

NAIYER MASUD

Jarga*

Surely we are all mad people, and they
Whom we think are, are not...

— CYRIL TOURNEUR

Those dear ones are like treasure in the wilderness;
Search for the hidden treasure till you find it.

I've thrown open the door for you
And placed its key in your hand.

Čo ganj and ān 'azizān dar kharābī

Ṭalab kun ganj-e pinhān tā beyābī

Dir-e īn ganj rā bar tō gushādām

Kulīd-e ganj dar dast-e tō dādām

— NASIR-E KHUSRAU

I

A RATHER LARGE dark hand moved across the page and a plump finger with a thin silver band on it began to move forward pausing at each and every word of the document.

Honored Sir, May Your Kindness Increase,

I submit this request to your exalted presence. Today I learned of your arrival in Lucknow and I have also come to know that you are one of the old acquaintances of my beloved late grandfather and are very well aware of our circumstances. You must also know what sort of *kindness* my revered brother sahib and his wife have considered it proper to show toward me following the death of my father. They vilify me saying I have the appetite of a cow and they don't provide enough food to satisfy my hunger.

*"Jarga" is from the author's second collection, *Ṭīr-e Kāfūr* (Lucknow: Nizāmi Press, 1990), 82–103.

Sometimes they give me food laced with poison so that I will eat it and die. And they have instructed every shopkeeper in the neighborhood not to sell me provisions. My brother-in-law sahib also slanders me. God willing, I'll settle accounts with him. His younger brother defames me too and both of them have their spies shadowing me. I have many enemies. Early this morning, as soon as I received the news of your arrival, I was coming to meet you, but my enemies came along behind me in a truck, so, without meeting you, I had to return through a back alley. And I have many enemies whose spies are forever keeping an eye on me. They continually walk back and forth around my house, sometimes disguised as fakirs, sometimes as hijras. But, by God, I don't fear them. When my *mind* is well, I'll give each and every one of them their due. I too have a very large party and I continually receive messages from the men of my party. I'll settle accounts with every single person. And let me tell you that my brother-in-law sahib is a heretic; the Lord of the World commands and they say, "It is not God that kills us, but time." And my brother-in-law never allows my sister to meet with me in his absence. He's afraid she might give me something to eat and drink. And his respected younger brother slanders me too and says I'm a freeloader.

If my *mind* becomes well, I may take a job somewhere or I may start tutoring so that I don't remain dependent on anyone. Dependence is a terrible thing. May Allah never cause you to hold out your hand to anyone. Would you show just this much favor regarding my situation: write a message to some minister or high-ranking official so that he'll make some arrangement and my *mind* will become well. There isn't anything wrong with my *mind*, it's just that I keep thinking about things. And when I start to speak, then, whenever I get warmed up, I can't stop. I want to stop, but I go on talking. Please include all of these things in your recommendation letter, and please also write that if my *mind* becomes well then I can do the work of tutoring, etc. And also this too, that I had taught a while in the Haidari School, and even when my *mind* was like this, I nevertheless taught very well. The new headmaster falsely accused me and dismissed me because his father was an adversary of my father. I worked properly when my *mind* wasn't well, so when my *mind* does become well, I'll work even better. Please write all of this in detail. Allah will reward you bountifully for this. Or please write out a certificate yourself saying that my *mind* can become well. Your certificate will be of great use to me.

What more can I write? It has become known to me that the haveli first belonged to your family. If my *mind* were well, I would have tried to have it returned to you.

The unfortunate,
Irshad Ahmad

The dark hand covered the paper.

2

An ice cream-wallah, pushing his cart, disappeared into the lane on the western end of the street. More than half of the stone marker showing the name of the lane had disintegrated and disappeared, leaving only the word "Lane" on the part that remained. The street was clean and it went straight off into the distance. Just ahead, fallen leaves were piled neatly along the sides of the thick shady trees planted at short intervals from one another, and the dust clinging to the leaves was spattered. The street too seemed as if it must have been wet earlier, although it hadn't rained. The stillness was a bit more pronounced than usual because it wasn't evening yet, but now a sound breaking the silence could be heard coming from the distance. It was a rickshaw with someone seated inside beating steadily on a drum. Now and then, rose-colored leaflets came flying out and scattered in front of the vehicle in the blowing wind. Within moments, the surroundings were transformed. An assortment of children sprang from the openings of the lanes that jutted off along this long street and raced toward the rickshaw to retrieve the leaflets. They quickly gathered up the ones that were rolling on the ground and then swarmed around the vehicle. From the distance, it seemed as though the besieged rickshaw in the midst of this throng was a piece of sweetmeats being attacked by large black ants.

Another rose-colored leaflet flew out, rose up into the air, and was swept over the heads of the children. At the same time, just as the rickshaw picked up speed, a burqa-clad woman emerged from the lane next to it. She came forward holding on to her faded burqa that was flapping in the wind and, with both hands, she awkwardly tried to catch a leaflet flying in front of the vehicle. In the process, she forgot about the vehicle. Bumping against the rickshaw's front wheel, she landed on the ground, rolled twice, and quickly stood up. Meanwhile, the leaflet escaped from her hands and sailed on down the street alone, beyond the reach of the crowd. The sound of the drum stopped and so did the forward movement of the vehicle. Now the woman was shaking her hands and quarreling with the rickshaw-wallah. Her voice couldn't be heard from the distance, but the gestures of her hands were enough to convey what sort of words were spilling from her mouth.

Someone nibbling on an ice cream walked into the street from the lane. He was coming along very slowly clutching the stick with two fingers. The milky ice cream was melting fast and, every few moments, he lifted it up to his mouth to let the drops fall onto his tongue. He looked at it lovingly, perhaps to estimate how much still remained, then he let the drops of milk slide down to the bottom of the ice cream, and putting his head back quickly, suspended it above his open mouth. His hair, pushed toward the back and smoothed down well with oil and water, made his face seem very gaunt.

“Come,” he said furtively to the ice cream raising it up to his mouth—but now all he had in his hand was an empty stick. A shadow passed over his face. Anxiously looking up and then down, he saw that the ice cream had fallen on the ground and gotten squashed beneath his very own foot. For a moment, despair flashed in his eyes. Quickly, he sucked the flat stick two or three times, tossed it aside, and rushed off toward the lane.

“Oh bhai!” he called out thrusting his hand into the pocket of his kamiz, “Oh bhai, ice cream!” But his feet slowed down of their own accord. He took his hand out of his pocket and stood listening for some time. Suddenly his eyes turned red and, coming to the middle of the street, he looked toward the sky. With his eyes turned upward, he moved two or three steps in one direction, then another, then a third, as if he was deciding on a spot. Finally, he stopped and stood in one place and tilted his head back a little more, which made his neck seem spindly.

“The first one!” he screamed, “landed on the ground!”

He went near the glob of ice cream and, bending down to the ground, drew a circle around it with his finger. Then, folding his hands on his chest, he stood up. His eyes closed and a veritable stream of words poured from his mouth like a memorized lesson. These words blended harmoniously with the hand gestures of the burqa-clad woman farther back. But that quarrel finally ended. The rickshaw moved on and the drum began beating again—and right along with it, a change came about in the condition of this person standing on the street. His lips closed and his eyes opened, became wide and then narrowed. Turning his head, he looked toward the rickshaw. The rose-colored leaflet that had escaped from the woman’s hand was rolling straight toward him on the ground. He looked at it and leaned forward paying close attention. When it got near his feet, he pounced and grabbed it. Then, with fear in his eyes, he looked all around before putting the leaflet in his pocket. Now his eyes were fastened on the approaching rickshaw. He was listening to the sound of the drum with rapt attention and his head was swaying slowly as

if he could easily understand the meaning of every beat. The rickshaw passed by right near him, but it didn't affect the degree of his concentration at all. He didn't even pay attention to the black car that came and stopped near him just then.

"Bhai Sahib, please just listen to me," someone said from inside the car, but he didn't hear. When the voice called to him a third time, he turned. He took one look at the car and began shaking his hand in annoyance. The car moved on and he again became lost in the fading sound of the drum, but now the traffic on the street had started getting heavy. Most of the vehicles and passersby were headed in the very same direction as that black car.

Three boys riding bicycles passed by and, after going a little further, they circled around and came back. They surrounded him and watched his deep engrossment with curiosity for some time. Then the chatter started.

"Irshad Bhai! For heaven's sake, we were wandering all over the city looking for you and you popped up here."

"Irshad Bhai!"

"Irshad Bhai! Hello, where are you?"

"Irshad Bhai Sahib!"

Finally he stirred. For some time he gazed at each face, one by one, in a daze, then a flash of recognition appeared in his eyes and he told them, as if he was reporting some extremely important news, "There was a message coming."

"A message? I see! Really?"

"By God, look at this." He took the rose-colored leaflet out of his pocket. "This came too!"

"Let's see, let's see. Where did you get it?"

He pointed toward the glob on the street and suddenly became glum.

"My ice cream fell," he said, his voice sounding strained.

"Your ice cream fell! That's terrible!"

"I hadn't even eaten half of it."

"Oh-ho! In other words, in the prime of its youth, right? Well, don't be sad Irshad Bhai. Tell me, how much ice cream will you eat?"

Another boy said, "Do you know where we're going? To Manzur Sahib's!"

"Manzur Sahib's?"

"Yes, Manzur Sahib's! Today is the debut of the haveli."

"The debut of the haveli?"

"Yes, the debut of the haveli! And in celebration he's arranged a

grand banquet.”

“A banquet?”

“Yes, a banquet! And Manzur Sahib has said ... what has he said Ishtiaq?”

“He said even if we couldn’t attend ourselves, he still wanted us to be sure to bring Irshad.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you! So come on brother. We’ll just wheel on over there.”

One of them had Irshad hop in front of him on the bar of the bicycle.

3

At the end of the lane, on the left side, and set back a bit from the street, there was an old-style entryway that seemed very new. Around it, there was a bustle of activity. People were going inside in small groups. Their eyes automatically lingered on the entrance. Before going in, they took a good long look at the whole of it and then passed through talking to one another. As they passed under it, some raised their heads to look; others seemed to avoid looking altogether. Most of them just gazed at it from the distance and saw that the orange glow of the setting sun was highlighting the decorative work on its twin, marble columns, and the waning sunlight seemed to be drowning out all of the colors in the geometrical, cut-glass forms fastened to it; on the façade that supported three crescent-shaped arches, two fish made of silver, or of some other metal plated with silver, seemed to be quivering for some reason, and the reflection of the light in their lifeless, red-glass eyes was orange; the reflection was even brighter on the glistening, brass spire on top of the black stone triangle affixed to the façade.

On coming closer, they saw that the skillful artistry which the glass, stone and metals craftsmen had displayed on this entryway wasn’t fully visible from the distance. Now they saw forms within forms, and when they went up right next to the entryway to look closely at these fine details, they saw bits of dirt stuck to the marble columns. Then they noticed that these bits of dirt were actually embedded in the polished surface of these columns.

The haveli was behind this entryway, although the entryway had never been in front of the haveli before today, not even last night. Nevertheless, there it was, standing some distance from the street, completely finished. The haveli wasn’t visible behind it, but the owner of the haveli

was standing in front of it welcoming the arriving guests. He would say a few sentences to everyone and then step to one side and point toward the entrance. The stream of guests passing beneath the entryway in this manner would sometimes stop for brief periods. On one such occasion, the owner rubbed his finger lightly on one column and then brought his finger up to his eyes and looked at it closely. After that he pressed his thumb and finger together two or three times. Just then, a young man walking quickly came through the entrance. The owner noticed him out of the corner of his eyes and called out quietly, "Muneer Shah Sahib!"

"Yes Abbu?" The young man stopped immediately and turned around.

"Where are you off to?"

"Abbu, perhaps that ice cream ..."

"It's come," his father said and then he asked, "Did you take your medicine?"

"Medicine ... Abbu ..."

"Yes, yes." The father took a small vial from his pocket and held it out toward the young man.

"Good heavens, Abbu," the young man said taking the vial. "You never forget."

"Twenty-seven minutes after," he said looking at the watch on his wrist, "then again at bedtime."

"Yes, Abbu," the young man said also glancing at his watch.

He turned and had walked a few steps toward the gate when he heard the voice of his father again. "Will you give me the vial?"

The young man turned back around. "I'll remember, Abbu," he said almost whimpering. "At bedtime too ..."

But his father put out his hand toward him and said, "Please, just take out one capsule."

As the young man was returning the vial his father said, apparently addressing the vial, "Your *jarga* [gangl] is very punctual."

Just then a small group of guests approached the entrance and the father went forward and shook hands with them one by one and spoke to them briefly. After the guests had gone in, he turned toward the young man.

"*Jarga*, Abbu?" the young man said a little upset.

"Nearly everyone has arrived," the father said. "Now please just do me the kindness of seating all of them at one table and ..."

"But Abbu, none of these have come. The list of guests you yourself ..."

“At one table,” the father repeated, “and you must personally see to it that they, and only they, are well looked after.”

“But Abbu, they can’t come without an invitation.”

“Did I say that they had come without an invitation?”

“Abbu, might you be making a mistake in recognizing ...”

“Are you trying to say that I don’t recognize my own guests?” the father said. “That’s possible. At any rate, one of these gentlemen has told me that at least three spirits would be needed for a building of this size, and he can supply me with very suitable spirits at a very suitable price.

“Zafar Sahib!?” the young man said wide-eyed.

“As far as I know, only one gentleman in the city handles this kind of business, and he’s your discovery.”

“But Zafar Sahib ...”

Another group of guests approached. After finishing with them, the father again turned his attention to the young man.

“If I marry the Princess of Yemen, you won’t object?”

“Badaruddin!” The young man’s eyes opened wider. “But Abbu, Zafar Sahib’s gone to Delhi.”

“He had gone,” the father said. “The Princess of Yemen tried to have him kidnapped there so he came running back. He didn’t want to marry her. But he thinks, if I’m willing ...”

“The Princess of Yemen!” the young man said sounding very serious.

“He’s convinced me that she’ll become my maidservant.”

“The Princess of Yemen!” the young man said in that same serious tone. “Abbu, what’s the harm?”

“See see, it’s starting to work,” the father said, also in that same tone. Then, looking at his watch, he continued, “Mahatma Gandhi still hasn’t shown up.”

The young man looked befuddled and then jumped up. “Abbu! What, *even* Babu Sahib ...?”

“When do I recognize anyone? At any rate, the one who informs has told me that Gandhi-Ji will arrive in a little while and that Bahadur Shah Zafar has already come, although he’s had his beard shaved off ...” Suddenly his tone became very affectionate, “No, no, don’t try to restrain your happiness.”

“Abbu, I’m confused.”

“No reason to be.”

“But I didn’t invite him, Abbu.”

“Did I say that you had? And listen, don’t start digging into who invited him now. Just keep in mind that if he starts to make the other

guests his confidants then ...”

“When is he ever open with everyone, Abbu?” the young man said plaintively.

“You’re open with whomever you want to be open with.”

“Me ... Abbu ... I’ll round them all up together in one place.”

“That’s right,” the father said. “That’s exactly what I was saying. And ... that’s it, now go. I’m counting on your kindness. Please don’t forget your medicine.”

But as the young man began turning toward the entrance, he again heard his father’s voice.

“Please come, come” he was saying as though talking to himself, “you’re the only one missing.”

The young man turned back, “Abbu?”

“It’s nothing. Irshad Ahmad Sahib is bringing his honorable self, along with his *mind*. The young man looked. Quite some distance from the entrance, by the side of the street near the teashop, a boy had let Irshad down from a bicycle. The young man mumbled, “These days Irshad ...”

“It’s all right. You go inside,” the father said. “I’ll receive him.”

But Irshad was headed toward the teashop. From the way he was walking, it seemed as though one of his feet must have fallen asleep while he was riding on the bar.

4

At that time only two men were in the teashop. One of them was the proprietor. When he saw Irshad coming, he said very affectionately, “Come on in, Irshad Mian. How about a *nān khatā’ī* [type of Chinese cake]?”

“No, Muhammad Mian, not today,” Irshad replied as he was climbing the three steps of the shop.

“I’m offering it from my heart.”

“Not today.”

“Come on now, take it. I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“Not today,” Irshad said again and a slight smile appeared on his face. He leaned over toward Muhammad Mian a little and said in a hushed voice, “Today there’s going to be ice cream!” Then he pointed toward the entryway.

“Is that right? So you’re going to have a feast at Manzur Sahib’s today!”

“Not a feast,” Irshad said very brusquely, “just ice cream!”

“Did you get permission?”

“To hell with permission! For starters, my ice cream got spoiled ... Muhammad Mian, don't make me angry!”

“Can't you even take a joke, Irshad Mian? Have a seat, I'll give you some tea.”

“Not tea.”

“Only ice cream?”

“Yes!”

“I'm invited too, bhai. I got a card.”

“So come on.”

“You don't expect me to just abandon the shop and go.”

“Very well then, I should be on my way ... and yes ...” As he was leaving, Irshad stopped. Going up close to Muhammad Mian, he took the rose-colored leaflet out of his pocket. “Keep this. It just came today.”

He placed the leaflet on the platform of utensils and, as he was doing this, his hand almost brushed against a rather large dark hand that was resting there. Only then did he become aware of the presence of another man. The man wasn't facing Irshad, but Irshad wasn't looking at his face anyway. With one glance he saw the dark hand and the thin silver band on its plump finger. Then, very carefully, he picked up the rose-colored leaflet from the platform and slipped it back into his pocket. His body was trembling slowly, but he managed to get hold of himself.

“Very well, Muhammad Mian,” he said in a strained voice going down the stairs, “I'll come again, it's getting late.” And walking quickly, he went off toward the entrance.

For some time, Muhammad Mian continued looking at the street absentmindedly, then he turned toward the other man and said, “If you want to know the truth, Nawab, the haveli had become a ruin.

“This Irshad Mian ...,” the other man asked, “is he the grandson of Maulvi Aulad Ahmad?”

“What a good eye you have.”

“He looks a lot like his grandfather.”

“The whole family was cast from a single mould, and this one, he seemed to be such a bright boy ... then, God knows what came over him.”

“The haveli ...” the other man said thinking, “it had become a ruin long ago, Muhammad Mian.”

“That's true, but Manzur Sahib should be applauded. He wouldn't rest until he had it completely restored. While the repairs were going on so many workers used to come to drink tea. They would say that for the amount of money he was spending on the repairs, three new houses ten

times the size of the haveli could be built.”

“So why didn’t he?”

“Well, his mind was all set on the haveli, so that’s what got done, and you know, these days, carving ...”

“But the façade wasn’t like this before.”

“The façade ... it isn’t the same?”

“It’s very different.”

“But Nawab, when you think about it, the front was in miserable shape. It was impossible to even guess what the original had been like, only bare bricks were left. But let me say one thing Nawab: If today he were to learn the exact original design of the façade, he would have it demolished immediately and start rebuilding all over again.

He stopped abruptly, a little keyed up, and looked at the other man with probing eyes for some time. Then he said, “So, do you know how the front of the haveli used to look?”

“Wouldn’t I know?” the other man said quietly, and Muhammad Mian suddenly began to look dejected.

“That’s true. Well, never mind. Tell me, did you find somewhere to stay? If you take my advice ...” He stopped short and said in a whisper, “Manzur Sahib!”

The owner of the haveli was standing on the first step of the teashop.

“Muhammad Mian,” he said pointing toward the entrance, “I’m waiting for you.”

Muhammad Mian was flustered but managed to say with difficulty, “Ready ... Sir, I’m ready. Just let me put on my kurta.”

“Come on, it’s just starting,” and he went back toward the entrance.

“See Nawab, what did I tell you?” Muhammad Mian addressed the other man, “He’s a gem, a real gem.”

Slowly turning the silver band on his finger, the other man said, “You go on, Muhammad Mian. I’ll look after things here.”

“Go make yourself comfortable,” Muhammad Mian said taking his kurta down from the peg. “It’s unlikely any customer would be stopping in now.”

As he was going down the steps, Muhammad Mian finished fastening all the buttons of his kurta.

The area around the entryway was now awash in bright light. The

entrance itself was also glowing with electric lamps, and service people of every description were coming and going through it. There wasn't a single guest to be seen.

The owner of the haveli came out of the entrance. After giving some directions to two men, he turned to go back inside but then stopped. Irshad was rushing out.

"Irshad Sahib, where are you rushing off to?" he said coming up to him.

"Home," Irshad replied quite out of breath.

"Is everything all right?"

"Muneer deceived me. God knows what sort of people he had me sitting with."

"They're all friends. Please come inside."

"No, no. They aren't men of my party."

"Fine, they may not be. Sit at some other table, please. Come on, I'm going to have the ice cream served."

"No, Manzur Sahib, there's danger. You don't understand."

"I understand everything. Please, come along."

He tried to grab hold of Irshad's hand, but Irshad slipped away from him and ran.

There was almost no light inside the teashop. On the third step, Irshad fell and landed on his knees. He remained like that for some time and then got up, groaning softly, and went through the door. Now he was panting more than before.

"Muhammad Mian!" he called out quietly. Limping forward two or three steps, he collided with someone. He backed up a little, then lifted his head and found himself face to face with a rather large dark figure. The figure moved slightly and, terrified, Irshad watched its hand go up. He couldn't see the hand very well, however, the silver band on its finger was shining.

"Who is it?" Irshad asked, his voice quaking, then he faltered.

"Irshad Mian," came the sound of a firm but gentle voice, "I received your letter."

"Letter?"

There was a slight rustle. Two sheets of white paper could be seen in the dark hand. Irshad stared at these sheets a while and then mumbled, "The letter ... they got hold of it!" Suddenly he started saying loudly, "I don't know anything. I didn't write a letter to anyone. I don't even know

how to write.”

“I received your letter.”

Irshad was shaking now, but he clenched his fists and got hold of himself. “Let me go,” he said sounding almost as if he was giving a command.

The figure remained silent. Exerting even more control over himself, Irshad made his voice stern and said, “I’m going.”

Still, the figure remained silent. Irshad took a step back. Now he was almost on the verge of crying, but again he controlled himself. “I’m not afraid of anyone,” he said, “I too have a very large party.”

“I’m also a man of *your* party, Irshad Mian.”

Suddenly Irshad jumped back and fell down onto the street below. Then he got up and started running across the road. His whole body shone in the bright lights of a black car. The brakes screeched and a few moments later several men materialized on that empty street. For quite a while there was a jumble of voices all talking at once in which the name Irshad could be heard several times. Then someone said, “Take him to the hospital, the hospital.”

Another voice said, “Liaqat, you ride with him. We’ll let them know at the house.” The sound of a door being slammed shut was heard and the car turned around and went back in the same direction from which it had come.

For a few moments, the lights of the turning car fell on a man standing in the doorway of the teashop. Even after the car had disappeared from sight, he continued standing there a while, facing the street like a black statue. Then, very slowly, he began moving back.

If, at that moment, a customer had looked from the street, he would have thought the shop was empty. □

—Translated by Jane Shum and Muhammad Umar Memon