

NAIYER MASUD

Hounded*

JUST OUTSIDE THAT CITY there was a cluster of trees with thick foliage, and behind it there was a rather long, open field with leveled ground. Actually, a railway line was going to be laid there and this was the reason the ground had been leveled, but later the line was put elsewhere so the field was abandoned. It wasn't visible from the road. Only some scruffy, wild shrubs could be seen. Behind those, there was just a section of high, uneven ground and, beyond that, only the upper part of the trees. From the road, it wasn't clear whether those trees were close together or far apart or how far they extended.

One day as I was passing by the area, I felt an urge to look at the thicket of trees closely and that day, after venturing into it, I came upon this desolate field. No one went there—at least that's what I thought—so I liked going there for my stroll. It wasn't so much that I liked strolling, but it was thought that there was some problem with my heart. In order to remedy it, I was advised to take brisk walks early in the morning. At that time, I was afraid of heart disease. The image of dying suddenly was terrifying to me and I recalled the saying of an elder from my childhood again and again. He was aware of many incidents of people dying suddenly. For example, one gentleman was arranging the departure of his son's marriage procession, hurrying everyone onto the vehicles. Finally, he lifted up his foot to get on himself and dropped over dead. Everyone had to get out of the vehicles and the final arrangements for that gentleman got underway. This elder used to take pleasure in relating such incidents, but when he finished he never failed to say, in an angry tone of voice, "Now tell me sir, was this any time to die?"

He used to often recount the incident of another gentleman too:

"Guests were coming some distance to present a proposal for the hand of his daughter. He stood waiting for them at the gate reading a

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newspaper. The other members of the family were inside the house where arrangements were underway for a party. The guests arrived and, as this gentleman went forward to welcome them, he tottered and the newspaper fell from his hand. The guests rushed forward to support him, but he had already arrived in the next world. So much for the proposal, so much for the party. The sweets they had brought along remained inside their luggage. After participating in his funeral, those poor souls went back home.” And then that same, “Now tell me sir, was this any time to die?”

It seemed as though he was placing responsibility for every untimely death on the one who had died. After listening to him, since childhood the thought of dying suddenly seemed unpleasant to me and I saw various drawbacks in it. This was the reason I took the advice to walk in the early morning.

Inside the city, the places for walking were very crowded so I started searching for some secluded spot. During my search I also ended up taking substantial walks, and it was then that I found this field behind the thicket. It was the bitter cold period at the end of winter. After bundling myself up in warm clothes, I would go out in the early morning and walk in the field, quickly in some places, slowly in others. However, as winter was coming to an end, I noticed that many other people started to come there. Most were old men. Several people were practically jogging; a few were staggering along very slowly. Other people would bring them in vehicles and, after depositing them on the field, the escorts would sit and relax. Later, those same escorts would help them get into the vehicles again and take them back. Being in that crowd was unpleasant for me, but I wasn't aware of any other suitable venue. Finding no alternative, I started going to the field just before dawn, while it was still dark. This spoiled my sleep, but at least I found the field empty, and before other people arrived, it was time for me to return home.

I thought I was alone, but sometimes I sensed that someone else was in the clump of trees. I assumed it was my imagination, but one day I caught a glimpse of him. That day I was late going back and it was getting light. He was sitting propped against the trunk of a tree and didn't pay any attention to me. It was almost time for other people to start arriving so, without looking at him closely, I went out to the main road. I saw him several times after that, on the eastern side of the thicket. He was underneath that same tree with his chin resting on his knees. In the darkness, he appeared to be a phantom and I was only imagining that he was sitting there. I never saw him walking in the field; nor did he ever pay attention

to me.

One day as I was going out through the trees I heard his voice and halted. He was standing upright and I approached him. "What's the matter?" I asked, trying to see his face.

"I have a pain here," he said with great difficulty.

He must have also pointed to the place where he had pain, but I couldn't see properly in the darkness. He was falling. I steadied him with both hands and seated him up against the tree trunk. Not knowing what to do, I stood near him quietly. I may have stood there some time—so much so that it had gotten light and more and more people had started to arrive. He saw me in the light and slowly said my name.

"You?" he said. "Is it you?"

I looked at him closely too. He was some old office colleague, but which office? When I was young, I had worked for various lengths of time in several offices and now I couldn't even remember all those offices let alone the name of some colleague from one of them. He was someone I had worked with in one of those offices. There was a square satchel hanging from his shoulder. Even now it was dangling there and because of it I remembered: he was working in that office before I came along. He had even helped me with my work several times. His name was rather short, but at the time I wasn't able to recall either his name or which office he had been in. I hadn't had much of a relationship with him. In every office I associated with the people who were my own age. He was older than me and I probably hadn't found him interesting.

"Why did you start coming here?" he asked.

"My heart," I said. "I was advised to take walks in the early morning. And you? What's the matter with you?"

"Smoke," he said. "There are a lot of restaurants around my house and they get their ovens going when it's still dark. For me, I mean for my lungs, the smoke is poison."

"But the ovens burn all day long."

"I'm away all day." He paused and then said, "No, they do burn all day, but right after they get them going ..."

Suddenly his face became contorted. He stood up, stuck his hand inside his satchel and tried to take something out. Then he handed the satchel to me and doubled over.

"Call some others too," he said, his voice choking, then he sat down on the ground. I went out and looked around. By now, there were several old men strolling back and forth in the field, but they all seemed to be in need of help themselves. I went to other parts of the field at the far end

and there too I saw some old men staggering along. Their helpers were sitting off to one side. I looked at each of them closely for a while, but sensed that each one was waiting impatiently for the return of his own old man, so I didn't say anything to them. Disappointed, I went back into the thicket, but I couldn't remember which tree I had left my colleague under. I looked around under the trees, but didn't find him anywhere. I ran my eyes along the right and left of the dirt path that connected the main road to the field. Then I went onto the main road and started off toward my house. The whole way, I felt sure I would meet up with him somewhere or other walking slowly, or standing, or sitting, or lying on the ground, but I didn't find him in any state at all and, in the meantime, I arrived home.

There, while I was changing my clothes, I noticed that his satchel was still in my hand.

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For several days I continued searching for him in the area around the field and on the other paths that branched off from the main road. Two or three times, as I approached the thicket, I had the feeling he was there somewhere in the darkness beneath some tree, but when I arrived all I found beneath the trees was the dew that had dripped from the leaves. I had also planned to go to the old offices I remembered—and I even went to two of them—but I had only worked in each of them for a few months and there was no one there now who knew me, nor anyone that I knew. I also couldn't figure out how to proceed with inquiring about my colleague when, in fact, I remembered neither his name nor his job. In the end, after asking about various things, I went away and gave up the idea of searching for him in the offices.

After that he didn't go to the field, at least not at the same time I was there, so my attempts to look for him came to nothing, and the surprising result was that I abandoned going to the field. Meanwhile, one day my glance fell on his satchel, which I had put in my closet. I was amazed that I hadn't thought of examining the contents to find out about its owner. With considerable curiosity, I turned it upside down on the table. In it there were some ordinary bills in small denominations, some medicines, and some receipts that were no longer readable. There were also two or three letters addressed to some "Honorable Brother" from some "Obedient Achchan" that seemed to have been written long ago. None of them had envelopes, nor did they reveal anything about when or where they

were from, or to what address they had been sent. With some hesitation, I read through them, but they only gave information about the illness or well-being of “Chhoti Khala” and “Manjhli Phuphi Sahib” and nothing more. There was also a picture of a one-and-a-half or two-year-old girl on the back of which was inscribed, “Ameena is eating a biscuit.” Reading these personal letters, I felt as if I were a criminal and, even so, I didn’t find so much as a clue about the owner.

That satchel was now a burden weighing on my chest and I started thinking about what could possibly have happened to its owner. He knew me and he knew that I could be found at the field, but he didn’t try to contact me. Alive or dead, hadn’t he been able to reach his home? Hadn’t his family searched for him? Had he lived alone? Had he been run over by some vehicle and been disposed of like an unclaimed corpse? There was just question after question, and I didn’t come up with the answer to even one of them. Then the terrifying thought occurred to me that I had the belongings of a person who had disappeared, and I could well be questioned about it. If some unknown man had been the cause of his death in an accident, or if nothing was known about the man’s identity yet, I could be accused. After that, all sorts of fears besieged me—and every fear ended up at the police, the interrogation, and the lock-up.

As it was, my life wasn’t going very well, but the thought of life as an accused, or rather, as a criminal of sorts was more than I could bear. One day, after this thought had started hounding me all the time, I latched the door from the inside and took out the satchel. It was a new, sturdy satchel made of hand-loomed cloth. I liked it very much. I took out the things inside of it and looked at them one more time. Then I put them back inside and started a large fire. At first, the smoke from the fire started choking me, but then the flames shot upward. I tossed the satchel into the fire and kept turning it over and over with a stick until it was completely reduced to ashes. Thus Honorable Brother and Obedient Achchan, Chhoti Khala and Manjhli Phuphi Sahiba, Ameena and her biscuit, and those medicines, those banknotes and those receipts were all destroyed. I think Ameena’s biscuit was the very last thing to be reduced to ashes.

While I was gathering up the ashes, it felt as though now I really had killed that man. The thought didn’t trouble me any less, but even so, I felt relaxed, like a criminal who has destroyed all the evidence of his guilt.

curred to me several times that I shouldn't have burned the satchel—the man might still be alive. However, with the passage of time, I just forgot about him. During that period, one time I also had my medical checkup. My heart condition had improved somewhat. When I was asked about the walking, I said I was still doing that. By this I meant that every day I would go out of the house, but there was no fixed time for it. I would leave whenever I felt like it, wander around aimlessly here and there, and then come back.

One day I ended up in a well-known neighborhood of the city that I had never been to before. It was located on the far side of a large bazaar and beyond it there was another commercial area. This neighborhood had many small lanes. I was wandering around in them and couldn't figure out which one would take me out of there. Just as I was going from one lane into another, a man coming in my direction noticed me and stopped short. When I got near him I stopped too.

"My goodness, is that you?" he exclaimed.

"You?" I also exclaimed, and the two of us embraced. He was a very close friend from my schooldays. Even after such a long time, we had no difficulty recognizing each other. We stood right there and started talking about our present lives, then school. We recalled our old teachers, what we knew about the situations of our old classmates, and we reminisced about our pranks. He had been a very lively fellow and there was still a glimmer of playfulness in what he said. I enjoyed meeting up with him unexpectedly. He used to sing a lot too, and he would do good imitations of popular songs from that period, but he didn't sing any song completely. He would start a song and, after one or two bars, he would mix some other song into it, then a third. He would go through fifteen or twenty songs this way. If someone asked him to sing a whole song, he would say, "I don't remember the whole song." And the truth of the matter is that we enjoyed just hearing snippets of songs from him.

I brought up the subject of his songs and asked, "Do you still sing 'patchwork songs'?"

"Not anymore, haven't you noticed my voice?" he said somewhat wistfully and fell silent.

Indeed, his voice had gotten bad. After some time, he took my hand and said, "We've finally met again after such a long time. Come on, let's sit and visit a little while. My house is right nearby."

We entered another lane and, after walking a short distance, he stopped in front of a small restaurant and said something to the proprietor before continuing on. Three or four restaurants were adjoining one an-

other and then we came to his house. The entry door was small but inside the house was spacious. There was also a courtyard. The two of us were sitting in a room near the door telling each other about ourselves when someone knocked on the front door. My friend called out, "Come on in."

A lad wearing only shorts entered carrying two glasses of tea and two saucers in his hands. I was somewhat surprised that he was holding four things in each hand. He placed everything on a table and went rushing back.

At that moment we were laughing at the nicknames we used to give our teachers. "Do you remember Master 'Tabla'?" he asked.

"How could anyone forget him?"

He was the most simple-hearted of all our teachers. If he really got angry at some boy he would tap softly on the boy's back with his two hands, like a tabla, that's all.

"Do you remember his cursing?"

"No," I said, "did he curse too?"

"One time I didn't have my homework and he kept asking over and over, 'Why didn't you bring your homework?' I didn't have an answer and I just stood there without saying anything. He said, 'Why don't you answer? Say something, if you don't I'll curse.' When I still remained silent, he started saying, 'You won't say anything? So, should I curse?' He asked a second time, 'Should I curse?' I said, 'Please, go ahead.' So he said, 'Dead boy!' When I heard this curse I laughed."

"Then what happened?" I asked chuckling.

"What could happen, he got really angry and did his drum routine on my back. A long time after leaving school, I met him once. He had developed a breathing problem. Yaar, my house is really lousy."

He mixed one subject into another, the same way he used to patch together songs. I said, "Why? Why is it lousy? It's such a nice house."

"Yes it is, but there are lots of restaurants around here."

A bell started ringing in my head and I said, "So what if there are? At least you don't have to cook your own meals."

He said exactly what I was expecting to hear: "That's right, but early in the morning they fire up their ovens. The smoke spreads everywhere and I start suffocating. I suspect that's the reason my voice has gone bad."

If I had wanted to, I could have continued the conversation, but suddenly the thought of the satchel I had burned came to me.

"It was pointless," I thought and was about to get up, but just then my friend said, "There used to be a gentleman in the neighborhood who would leave his house before the ovens were lighted. I don't know where

he would go. At sunrise, he would come back, but how long could he have gone on like that?"

I couldn't restrain myself anymore and asked, "So now he doesn't go out?"

"No, one day he went out and didn't come back. Another restaurant opened next to his house. Isn't that wonderful?" Then he remembered something and said, "That reminds me, he ... his satchel ... what was his name?"

"What about a satchel?" I said with difficulty.

"He was never without it for even a few moments. It was hanging from his shoulder even when he was playing cricket with us."

It all came back to me.

"Oh, you mean him?" I said. "Yes, that drawing master. One time when he ran to score, the satchel fell off when he was half way so he stopped to pick it up and ..."

"... he was run out!" he said and burst out laughing. I started laughing too. We continued talking about the drawing master for some time and then I stood up. As I was leaving I said, "Tell me one thing."

"Yes, what?"

"I came through several lanes to get here, which one should I take to go out?"

"Is that all?" he laughed. "It's the one right in front. Go straight; don't turn anywhere. It will take you into the bazaar. Or, maybe I should go along, I'll walk with you up to the main road." When we reached the end of the lane he hugged me again and said, "Yaar, do drop by now and then."

"Sure, I will," I said and set off. After going forward a few steps, I looked back. He was turning into his lane. I remembered his house but I was sure that in two days time the memory would be gone, so I turned around and followed him. He was just going inside when I caught up to him. He looked at me somewhat surprised and I said, "Yaar, I forgot to ask one thing."

"Yes, yes, what is it?"

Then he saw me hesitating and said, "Come on, sit a while longer. It's been a long time since we were together."

Inside the room, after talking about this and that for some time, he said, "You were going to ask something."

"Yes," I said, "He ... you were saying another restaurant had opened."

"Restaurants are continually opening," he said, "and closing too."

“No,” I said, “next to his house ... the gentleman who, because of the smoke ...”

“Oh, I see, are you asking about Malik Sahib?”

And his name came back to me too.

“Malik Sahib,” I said. “I worked in an office with him for a while and I came to his home two or three times.” (Although I hadn’t.) “He was very kind to me and I was friendly with him too.”

Then I made up several stories about his kindnesses and my friendliness. I couldn’t understand why I felt the need to tell so many lies. My friend listened to what I was saying without much interest and then he said, “Yes, he was a simple man, and I think he was a bit wacky too.”

“Wacky?”

“Or maybe not—but his satchel ...” He paused, then he said, “He kept his satchel by his side all the time.”

“Like our drawing master?”

“The drawing master used to replace his satchel when it became worn, but Malik Sahib would buy a new one every two or three months. It was a compulsion of some sort.”

“Did he have a wife and children?”

“Perhaps somewhere else. Here he lived alone. Toward the end he probably didn’t even have a friend.”

“Not even you?”

“My friendship with him only extended as far as his key.”

He explained that when Malik Sahib went out for his morning stroll, he would hang his house key on my friend’s door, and when he came back he would take it down.

“That day the key was still hanging there at noon. Around mid-afternoon, a man came and brought the news. Malik Sahib used to go walking at the railway field and it was there that the end came.”

Then my friend described in detail how the people walking in the field heard the sound of someone groaning in the clump of trees, but by the time they reached the sound, Malik Sahib was already unconscious. By chance, two of them had worked in an office with him at one time. They recognized him and took him to the hospital, but at the hospital they were told that he was dead. His office was notified and the people there looked up his home address in their old records. Then the residents of the neighborhood were informed and, after arranging with the hospital and the police, they went and claimed his body.

“An untimely death,” I said quietly.

“If there hadn’t been any of his acquaintances among the people

walking at the field, who knows what would have happened to that poor man.”

I imagined the plight of unclaimed bodies. Then I pushed that thought aside and asked, “So he was found in the thicket?”

“He was probably trying to come out, but he mistakenly went further in.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because of his satchel. There was no satchel where he was found. It must have fallen somewhere among the trees.”

“Perhaps he didn’t take his satchel that day.”

“Not a chance, his satchel was always with him. When his condition deteriorated and he tried to come out, it must have dropped from his hand somewhere along the way.”

“But it wasn’t found?”

“Someone must have snatched it; it was a new satchel. Or, perhaps it’s still lying among the trees somewhere.”

In order to change the subject I started to say, “His relatives ...”

“Didn’t I mention that he lived alone? But they had given money to two restaurant proprietors of the neighborhood so that if something should happen to him ...”

Then he brought up the subject of funerals and graveyards—some of which I heard, some of which I didn’t. After that we started talking about various things again and finally I stood up. My friend again said, “Yaar, do drop by now and then.”

“We’ll see if I remember the way.”

He started telling me the landmarks from the main road up to his house, then he remembered something and said, “But wait a minute, you know Malik Sahib’s house, mine is just three houses to the left of it ...”

I said, “You drop by now and then too.”

I didn’t tell him my address because my house was on his way to school and we used to often stand at the door talking.

I came away from there, but for a few days I kept thinking that if I had searched for him in the thicket, perhaps he could have been saved. Then I just forgot about him, and my friend too.

Now I was freed of my fear of an untimely death because, once again, the condition of my heart was pronounced okay at my medical checkup. After that, I did much less going out. I mostly took care of the trees and

plants in my small garden or tended to the chickens being raised in my house.

One day, I was returning after buying grain for the chickens from the neighborhood mill when I saw my friend coming from the direction of my house. As soon as he got near me he said, "Good thing I ran into you. I was leaving."

"I had just stepped out for a few minutes. Come on, sit down."

"Not now," he said. "I just came to tell you that they, I mean Malik Sahib's relatives, have arrived."

"So?"

"So," he repeated what I said and laughed loudly. "Remember?"

The memory came back to me. During our schooldays this was another one of the things we used to do to amuse ourselves. We would ask one of our friends for the details of some interesting news and, when he had finished telling us excitedly, we would make a face and say, "So?"

"Yes, I remember." And I started laughing too. "But seriously, if Malik Sahib's relatives have arrived, what does that have to do with me?"

"Well, they want to meet you."

"Why me?"

"You used to get together with Malik Sahib, didn't you? They're meeting his acquaintances."

"I didn't get together with him much. Just when we worked at the office ..." Then I stopped.

"Let's go, tell them all this. They're leaving today."

"And when did they come?"

"Several days ago. Today when I mentioned you to them ..."

Cursing him inside, I put the sack of grain in the house and set off with him.

Along the way, he told me that they had settled in some other country and had lost touch with their relatives here. "Or rather, except for Malik Sahib, they no longer have any relatives here." What their relationship to Malik Sahib was, this my friend didn't know.

We arrived there. The house was somewhat like my friend's house. Because of the guests there was quite a lot of activity. There were two young men, a man and his wife—who were also quite young—a middle-aged woman, and one or two children. From the look of their clothing and baggage, they appeared to be quite well-to-do. My friend introduced me and I prepared myself for their questions—which I had been pondering the answers to the whole way there. However, they just casually asked a few questions about me: where I lived, what I did, and so on—

and they didn't seem interested in my answers. Mostly they told me about themselves. The middle-aged woman was talking quietly to my friend. I turned my attention to the young men, but I couldn't make out clearly what they were saying. I only caught that they had found a buyer for the house, they had already disposed of the household goods, and, they were leaving in the evening, but, before going, they planned to take a look at the historical buildings of the city.

I signaled my friend that we should depart and we both stood. The middle-aged woman was still talking to my friend. I remember her last sentences: "I don't even remember him. I only saw his letters at Achchan Bhai's. He would write with great affection." She sighed deeply. "Our toys were also found among his belongings. He still held on to them." □

—*Translated by Jane Shum and Muhammad Umar Memon*