

IKRAMULLAH

The Forest*

THE SUN HAD ALREADY SET, and the evening grey was darkening everywhere when the bus stopped at a clump of trees. He got down, his cotton shalwar stiff with laundry starch and rustling. The conductor of the bus shouted to the driver, "O.K. Go!" and the creaking bus moved on. The light spilling out from the open door moved along beside the bus. He stared at the receding rear end of the bus where a black, cast-iron stepladder extended up to the roof. Through the rear window he could see the backs of his erstwhile bus-mates' heads wrapped in grimy, worn-out turbans and drab *kheses* (shawls) of faded colors. They were all looking straight ahead and bouncing up and down. He was standing alone on the side of the road. The bus had disappeared from view leaving behind traces of dust and smoke in the air. In front of him, ripening crops rolled out as far as he could see, and beyond them stood the forest with its arms spread out from one end of the horizon to the other. In the misty darkness of the evening, the forest seemed like a huge black wall that reached all the way to the sky. Except for the birds hurrying off towards the forest, the entire scene looked like a still picture. He urinated on the roots of a tree and lifted the bundle containing gifts—or, rather, the material expression of his feelings—for his mother, father, brothers and wife-to-be onto his shoulder. Going down the slope of the road he alighted on the narrow dirt-path. In an hour he would be at the forest's mouth, and after crossing through it, which would take a good two hours, he would see his village straight ahead.

Dogs began to bark. Suddenly, images of houses popped out of the darkness and stood facing him. Had he reached his village already? With-

*"Jaṅgal," from the author's first collection of the same name (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mil, 1980), pp. 66–78.

out going through the forest? Rows of closed doors stood blind and mute on both sides of the deserted street. An air of desolation hung everywhere. He walked along thoroughly dumbfounded, his feet sinking in the thick dust on the ground. Wherever he set his foot a small cloud of dust raised its head in an attempt to chase after his feet and then became suspended in the air. Any one of these inhospitable and cheerless doors could be his. Why not knock at one? A shop in the village square was still open. Inside, in the flickering light of a clay-lamp, sat a shadowy figure. He seemed to have been sitting there in silent immobility for centuries, his eyes forever glued to the ground. Was he alive or not? One couldn't be sure from that distance. Perhaps he should have a look to check whether the man was dead or alive. But he walked on thinking: "Dead or alive, what's the difference: if alive, he will ultimately die one day; and if dead, there's nothing I could do about it." As he approached the last house he saw a man wrapped in a white shawl coming toward him. When he passed him he heard a voice:

"Stranger! Stranger!"

His feet stopped and he turned around. The same man stood facing him some ten feet away.

"You talking to me?"

"Yes. Where are you heading?"

"The far side of the forest."

"Someone unfamiliar with it can hardly find his way through it even in the daytime. You want to go through it at night?"

"I'm no stranger to the forest. I have known its every leaf since childhood."

"Listen. This is the last village before the forest. There isn't any other where you may be able to find rest. Stay here for the night. You can go wherever you're headed in the morning."

"No, don't worry. The moon will be out soon. I'll have no trouble finding my way."

"The place is treacherous."

"Not for me. I know it well," he said and moved on.

"Don't be so stubborn. Do as I say."

He ignored the man's words and continued down the dirt-path that meandered through the fields. The other man watched him move further and further away, struggling with the impulse to make one final attempt to dissuade him before he had disappeared from sight altogether, but couldn't find the courage to do so.

He was now standing before that endless wall. The trail was rushing headfirst into the forest like a snake into its pit. He paused at the mouth. The wall had shrunk down to the space of a few yards on either side of him because of its nearness. Dark silent trees, their branches hopelessly tangled above their huge trunks, stood immediately in front, and a massive dark cloud of leaves hung poised above his head. He wondered about the changes that might have occurred in the forest in the last three years. "Perhaps it would be better if I return to the village I just left." He felt the firm surface of the trail with his toes and found in his feet the impatient energy of a headstrong horse. The old sensations of the path came flooding back to him: "Why, it's the same old trail. I know it very well. Even in the old days it entered the forest at exactly the same point, went straight through and came out. To that extent at least there had been no change. Anyway, whether there has been any change or not, what could be gained by taking an unnecessary risk? What used to guide me through the forest at night was my 'sixth sense.' I won't venture too far, just far enough to see whether it's still working."

He took the bundle off his shoulder and held it in one hand. With the other he moved the branches aside and entered the forest. He drew a deep breath and experienced the familiar faint smell of the trees, the same moist, heavy air. Outside the forest it was also dark but one could at least distinguish between the upright crops and the flatlands in the light of the stars. The shrubs looked like dogs sitting on their haunches and one could make out the outlines of the dark, umbrella-like crowns of the trees. But inside the forest it was so dark that one literally could not see one's own hands. He looked up and turned his neck about to see if he could spot any stars. Everywhere there was just darkness, unending darkness. He took a few steps forward looking for stars, his head still extended upward. "Yes, there's one." A lone star twinkled high above. Its light flickered steadily as if it was a heart quietly beating away somewhere. "Where have its companions disappeared? Well, where else could they be except hiding behind the foliage?" Looking for other stars with his face turned skyward, he took a few more steps. With the first step this single star disappeared. He kept walking. Right between the soaring treetops, he saw two stars flickering close together. "My 'sixth sense' is helping me, after all. It's brought me this far into the forest. I've been walking right on the trail and haven't strayed. My feet have not forgotten the way. If I keep moving like this, I'll soon reach my village. So why go back to that other village? How far have I come? Maybe a furlong, maybe a little more or a little less—difficult to say. There used to be a huge banyan at approximately

this distance from the entrance. It stood about forty feet off the trail on the right. The forest doesn't have any tree bigger than that one. In my youth, while gathering firewood with my friends during the day, we used to come as far as that tree and we played hide-and-seek in its thick branches. How strong and sturdy that tree used to be, like a firm majestic mountain its roots dug deep into the earth's breast. Is it still there? I should look for it. It's not too late; it's only the evening."

He stroked the trail with his feet in order to let them become completely reacquainted and reoriented. Then he turned at a right angle, joined his feet together, and stood erect. He gauged his body's balance, drew a deep breath, and took a step forward, as one would when measuring a piece of land. Extending his right arm in front of him and counting his steps, he started to search for the banyan. He had taken six or seven steps when his hand struck a tree. He circled around it rubbing his hand on its rough bark and then, avoiding other trees and taking each step very carefully, he walked about fifty steps. There was no sign of that magnificent tree.

The farther he moved away from the trail, the thicker the growth of trees became. His right hand swiftly scanned the space ahead of him for unexpected danger. Despite this precaution, he frequently bumped against trees and he felt as though someone had purposely given him a ruthless shove on his left shoulder. "There weren't any trees around the banyan—were there? It used to spread its shade over a small clearing all by itself. Its aerial roots cascaded down from its stout branches like so many thick, swaying ropes. Some of these roots were sunk into the ground and looked like pillars supporting the tree's bulky arms. My friends and I used to call it the banyan's beard. How we used to climb up and down this beard to escape being caught by the one who was 'It!' ... If I were going in the right direction, I would have reached the banyan by now. Apparently I turned right off the trail a bit too soon. If I turn left and walk parallel to the trail I might find the banyan. I'll look for it a bit longer. If I still don't find it, I'll return to the trail and head off toward my village."

He changed direction. The trail went straight, didn't it? Whenever he wanted he could turn left, count sixty steps and get back to the path.

He was walking along when suddenly he stumbled and fell helplessly into a mud-puddle. His bundle rolled away somewhere. His outstretched hand could not have seen the puddle coming. He just slipped and fell into it. But no, his foot had struck against something hard. He felt along the ground with both hands. Oh, it was the stump of a cleanly chopped

tree, as smooth and big as a butcher's block. He bent over, like a weaver setting the warp, and groped and sloshed through the mud a few feet to his right and then to his left. He took one step forward, straight ahead, and again explored the space to his right and left, but couldn't find his bundle. Another step forward, followed by another fruitless search. After he had gone a few steps more his hand suddenly struck his mud-splattered bundle. While he was looking for his bundle his hand had happened upon a number of tree-stumps. "Oh, I see. They've chopped down a number of trees in this part of the forest and then watered the place!" He lifted his head and saw a big patch of sky studded with stars. "Looks like a fairly large open field! And the clump of trees beyond this field, once I go through that, I'll surely hit upon the banyan. It's impossible to walk here. Why get all worked up about the banyan? I've already lost so much time ... and nothing to show for it. I could have easily walked halfway through the forest by now."

Coming back to the stump, he turned toward the trail and started walking. After counting fifty steps, he pressed his feet down to make sure. Oh, no, it was the same spongy earth where the sparse, upright strands of tall grass rustled as they rubbed against his shalwar. He now walked with great care, making sure of the ground's firmness before taking his next step. Sixty steps later he checked the ground with his feet again, but again, no, it was not the trail. In case his feet were deceiving him, he felt the ground with his hands to be absolutely sure. It was still the same soil, still the same tall strands of grass poking into his nostrils and titillating them. "But these are the same sixty steps I had taken when I detoured from the path! So where has the trail vanished? Maybe I took a longer route on the way back. Perhaps I should go another ten or fifteen steps forward."

But there was no sign of the trail. He went backward and forward, then back again and forward again. He moved about in a circle, but he could not find the trail. Exhausted by the effort, he wondered: "Why did I have to leave the trail? Then again, why did I have to enter the forest in the first place? If I had stayed on in that village I'd be enjoying a comfortable sleep now. Anyway, a trail can't just disappear. And besides, I haven't really gone very far into the forest yet. At most a couple of furlongs. I'm still near the edge. Even if I can't get back to the trail, I can easily walk between the trees and get out of the forest."

His shoes had become very heavy. He found a dry branch and scraped the mud from the soles. Then he thought of scraping the mud off of his bundle and his clothes, but he soon gave up the idea thinking that

they were splattered all over and he wouldn't know where to begin. He decided to leave them as they were. He leaned against the bundle to rest a while and soon fell asleep. Only God knows how long he slept. He woke up only when he heard a pack of jackals raising hell nearby with their prolonged howls. "Jackals!" an inadvertent smile appeared on his face. "Oh, well, what else would there be in the forest besides jackals!" Moonlight had spread over the treetops and a soft, cool light was filtering through the leaves. He felt a wonderful sense of surprise, joy and contentment. In the midst of his agitation he had entirely forgotten that there was going to be a moon that night. Just then his eyes fell on the trail a short distance in front of him, flashing like a long, winding thin speckled snake. "I'll be darned," he exclaimed. "I must have crossed it scores of times. Can't imagine why I couldn't recognize it even though it's what I've been wandering around in search of. How is it that my feet have forgotten its touch and lost the memory of it?"

He picked up the bundle, slung it over his shoulder and started off for the village he had left behind. "I'll go back and catch some sleep there. Tomorrow at sunup, I'll leave for my village. The man in the shawl, the one who was insisting that I spend the night at his place, must be fast asleep by now. How could I knock at each and every door asking about a man I'd run into at the edge of the village at twilight? Lord knows how many people here, cloaked in similar shawls, had wandered to the edge of the village? I don't even remember his face. How could I? It was half-covered and it was in the dark; it looked about as distinct as a plain, flat slate. Besides, how could a person possibly go knocking on countless doors anyway? All right, I'll go to the mosque and stay there. But wouldn't the muezzin have already locked the door and gone for the night? He wouldn't be back to open it again until before the dawn prayer. What good will it do then? As it is, my clothes are damp; it's getting colder by the minute; and I also haven't eaten since morning. My stomach seems to be on fire from hunger. My needs are many, who'll attend to them at the mosque? Suppose nobody opens the door to me, what then? The village dogs will keep harassing me all night long. So shall I try to go back to my own village? No, no, the residents of this village couldn't possibly be so heartless as to deny refuge to a wayfarer for just one night. Then again, if the man who did allow me to stay at his place murdered me during the night for the five hundred rupees I've collected with such hardship, and quietly buried me there, no one would ever find out, and I'd have lost not just my money but also my life. So that was the cause of my hesitation

earlier! It took this long to find out the real reason hiding deep in my heart.”

He stopped in his tracks and turned around. The bare, level and speckled trail rolled out far into the distance. It cut through the forest in a straight line. There was absolutely no chance of losing it in the light of the moon. Even if there were no moonlight, there was little chance of its disappearing—a piece of solid ground, two or two and a half feet wide, on which the shoe made a hard knocking sound, very different from the soft, spongy surface of the forest. “If I couldn’t find it earlier it was because when I was looking for it I must have inadvertently jumped over it, or as I was sliding my feet forward in my mud-coated shoes I couldn’t tell the difference between the trail’s hard surface and the soft earth of the forest. What I should have done, instead, was knock hard on the ground with my heels. Then I’d have known the truth right away. That was my mistake. Anyway, one learns from experience. Never again will I step off the trail. And that stupid attempt to look for the banyan—wasn’t that totally ignorant and absurd? Why would I want to do that again after what I’ve been through?”

Once again he turned his face in the direction of his village, fixed his bundle securely on his shoulder and hurried off along the speckled trail. Soon he reached the place where they had cut down all of the trees. It was an open semi-circular patch standing alongside the trail on his right. The lustrous moon was shining above his left shoulder. The branches of the trees standing in a row on his left hung listlessly like loose, limp arms, while the drab, helpless-looking butcher’s blocks were visible scattered all over the empty patch. A luminous mist suffused the dark sky, and the many stars that had been trying to outshine each other earlier had now disappeared in this effulgent haze. Only a few stars could be spotted here and there, shining dimly. The forest had started again on either side of him. He had walked a little ways when he saw a dark massive dome on his right standing apart from the others in distinguished aloofness, all bathed in moonlight. “So this is where you are!” Seeing the banyan, he turned his face away, spat in disgust and continued on. A vague and inarticulate thought which had been swimming around in his brain for some time suddenly became clear and planted itself before him. “Where am I running to in such a hurry? What am I going to get there? If I had already reached there what would have happened? And what would happen if I did reach there right this minute? And what will happen if I don’t get there at all? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It’s like my search for the banyan. If I’d found it when I was looking for it so desperately, what, exactly,

would the discovery have given me? And what has it given me now when I've found it quite by accident? Just the opportunity to express a little of my contempt for it. That's all. Had I found it when I was looking for it, I'd have shown it a little love instead. That's all. I might have even touched it on its rough bark. So what of it? It wouldn't have done much good, anyway. The banyan's true substance would still have eluded me. I wouldn't have been able to touch that."

He had traveled halfway through the forest, when, suddenly, the light of the moon vanished as though someone had simply switched it off. A patch of cloud had obscured the moon, though some light was still streaming down from the cloud's edge. The branches that appeared to hang limply before, now looked like so many snakes dangling from the trees, twisting and turning impatiently. Gusting wind whistled and hissed through the trees, knocking them violently against each other. Being inside a relatively dense part of the forest, he was safe from the direct assault of the wind. But this didn't stop his clothes from fluttering about. Where had this cloud and this wind suddenly appeared from, and the wind gradually picked up? "Oh, I was so deep in my thoughts that I failed to notice the growing intensity of the wind. But even if I had noticed it, could I have stopped the storm or the cloud from concealing the moon?" As he watched, even the last trace of light vanished. Pitch darkness swept over everything. "Shall I turn back to that other village? But it would be about as far away now as my own." Just to be sure, he pounded his heel on the trail. It was still there, under his feet. "I must keep walking, regardless of how far I can go. If I lose the trail, I'll sit down and lean against a tree to pass the night. In the morning I'll find my way home." He kept going, even though his feet slowed down. Every ten or fifteen paces he tapped with his heels to confirm that he was still on the trail. He had walked quite far when suddenly his whole body collided with what seemed like a wall. The entire front of his body—mouth, nose, forehead, eyes, neck, chest, stomach, legs—was badly injured. The jolt sent him whirling down to the ground, half unconscious, as if felled by a torrent of nasty blows administered in the ring by a powerful opponent. He lay in that condition for a while collecting his wits. At last he managed to raise himself up on his right elbow and tried to look around. There was nothing but darkness. No stars, no moon, not even the sky, nothing around him but earth—hard, solid, and very much there. He was sitting right on the trail. "So what is this on the trail then? Most likely, a big pile of assorted, dry branches from acacia and *shisham*, and other pieces of wood, hacked off by axes and dumped here together. And I ran straight into it."

He passed his hand over his face. It became wet. “Blood? No, it must be sweat.” His whole body had been perspiring lightly. He opened his eyes as wide as he could and brought his hand close trying to see more clearly. It was impossible to tell in the darkness whether it was blood or sweat. He felt something salty inside his mouth. “Perspiration is salty too, isn’t it?” But now his tongue undoubtedly tasted blood. He rounded his mouth, filled it with as much blood as it could hold at one go and spat it out. For a moment the inside of his mouth felt completely clean, but the very next moment the taste of blood crept up on his tongue. His whole face was hurting, and so were his eyes, but it was hard to know where all he had sustained injuries, or how serious those injuries were. Maybe the tissues of his eyes had also been injured because when he pressed on his eyes he felt the same heavy, dull pain that he felt elsewhere on his body. “Who in the world stores wood right in the middle of a trail? It is a trail, after all, and should be kept clear of obstructions. Is it then not the trail, the trail that I’ve been thinking of all along, but merely a track that the lumberjacks working in the forest have turned into a trail by tramping over it repeatedly? God only knows precisely where I strayed off the main path and got onto this track. Under my feet it seemed just as firm as the main trail. As far as my heel could tell, it hadn’t erred. It couldn’t have done any more, could it have? But now, where’s the pile of wood—in back of me or in front?”

He began crawling forward on all fours. First he would check the space in front of him for possible obstructions by waving his hand, and then he would push himself a step forward, all the while spitting mouthfuls of blood. “What—another trail intersecting this one? Apparently I’m standing at the intersection of two trails. Which of the two have I traveled on to get here?” Still moving along like an animal, he put his hand down on the crumbly forest soil, which was dotted with growths of sparse grass, looking for his bundle. His hand fell on yet another trail. “Which of these is *my* trail? Could it be that there’s just a single trail but it’s so riddled with twists and turns that every time my hands or knees come upon a section of it I think it’s a new trail? And now there’s yet another one! No, there couldn’t be a single trail. No, there must be many.”

He forgot all about his bundle and started to move faster. Another trail appeared, then another, and then still another. “What’s going on? A moment ago I was having difficulty finding even one, and now a whole slew of them have materialized.”

Again his head knocked against something facing him. He groped about with his hand. It was a pile of wood gathered from the forest. He

stood up. “Is this the earlier pile or a new one? There doesn’t appear to be any difference—a high wall of the same kind of sharp, spiked wood gathered together. If it is a second pile, it’s got to be either to the left or the right of the first one, or possibly behind it or even in front of it. Or, perhaps like the trails, it’s one of many. From which direction have I gotten here? Probably from the right.” He turned that way. His whole body was shaking and his clothes and face were drenched in blood. His breath was coming fast and hard. He took a few steps. “No, I got here from where my back is now.” He lunged in that direction. “No, no, from the left.” He quickly turned that way. His forehead struck hard against a thick branch that was hanging down toward the ground. The loud bang echoed in his head. The first question that came to his mind as he recovered from the impact was “What trap am I caught in? The forest has hemmed me in. My ears are splitting from its riotous laughter. It’s not going to let me go. I have to flee.” And he did, straight ahead, in the direction he was facing, bumping into trees and getting tossed around like a ball being passed between players in a circle who were loath to let it slip away. At last he collapsed onto the ground. In the morning, by the time the sun rose, his whole body had been covered by black ants, and it was impossible to identify the man who had been killed during the night. □

—*Translated by Faruq Hassan and Muhammad Umar Memon*