg Sahib's own office. Besides these, there were certified copies of all kinds of petitions, official notices, court rulings, etc., probably none of them less than a hundred years old. After it was put in a file, each paper assumed the appearance of a legal document, which was beyond my ability to understand, so, without probing deeply into it, I merely picked up and recorded each item on the list I was compiling. Beg Sahib had written a number on each file and on each paper in it and had also given each of them a title. This made my job considerably easier. I concentrated mainly on making sure that I didn't miss entering a single paper on the list. Now and then my attention did wander off though. That happened because there was a steady stream of women coming to see Hajira Begam and, except for her, none of them could keep their voices down when they spoke. Although, when one woman would stop and another start, I did sometimes feel that the woman before her had been speaking rather softly. On occasion all of the women broke out laughing at the same time and then I was obliged to backtrack to check some entries. That didn't bother me much because in my previous employment I had become accustomed to making errors and then correcting them. I must admit, though, that to correct some entries while working at Beg Sahib's home I was obliged to peruse certain legal papers and I found this tedious and boring.

But one day, after I had finished work on several legal files, a file with "The Big Garbage Dump" written on it caught my eye. I opened it with great interest, but all it contained was just one paper with the addresses of some properties from the distant past copied on it. Each address invariably contained either the line "Adjacent to Big Garbage Dump" or "In front of Big Garbage Dump." This file disappointed me. A similar disappointment awaited me when I looked into another file with no serial number but with "Ayaz" written on it in pencil. This one contained an incomplete genealogy of some family, with Ayaz's name appearing at the end. It didn't even tell me as much as I already knew about Ayaz. Beg Sahib had told me earlier that Ayaz was the last surviving member of his family, and I already knew that Beg Sahib had raised him from childhood. I wondered for quite a while whether something useful about Ayaz might only exist in his family tree.

When I looked at the list, I discovered that I had skipped Ayaz's file and was recording items from the one after it. God knows how many other errors I had already made. That day Hajira Begam's women visitors were speaking unusually loudly and also laughing more than at any other time. From the dribbles of conversation that trickled into my ears, I surmised that Hajira Begam was out somewhere. Then I heard the clanking of teacups and such. I heard this noise at least twice during my hours working there. Each time it was followed shortly thereafter by a woman entering the room I was in through the door that was behind me. I would keep my eyes fixed on the file that was in front of me, while the woman, after placing a cup of tea near the other files, would quietly turn back on her heels. Sometimes, when Hajira Begam brought the tea over herself, she would tarry a little and talk about one or two things with me. I wasn't expecting any tea that day. I was also thinking that the house felt strangely still and quiet in her absence even though the women's noises were louder and sharper than before. In the midst of those loud noises I heard someone say, "Who will take the tea over?"

By then I was already busy counting the errors on my list, which seemed more numerous than usual. A short while later I heard the sound of a teacup being placed softly on the desk and I lost track of my count. I started all over again. Right after I began counting I heard an expressionless voice behind my back, "Why didn't you bring him along?"

"Him—who?" I blurted out, not thinking.

"Ayaz Bhai."

Then I turned around and looked at her, recognizing her after some uncertainty. "You're Shamima, aren't you?" I asked, and looked at her again. "Why, you've grown so big!"

My cordiality left her unaffected. She asked, again in an expressionless voice, "Please bring him from there, Ghayas Bhai."

"From where?"

"The Big Garbage Dump."

Is she still the way she used to be, I wondered to myself.

"Nobody can live in the Garbage Dump, Shamima."

"Why not? After all, you did, didn't you?"

Just then women's voices were heard outside on the veranda. Hajira Begam's was among them. Then she herself entered the room. Shamima, pausing briefly as she started to leave the room, told her, "I had brought tea."

“That’s good,” Hajira Begam said absentmindedly as she came and stood near the desk. After waiting a while for her to say something, I said, “I saw Shamima today for the first time in a long time.”

Hajira Begam looked a bit anxious and quite tired. She glanced at the files on the desk and said, “You’ve done quite a lot of work.”

“It’s not a lot really. It’s just making a list after all.”

“Were you able to understand the papers?”

“These are legal matters. Lawyers would understand them.”

Suddenly I began to tire of my work. I made an estimate of the remaining files and the papers in them and said, “Only a little work remains. If I stay longer I may be able to wrap it all up today.”

“Are you sure you don’t have other work to do?” she asked, then said on her own, “Yes, it would be nice if you finished it today. You can eat here.”

“A cup of tea would be fine halfway through. I’m used to eating only once a day.”

“People your age should eat three or four times a day,” she commented. “OK, you work,” and she left the room.

The remaining work was less than what I had guessed. Then, too, I hurried to finish it. At some point a woman servant came in with tea. It was completely quiet in the house. I asked her, “Is Begam Sahiba in?”

“She’s been gone for quite a while now,” she said as she was leaving.

I had finished compiling the list by mid-afternoon. I checked that day’s entries against the papers in the files and also made sure the files were arranged in serial order. As I was putting the list on top of the files, the woman servant walked in, again with tea. She put the cup down on the desk and said, “Let me know when you’re leaving.”

“I’ve finished the work and I’m just getting ready to go,” I said. “You may close the door now.”

“At least drink the tea first,” she said, picking up the earlier teacup, and then she left the room.

I was repeatedly reminded of Shamima as I was putting the files and the list into the briefcase. She was just a little girl when I used to visit Ayaz during our childhood. Sometimes when he and I went out for a stroll, she would ask to accompany us without showing the least bit of eagerness. In answer, Ayaz always said the same thing, “No. Your clothes will get dirty.” While she stood quietly watching us walk away he would tell her that the two of us were headed to the Garbage Dump. When we returned she would often be found standing at the door and she never failed to ask what all we had seen. But without paying much attention to

our answer she just followed Ayaz into the house. The only things I knew about her were that she was Hajira Begam's sister, that she hung around Ayaz, and that she was a little weak in the head. She was absolutely fanatic when it came to wearing spotlessly clean clothes. We considered this to be the result of her mental weakness—a weakness that showed on her face when she expressed her desire to go along with us, and also when she had brought tea for me. Perhaps that's the reason I had recognized her.

Had she not been weak in the head, I could have asked her quite a few things. But what things?—I hadn't the foggiest idea. I strained my mind for quite some time until I experienced the same weariness I had experienced when I was making the list. The tea on the desk had turned cold. I gulped it down like water and left without letting the woman servant know.

5

Three or four days later Hajira Begam sent Rahmatullah to fetch me. That day her house was devoid of women's noises. Hajira Begam was seated in Beg Sahib's chair in the office-like room. She talked about this and that for quite a while. Then she hesitated just as she was about to say something, and said instead, "You've drawn up the list very neatly. The lawyer was full of praise."

"Has he examined the papers?"

"Yes. And so have I. But ..."

After that she spoke as if she was talking to herself. But everything she said was so convoluted that I really had to make my mind work very hard to understand it. All I could figure out was this: The legal proceedings would drag on for quite a while, and even then it would be difficult to prove who the Garbage Dump actually did belong to. While the building belonging to Beg Sahib's family was definitely there, in the opinion of the lawyer the Garbage Dump had undoubtedly been there earlier. The lawyer also felt that either Beg Sahib had not carefully examined the files he had prepared or he had also been preparing another file which he wanted to pull out without warning. Assuming that he had won the case after so much trouble and headache, what would Beg Sahib have done with a dilapidated dalan filled with garbage anyway? The lawyer was finding this hard to figure out, and so was Hajira Begam. Still worse, now the suit had to be brought to the court by Hajira Begam. Her remark, "Anything I say or do becomes the talk of the town," lingered in my

memory. Obviously, if the suit prepared by Beg Sahib were to be pursued further that would, no doubt, also attract a great deal of attention. And Hajira Begam would surely acquire a new nickname with “Garbage Dump” worked into it somehow. Exactly the same thing had happened with several well-known people in the city.

I was listening quietly. I remembered the absolutely bizarre nicknames tacked onto some of the city’s prominent individuals and I immediately understood Hajira Begam’s worry. Not just that, I also understood why she was telling me all this. So I said, “I’ve taken every precaution to insure that no one knows anything about this matter. I haven’t even spoken to anyone at home about it.”

“You did the right thing,” she said. “Yes, the lawyer is of the same opinion: quash the matter where it now stands.”

I concurred with what the lawyer said. Getting up, I was about to tell her that if, in the future, she needed my help in any matter, all she had to do was send Rahmatullah for me, but she beckoned for me to sit back down. She hesitated a bit, then, opening the desk drawer, she said in a tone as though she was addressing one of her own, “Ghayas Mian, refuse it only if you really want to hurt me.” Then she pushed an envelope toward me.

Although the color in my face had perhaps changed a little, my hand moved forward as if by its own volition. Hajira Begam looked at me with downcast eyes and said, “Don’t say another word.” She looked even more downcast. “Think that you were working at the office for a while longer after him.”

I sat tongue-tied, flipping the envelope back and forth. She too remained silent. Finally she said, “Do visit us now and then. Now that he’s gone ... you don’t know ...” and her voice gave way. When I lifted up my head after some time, she was already gone.

After going down the lane of stairs I came to a halt in front of the Garbage Dump. Eventually I continued on into the long lane and turned left. As usual, the lane was deserted and quiet, but not the kind of quiet that permeated the area around the Garbage Dump. Here it wasn’t even broken by the loud shrill barking of dogs fighting among themselves. I remembered how, at the time I was getting Beg Sahib’s papers ready, whenever I came to the Garbage Dump I stopped in front of it and I would sense some vague feeling in its silence, but I could never put it into words.

I turned around and once again went to stand in front of that dilapidated dalan. I looked at the trash that was lying there. Something resembling steam was rising from the rubbish underneath, and that vague feeling now seemed to be somewhat like anticipation. My roving eyes stopped at the inner arches and I stepped, somewhat carefully, on the pile of garbage. While trying to avoid stepping on several useful objects, and trying to avoid tripping on them myself in the process, I managed to get as far as the first arch. Then I stuck out my head.

It was just as it had always been: extremely old trash, decayed and disintegrating, extending upwards about the distance of a couple of arm lengths but unable to reach the highest serratures. The rubble that was used for the filler kind of soared upward behind it and, here and there, empty spaces were filled with the faint echo of vehicles as they moved along on the highway above. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*