

FAYYAZ RAFAT

A Night's Paradise

THERE WERE THREE OF THEM; all three had sworn to be together for the rest of their lives and to die together. Who were they, where had they come from, what was their religion, which part of India did they come from—these were questions they had never asked among themselves. The one thing they had in common was—unemployment, relentless unemployment, which had brought them inextricably close to each other.

Their past clung to their foreheads like grains of sand. Their present was cloaked in thick layers of mist. They lived solely on the sweet dreams of a glorious future.

And now ...

Now one of them was dead.

His corpse lay squarely in the middle of the footpath where just seconds ago his companions had covered it with a ragged old sheet. The sheet, being a bit short, couldn't cover the dead man's body fully, leaving his face exposed. Anyone looking at that face could tell that the man had died at the pinnacle of youth. He had barely begun to grow his whiskers. Now his face wore a deathly pallor. His hollow cheekbones stood out clearly on his gaunt face. Yet the beauty of that youthful face clearly shone through, even after death. That classically long face, aquiline nose and limpid blue eyes could soften the most stony hearted.

The young man had died of abject poverty. Death had not been due to natural causes. The distressing severity of his circumstances and ceaseless financial hardships had nudged him into the arms of death much, much before his time. Weakened by hunger and starvation, he had been swept away like a twig in a gust of wind. And with him were gone his dreams and aspirations, lost forever in some surging unknown ocean.

He had come to the city with such dreams, but now those dreams lay trampled in the dust. The dazzling city lights, the buildings that reached up to the sky, the array of beautiful faces—all remained strangers to him.

No one befriended him. No one ever extended a friendly hand toward him. He kept knocking on the doors of those buildings that rose to the skies, but no one ever answered his knocks. He trudged along on the brightly lit streets till every bone in his body ached and his shoes wore off. But no one ever asked him to pause awhile, to rest his weary limbs. There was not a single sheltering tree on those brightly lit, endless city streets where he could find rest and respite. His eyes ricocheted off countless beautifully groomed faces, but no one ever brought their face close to his. The beautiful faces took in his disheveled clothes in one quick look and blithely went their own heedless way.

People were gathering donations for the dead man's last rites. His two companions stood silently with bowed head on either end of his dead body. Their mouths had run dry and their tongues had grown tired of extolling their dead friend's virtues.

Till last night the dead man had been sitting with them in a roadside shack, laughing and joking over a *pau*-roll and a small cup of tea. Afterwards, they had gone to their usual places on the footpath. In the morning when they woke up, they found him dead. They wept and wailed. Witnessing their loud lamentation, a crowd slowly gathered and started dropping big and small coins for the dead man's last rites, each according to his own status, on the grimy sheet. Some people who were more God-fearing than others left one, two, even five-rupee notes to secure a place for themselves in heaven.

In this manner, two hundred and thirty-four rupees and five paisas in all were collected.

The dead man's two friends looked meaningfully into each other's eyes. Casting a quick, all-seeing look in every direction, one said, "Everything is OK. Two hundred and thirty-four rupees and five paisas are quite enough. It won't be wise to delay any further. It's dark already. The last rites should be finished." A muffled giggle escaped him by the time he said the last sentence. He looked at the dead man and spoke admiringly, "What a wonderful scheme my friend has concocted! Imagine earning two hundred and thirty-four rupees and five paisas in a single day!" He tugged at the sheet covering the dead man and said, "Now get up quickly. First we'll go and have a grand meal somewhere, then we'll go to a brothel, maybe even get drunk."

The dead man continued to lie there—mute and still as a corpse. The dead man's friend shook him and said again, "Great acting, man! Now get up quickly or someone might call the police and we'll be in real trouble."

The dead man heard the word “police” and immediately came to life. He bolted up like a spring and within the blink of an eye all three disappeared down a dark alley. They were heading for a certain place on Byculla Road where, on the fifth floor of the seventh building, Punjabi, Sindhi, Gujrati, Bhutani, Santhali, Rajasthani, Marathi, Anglo-Indian and Burmese girls practiced the age-old profession. One, two, or more—there were enough here to last all night long. You could take your pick from young and old, novices and experienced hands. Country-made Horse brand liquor was also available. You could order mashed potatoes, fruit chaat, mince samosas and tandoori roti. For two hundred and thirty-four rupees and five paisas you could buy all this for one night.

They looked around with sharp, penetrating eyes as they approached the building. Then they sprinted up to the fifth floor. A decrepit old madam measured the three young men with her world-weary eyes. Within a flash, a bevy of brightly-colored fairies surrounded them. Each of the three men picked the girl of his choice by looping an arm around her waist. They picked up a bottle of booze each, ordered their food, and placed the grubby notes and rust-speckled coins on the madam’s wizened old palms.

Then they sat down and began to talk. Their beloveds for the night sat beside them and kept plying them with drinks. When their intoxication had soared up their spinal chords and exploded in the back of their skulls, they began to hurl the choicest abuses at each other. Swaying in the arms of their beloveds for the night, they tottered off to their rooms. All night long they took the pleasures of paradise they had bought for one night.

By the time morning dawned, there was bedlam in the entire building. The madam heard the girls squawking and crying and woke up. She found the three young men sleeping peacefully. When she tried to wake them, their necks lolled over and blue flecks of foam frothed from their mouths.

According to the forensic report, the cause of death was questionable liquor. □

—*Translated by Rakhshanda Jalil*