

NAIYER MASUD

The Aster*

I WAS FOND of growing flowers. When I first started, the entire courtyard of my house was so full of flowers that it was difficult to even walk there. There must have been at least fifty varieties and I could recognize all of them—as a matter of fact, I could recognize all of the plants, the leaves, the flowers and even the seeds. The flowers were all European and some of them were fragrant. These seasonal flowers used to bloom during the winter and stop blooming when winter was over. Within a few days even the plants themselves dried up and the next season new ones were planted all over again. This was hard work but I managed to do it myself. I would save the seeds of certain flowers and when the time came I would plant them in the ground. I worked especially hard on these and cared for them as if they were my own children. I bought the plants for the rest of the flowers from Balram. He was the caretaker of the national botanical garden and he tended his own small plot as well. Every type of plant could be found there because the government garden was essentially a testing site. Balram would order flowers from abroad and then experiment to see how well they grew in our native soil. Sometimes the experiments succeeded, sometimes they didn't. Balram also brought me rare varieties of flowers from the garden, many of which he didn't even know the names of, or when he talked about them he would mispronounce the names. For example, he would call "nigella" "naryala." One time he gave me an "*ārṭoṭī*" plant. I have several illustrated books about plants and I used to search through them to find the real names. The real name for "*ārṭoṭī*" turned out to be "arctotis."

At my home I also had some native flowers that were mostly white and bloomed during the summer and the rainy season. They stood in a hedge along one side of the courtyard filling the whole house with their

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fragrance. The plants of these flowers didn't die off at the end of the season so I didn't have to do a lot of work on them. These were my wife's favorite. She liked the multi-colored European varieties too, but not as much as I did.

After my wife became ill, my interest gradually waned and I gave up planting European flowers. I just didn't have the time to take care of them. The native varieties continued to bloom for two or three years, but eventually they died out too because they didn't get watered. For a long time now the courtyard has been abandoned and I've amused myself with my dear daughter instead of flowers.

My daughter Sanaa is very naughty and keeps inventing brand new kinds of mischief. I enjoy her mischief, but one day she took out one of my small hoes and started digging in the ground at the end of the courtyard. Perhaps she had seen the gardener at her school using a hoe. Behind the wide blade of my hoe, there was also a narrow blade, so if you didn't use the hoe carefully you could get hurt. I cautioned her, "Sanaa, my daughter, this isn't something to play with."

"Then what is it for?"

"It's for making a flowerbed."

"Why make a flowerbed?"

"To plant flowers."

"Well then, plant flowers," she said, and then she mentioned the small garden of some friend of hers where several flowers of different colors had been planted.

I felt my earlier interest in gardening coming back—and the courtyard of the house seemed even more barren. Then I recalled the time when the abundance of flowers in the courtyard had made walking there difficult and I said, "Yes, I will plant flowers for my daughter too."

"Please plant pink ones," she said, "like the color of my dress."

"First I need to prepare the flowerbed."

I began digging the ground right away. The earth was soft and soon the long, deep bed was ready. The dug up soil was heaped on one side and Sanaa started climbing that heap again and again. Whenever she did this, some of the soil would fall back into the flowerbed. When I stopped her, she came over to me and I took her into her mother's room. Her mother was reclining on the bed and she looked at us in a daze. Sanaa went over to her, kissed her and said, "Amma, Papa will plant flowers for me."

Her mother tried to hug her with her lifeless hands and said with great difficulty, "Did you drink your milk?" Then she fell silent and we left the room.

The flowerbed needed a little more work and I thought I might as well get it over with, but I hadn't done any strenuous labor in years so I felt tired.

"All right," I told myself, "I'll finish it tomorrow," and went into the *dālān*.

That very evening was Sanaa's tenth birthday. She got together with her friends for the occasion and created a big ruckus. After her friends had left, she talked about each of them for a while and again mentioned the flowers at the home of one of her friends. I said, "Tomorrow Sanaa will have flowers planted at her home too."

"Pink ones."

"Yes, pink ones," I said patting her gently, "but go to sleep now; if you don't, you won't wake up early in the morning."

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The next day I woke up late. Sanaa was in her room talking to some woman. I only caught a glimpse of the woman's rose-colored sari. "Must be Sanaa's teacher," I thought. Today she's wearing "colorful" clothing.

She came very early in the morning to give Sanaa her lessons. She was rather poor and always wore a plain white dress. I remembered that she had taken the day off today in order to go to some event. I thought, "Looks like she's decided to teach Sanaa even today." I praised her in my heart of hearts.

I had to rush out. Several errands had piled up, so, after eating a light breakfast and putting Sanaa's breakfast in the pantry, I picked up an old sack and left. I ran very late doing my errands and thought about Sanaa. For the most part she took care of herself. I felt sure that after studying with her tutor, changing her clothes and eating breakfast, she would have gone out at the right time to stand by the gate and wait for her school bus, and now she must be sitting in her place at school. I was concerned about her but there was still some time before she would return home. Her mother was there all alone because the maidservant who always tended to her had gone home two days ago to be with her sick daughter. I stood there wavering for some time and then looked at my watch and set off toward Balram's little garden.

I was disappointed to see that there weren't many flowers there now, and the ones that were there were ordinary varieties. Balram was sitting on a charpoy smoking his huqqa. As soon as he spotted me he pushed the huqqa away and stood up.

"Greetings, Bhaiya, come in, come in," he said very warmly. "It's been

a long time since you were last here. Don't you plant flowers and such now?"

"Oh, I just lost interest," I said. "Tell me, how are you?"

He immediately got going telling his tale, the gist of which was that he had been fired from his government job. He'd been accused of carrying on his own personal flower business during his service. His wife had died, one son was doing wage labor somewhere outside the country and another had gotten lost during some fair or other and couldn't be found. Now Balram lived alone and had developed respiratory problems.

I commiserated with him and told him a little about myself, then I asked, "What kinds of flowers do you have?"

He gave the names of several and I said, "Well, we're planting a flowerbed. My daughter is eager to have one. What kinds of pink flowers do you have? She's especially asked for pink ones."

Balram praised her enthusiasm, asked her age, and showered his blessings on her. Pointing toward one bed of flowers, he said, "In that case, please take the *gul-e sitāra* for our *biṭyā*."

"*Gul-e sitāra?*"

"The one we call *bāshtar*."

I remembered that the aster was my favorite flower too and that it was I who had told Balram it was called *gul-e sitāra* in our language but I myself called it the aster. The entire plant consisted of long-stemmed blooms so each plant looked like a veritable bouquet. I would buy pink asters from Balram, and also purple ones and white ones. I'd plant all of them in a single flowerbed: purple in the middle, around these the pink ones, and around the border, white, so this particular flowerbed would stand out more than any other in the courtyard. I had Balram pick out the plants that had already grown large and had buds on them. He asked me how big the flowerbed was and, based on its size, he carefully dug up several plants, firmed up the soil around the roots and then packed wild grass around them. Then he paused and said, "Would you like me to come over this evening to prepare the flowerbed and plant them?"

"No," I said, "I've already prepared the flowerbed. I'll plant them myself this evening."

I opened my large sack and Balram carefully placed the plants inside. As I was walking away I said, "Okay Balram, the winter is just about over now. Starting next year, I'll plant all kinds of flowers again." Then after pausing a while I asked, "How much do I owe you? It's been so long, the price of flowers must have gone up."

"No Sahib," he said. "Please give these to *biṭyā* with my compliments. Next year they can be from you ..."

As I approached the house, I began to imagine those flowers already blooming in the flowerbed and I was just as fond of them as I was of Sanaa.

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Sanaa hadn't returned yet. When she left for school she had latched the door of the house from the outside. I was surprised at her prudence. I opened it and, after stopping in the *devrhi*, I took a quick look inside the house.

The scene was the same as every other day. On the right side of the courtyard, all three arches of the *dālān* were blocked and a door had been installed on the one in the middle. Sanaa's little room was on one side of the *dālān*. On the other side there was another room where my wife stayed with the maidservant. There was a spacious courtyard in front of the *dālān* and the flowerbed I had prepared was at the very end of the courtyard. Everything was exactly as I had left it. My thoughts drifted to my wife. She was okay in the morning—I mean she was the same as she had been since becoming ill, that is, unable to walk around and her mind unsettled most of the time. I took care of her and also looked after Sanaa, so I had more or less stopped going out of the house. The bazaar was right nearby so shopping didn't take much time. Actually, the maid took care of the everyday shopping. Only rarely did I do any myself, but today I had had to run several errands, and I also had to buy the plants for Sanaa, so it had gotten very late and my wife had been in the house alone.

I tossed the sack of plants into the *dālān* and rushed off to look in on her. She was sitting propped against her pillows and seemed fine. In fact, today she looked at me and said, "Did you eat?"

"I'll eat now," I said. "As soon as Sanaa returns all three of us can eat together."

I had her lie down and sat with her a while, then I went into the *dālān*.

Some of the plants were still inside the sack, others were protruding a bit. I considered fixing up the flowerbed, but at the time I didn't have the energy to do it. I thought I would finish it in the evening instead, before doing the planting. I also considered sprinkling water on the plants, but I was tired and sat down on the *takht*.

I could see the flowerbed right in front of me. The hoe was lying on the pile of soil right next to it and I noticed that quite a bit of the soil from that pile had been put back into the flowerbed. "This must be Sanaa's

doing,” I thought. Then I caught glimpses of pinkish streaks behind what remained of the mound of soil. I couldn’t figure out what that was so I got up and quickly went over.

There was a woman lying face down, crumpled up in the flowerbed. Small clumps of soil were scattered all over her body. A lot of soil had been strewn over the top of her head but it didn’t completely conceal her rather long hair. I didn’t try to look at her face but glanced briefly at the rest of her body. She seemed young. From the way she was lying motionless, it became perfectly clear that she was dead and that I was standing in front of a corpse. My body began to feel prickly and I was seized by fear.

I was still gripped by fear when Sanaa returned from school. She put her satchel in the *dālān* and headed straight toward the flowerbed. My heart started palpitating and I stammered, “This ... what is this?”

“She came here and died.”

“Were you talking to her this morning?”

“Yes, she knocked at the door and I thought my teacher had arrived. When I opened the door she walked right in.”

“But who is she?”

“I don’t know. It’s the Happy Birthday of her daughter and she came to invite me. When I told her that I didn’t know her or her daughter she said, ‘My husband knows your father, I’ll talk to him.’ But you were already gone. Then she said, ‘I’ll wait.’ I thought I might as well go fix up your flowerbed. She got up too and came along with me. She picked up the hoe, then put it down, and then she fell into the flowerbed and died.”

“How did you know she was dead?”

“I just knew. I tried to shake her. She wasn’t breathing and her heart wasn’t beating. You look at her too.”

I moved back several steps. Along with my fear, I felt surprised at Sanaa’s courage. I asked, “And were you trying to hide the corpse?”

“Oh, no.”

“Then what were you doing?”

“I was burying it. Then my bus came and I went to school.” She looked at me and said, “Mother had said that a corpse should be buried quickly.”

“Is this any way to bury?”

“Then how?”

I didn’t answer. Dead bodies unnerved me. Until that day I’d never seen one. Even at that moment, I didn’t have the courage to look at the corpse lying in the flowerbed. My mind was muddled. It occurred to me just then that I should inform the police, but I was also unnerved by the

police.

“What should I do?” I asked myself. Sanaa stood right next to me, silent. I said to her, “Tell me from the beginning everything that happened.”

She repeated everything she had said before, even that she had first told her mother about the woman’s death. With great difficulty, her mother had come to understand that someone had died and had said without emotion, “Well then, bury her.” Afterward she probably forgot what she had heard and what she had said.

I remained dazed for a very long time. Then it occurred to me that I might get one of my friends to help. I did have three or four friends in the city, but at that moment I couldn’t remember a single one. Just then Sanaa said, “Papa, haven’t you eaten dinner?”

I felt a bit annoyed at this inappropriate question but calmed down immediately.

“I will,” I said and, without looking at the flowerbed, I pointed, “first I need to do something about her.”

I knew the police would have to be informed, but how? Some of the jargon connected with the police echoed through my mind—I wasn’t even sure what they meant—“F.I.R.,” “Punchnama,” “Police Remand,” and who knows what else. Each term came with its own special kind of fear. I may have uttered some of what I was thinking about the police out loud because, when I looked at Sanaa, she was standing there terrified.

Suddenly I remembered one friend with whom I was on extremely cordial terms, although we got together infrequently now, and I said to Sanaa, “All right, I’m going to see your Uncle Sajid. I won’t be gone long, and make sure...,” again without looking, I pointed at the flowerbed, “you don’t disturb it. Go wash up. Then stay in the *dālān* or go to your room.” I paused and then added, “Or go to your mother, but don’t tell her anything now.”

As I was leaving, I stopped and said, “And, yes, cover the body with a sheet. The face of a dead body shouldn’t be left exposed.”

Sajid’s house wasn’t very far from mine so I got there quickly. Luckily, he was home. He was a bit surprised to see me, but then he opened the outer room. There, after the usual formalities, I asked, “Tell me, if some woman who was a stranger came to your house and died, what would you do?”

“I would inform the police.”

“Wouldn’t that create problems?”

“Police procedures are, of course, convoluted. First of all, suspicion would fall on you. An effort would be made to identify the corpse. There would be an autopsy and the cause of death would be determined. If the

death turned out to be from unnatural causes, I mean poison or something, that would be the end of you.”

I, too, was well aware of what would happen in such circumstances, but I tried not to think about it and asked, “And what if the autopsy showed that the death was from natural causes?”

“Still you wouldn’t escape the tentacles of the police. They would suspect that the sudden death ...” He stopped and looked at me intently. “But why are you asking me all this?”

I related the whole incident to him in detail and he became somewhat alarmed.

“Awful. Really awful.” After quite a while he said, “You’ll have to report it to the police. They’ll come and take custody of the corpse. Then, you ... you’re absolutely sure you don’t recognize her?”

“No,” I said, and I was wondering how to tell him that I hadn’t looked at her face. Then something came to mind. “She herself told my daughter that I didn’t know her.” Then another thing also came to mind. “Well, the fact of the matter is, she’s lying face down and I’ve left her that way so the police ...”

“That’s good.”

“I came to you for precisely this reason, to find out what should be done now. I’m at my wits end.”

“I don’t have any experience with these kinds of things either,” he said. He thought for a while and then suddenly stood up. “What are we, after all. Come on, let’s go see Mushshu.”

“Mushshu?”

“The same. Mushtaq the bachelor. He’s become a lawyer now.”

I also remembered Mushtaq the bachelor. At one time I had a close friendship with him. The word “bachelor” had become a substitute for part of his name because he was adamantly opposed to getting married. He didn’t use the word “marriage” alone; he said, “the folly of marriage.” I asked Sajid, “Do you get together with Mushtaq the bachelor?”

“Almost every day. We play rummy. He knows how to deal with police matters, in fact, don’t report the matter to the police yet. Take him on as your lawyer. He’ll handle everything.”

“That’s a good idea. I feel better now.”

“Fine, then you go home. I’ll go get Mushtaq and bring him over.”

“Why don’t we just both go get him?”

“The corpse has been covered with dirt,” he said, then he shuddered slightly, or maybe I did. “You go clean it off.”

“No, I think Mushtaq should see the original scene first”—and this time I definitely shuddered. “After that it’s up to him.”

“That’s fine too, but your daughter is alone there. She’ll be frightened by the corpse, won’t she?”

Then the thought occurred to him on its own and I said out loud, “What would she fear. She was burying the corpse alone.”

“Amazing! Bhai, the children these days ... fine, come on, we’ll both go.”

We reached Mushtaq’s house. For the time being, I took particular comfort from the thought that now a lawyer would take the entire matter in hand.

We found Mushtaq in his outer room. When he saw us he laughed and joked with Sajid about the previous night’s rummy game, then he said to me, “What brings you here today?”

“I’ve gotten caught up in a disastrous situation.”

“Are you all right?”

Sajid told him the whole story and he listened solemnly. Then he questioned me about everything several times. Finally he said, “So you found her lying in the flowerbed dead. And everything before that is the account of your daughter. And you’re sure that everything she has said is absolutely true.”

I felt a bit annoyed by that remark and said, “She doesn’t tell lies.”

“Some children are fond of telling lies.”

“Why would she need to lie?”

“Not need, desire. Bhai, forgive me. A lawyer doesn’t trust everything he hears, whether some child ... okay, have some tea and then we’ll go.”

“No, my daughter is home all alone.”

“Why, what about her mother?”

“It doesn’t make any difference whether her mother is there or not. I’ll tell you *that* story some other time.”

Mushtaq quickly drew up a Power of Attorney for me to sign. Then he put on the black robe of lawyers and was ready. Seeing him dressed that way made my burden feel even lighter.

He kept telling jokes to Sajid the whole way, but I was still anxious. My biggest worry was that now I might be forced to look at the corpse. The very thought of a dead face terrified me. I wasn’t even thinking about how long the living could avoid the dead.

We arrived and Sanaa opened the door. She looked as if she had been weeping the whole time. I stroked her head. She started weeping again and said, “Amma is unconscious, I’m scared.”

“She’ll be okay soon. She often becomes unconscious.”

After seating the two of them in the outer room, I went into the courtyard and glanced all around. My eyes didn’t stop at the flowerbed, but I noticed that the corpse was now covered with a white sheet. I went into the outer room again, called to Sajid and took him into the courtyard. I showed him the flowerbed scene from a distance and said, “*You* might as well bring Mushtaq and show him. Meanwhile I’ll go get some snacks. I won’t be long.”

As he was objecting, I left the house. After passing some time in the bazaar it occurred to me that given the situation it wasn’t right for me to stay away so long, so I bought some biscuits and fruit and returned home.

The scene was the opposite of what I was expecting. Mushtaq was still sitting in the same place and Sajid was explaining something to him. “Bhai, I should take a look,” Mushtaq said.

“You’ll have plenty of time to look later, but right now go straight home and have a carriage sent. I’ll join you shortly and explain everything.”

“Has there been some mix-up?”

The color drained from Sajid’s face and Mushtaq again asked, “Has there been some mix-up?”

“A terrible mix-up.”

“So tell me what it is. As the attorney in this case ...”

“Didn’t I say I’d explain everything.”

“Sajid,” Mushtaq said hoarsely, “I’m beginning to understand a little.”

“Your understanding is fine. Get going now,” Sajid said practically pushing him outside.

After Mushtaq left, Sajid turned in my direction. In just that brief interval every sort of fear had overwhelmed me. I couldn’t ask Sajid anything. I just kept looking at him without saying a word. Finally *he* spoke, “It’s Sitara.”

“Sitara?”

“Mushtaq’s wife. She goes out of the house from time to time. Today she wandered over to your house. She must have found out somehow that you were Mushtaq’s friend.”

“But Mushtaq is a bachelor so a marriage ...”

“He did marry, secretly. I’ll tell you the whole story later. At the moment we need to arrange for her removal. Mushtaq will have a hearse sent. Meanwhile I should arrange for the shroud and other things ...”

He started to leave but I stopped him, “No, at least tell me, what’s the problem?”

“She’s a tenant on the upper story of Mushtaq’s house, I mean she

was a tenant. She doesn't have any relatives or anything. She lived alone. Mushtaq married her but made it look like she was just his tenant. When you told me about a woman coming to your house, I suspected it might be her, but when you said she had come to invite your daughter for her own daughter's birthday I thought it must be someone else."

"So doesn't she have a daughter?"

"You're the limit! Their marriage was a secret. Everyone thinks she's not married."

"Then whose birthday was she celebrating?"

"I don't think anyone's. She must certainly have longed to have children, but Mushtaq was resisting announcing their marriage."

"Why?"

"Mushtaq is known for being a 'bachelor.' That's why. Okay, I'm going."

"Where will you take her?"

"Mushtaq's house. After all, she lived there." On his way out he stopped, "You stay right here. Come later if you want."

"I'll stay here," I said, "my wife's condition has suddenly gotten worse. I need to look after her. Tell Mushtaq."

He heard some of what I said as he was leaving the house, some he didn't.

As soon as he was gone, I went into my wife's room. She was conscious now. She saw me and asked in a halting and somewhat apprehensive manner, "Was there a corpse?"

"There's no corpse."

"But Sanaa ..."

"She must have just been asking: What if there were a corpse in the house ..."

"Then it should be buried quickly," she said.

Her mind went blank again and she sank down onto her pillows. I laid her down properly and covered her with a blanket.

I sat with her for quite a long time hearing the voices of Sajid and some other people drifting in from the courtyard outside. Finally it became quiet and I went out there.

It was nighttime and the flowerbed was empty. The soil was heaped up in a mound again the way it was before. Sanaa was standing near it. When she saw me she came rushing in my direction and began asking, "Papa, nothing will happen now, right?"

"No, I guess not," I said. "Something might happen, but it won't involve us."

I took her into the *dālān*. Then she asked, "Papa, did you find out

who she was?"

"She was an acquaintance. After coming here the poor thing's heart gave out."

"She was very pretty. What was her name?"

"Sitara ... her name was Sitara."

Just then I remembered my asters. Lying untended, the plants had probably drooped over and withered and now they wouldn't be worth planting.

The flowerbed was also no longer in any condition for me to plant flowers in it. □

—*Translated by Jane Shum and Muhammad Umar Memon*