

NAIYER MASUD

Destitutes Compound*

AT THE TIME I LEFT HOME FOR GOOD I must have been around twenty-two or twenty-four years old. What prompted me to leave was my father's attitude. He complained that I'd developed bad habits. When I think about it now, it seems he was right to complain, and he was also right to try and find out on his own how I was spending my time. Back then, though, I thought it was all rather unfair and I used to complain to my mother about it. What galled me the most was that whenever he found out about some improper thing I'd done, he would feign ignorance and start asking me questions, wanting me to confess on my own what I'd done. This interrogation sometimes dragged on because he went about it circuitously, punctuating it with questions about unrelated matters. I had no difficulty guessing that he already knew everything, but I never gave a direct answer to his questions, and I too veered into unrelated issues. That irritated him a lot.

Finally my nerves became frayed from constantly being subjected to his barrage of questions. He was already boiling with anger over something one day when, to make matters worse, he received an anonymous letter which gave a detailed account of some fresh shenanigans of mine. It was a scorching hot day and I arrived home in a terribly irritable mood. The minute he saw me the questioning started; he didn't even allow me enough time to take a drink of water. I spoke insolently to him and even went so far as to blurt out, "What's the point of this playacting when you already know?"

The word "playacting" made him so angry he was shaking. He lashed out saying all sorts of things to me and the last thing he said was, "My lawfully earned money is not meant to be squandered on your dissolute ways. It would have been far better if you had never been born into this household."

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That really got to me. "Well, I'm born now," I said, "but as far as this household is concerned, from today consider me dead."

"Fine," he said, "from today you're dead to us."

My mother was a simple unassuming woman. She feared my father and she knew my obstinate nature. Tears began to flow from her eyes, but she was unable to open her mouth. I stuffed a few changes of clothing into a bag and left the house the very same day.

In the *devrhi*, as usual, my blind grandmother was sitting on a reed mat cutting betel-nuts. Hearing the sound of my footsteps she said, "Oh Bhaiyya, you no sooner come in than you go out again."

I didn't give any reply and left.

I made my way straight to Murad Mian's place. Gambling went on there and my father particularly hated to have me associating with him. Murad's father was a friend of my father and he had squandered his entire fortune gambling. After that he started borrowing money to continue his habit. When his debts mounted, he swallowed opium and killed himself. He owed my father money too. Father felt dismayed about the illicit way the man died and about the loss of his own money, but most of all he regretted that his lawfully acquired earnings had been spent on gambling. Somehow he found out that Murad Mian ran a gambling joint so he felt quite irritated by the man. But Murad Mian would say with tremendous pride that by letting others gamble at his place he was recovering all the money his father had lost. He had even attempted to pay back the debt owed to my father, but my father found it distasteful to accept even one cent obtained from gambling so he started to detest Murad Mian even more than he had Murad's father.

Actually, I had gone home straight from Murad Mian's. Now, seeing me back at his place so soon was all it took for Murad to guess that something was amiss. He knew the situation at my house so he quickly asked, "Had an argument with your father?"

I hastily related what had transpired. And I also said that I had left home for good, was heading for some other city now, and was never coming back.

"Never?" Murad Mian asked with surprise. "But where will you go?"

"Just anywhere," I said.

"How will you feed yourself?"

"I'll find some work, just any work."

"You won't even get a handout," he said. "Think it's easy to find work? And what skills do you have?"

The fact was, I had no skills. My education, too, was rather meager.

"If nothing else, I'll work as a laborer."

“As a laborer?” Murad Mian said. “You’ll cry uncle in three days flat.”

The thought occurred to me too that being a laborer was even harder than begging. Finally I said, “So you suggest something, Murad Mian.”

“All right, but first eat something. He had me drink a glass of water and sent for some food from the restaurant. Quite a while later, while I was relaxing in the breeze from the fan, he came and sat near me. First he made some small talk and then he said, “If you want my opinion, I would say go home, if not right away, maybe in a couple of days. If you make your father unhappy, you’ll never prosper.”

“He’s regretting that he brought me into this world in the first place. He never talks civilly to me. Whatever I do turns out to be against his wishes. For him, I’m dead from now on.”

“It’s anger. It’ll subside.”

“No it won’t,” I said. “And mine won’t either.”

“In that case, stay here with me a few days. After that ...”

“Murad Mian, I won’t stay in this city anymore.”

“All right, Mian, don’t. But I need some time ... to come up with something for you.”

For the next three or four days I stayed in the back room of his gambling joint. On the second day some men from my neighborhood came to Murad Mian looking for me. I thought that my father or mother must have sent them, but it turned out that they had mounted the search on their own after hearing that I had left home, and they had even learned this news from my blind grandmother. She wasn’t my grandmother, but she poked her nose into the affairs of our household a lot. Hearing that she was the one who had spread the news of my departure in the neighborhood made me even angrier.

I didn’t show myself to those people and Murad Mian feigned ignorance and sent them on their way. On the fourth day he disappeared all day. The boys who worked at his place took care of my meals and so on. Around nightfall, Murad Mian returned from somewhere dog-tired and said right away, “I’ve arranged something for you. For the moment, stay here a few days, then you can go to another city.”

“If I stay here with you, my whereabouts won’t remain a secret,” I said. “Everyone looking for me will come straight to you.”

“Oh brother, who’s asking you to live here? I’ve arranged another place.”

“And how will I feed myself?”

I realized that Murad Mian had asked me this question and I had asked him for the answer.

He replied, “I’ve arranged for your food too.”

“I won’t eat off of you.”

“Yes sir, I know that. Just for today please feed yourself off my illicit income and then be on your way. Starting tomorrow, eat off your own income. You won’t earn much, just enough for dal and roti.”

“Murad Mian, please tell me more: Where will I be living? What will I have to do?”

“Why ask that now? You’ve abandoned your home, after all.”

Then he called a boy who worked at his gambling joint and took him aside for quite a while explaining something to him. The boy went out, returned shortly, and said, “Let’s go. The *ikka* is waiting.”

Murad Mian hugged me and said, “Go, may God protect you! I’ll keep an eye on you, but we won’t be able to meet.”

I went out with my bag of clothes. A *yakka* with an emaciated horse and a down-and-out coachman stood right in front of the door. A thick covering was wrapped tightly around the sides of the cab. The boy helped me climb onto the carriage, which had no boarding step. He then secured the curtain to make sure nothing was exposed and said to the coachman, “Please take him to Childhood Love. If ...”

“I know. Murad Mian has explained.”

The coachman then whipped the horse a few times and the *yakka*-carriage lurched forward with a jolt.

For some time I thought about Childhood Love. What a strange name! Was it some woman? Some old flame of Murad Mian? What state must she be in now? Where does she live? Why am I being sent to her? My mind became muddled, but soon the rhythmic thumps of the *yakka* and the sound of the bells dangling from the horse’s neck made me feel somewhat drowsy. Now and then, when the coachman lit up a biri, a whiff of sulphur and the acrid odor of smoke drifted into my nostrils and jarred me out of my sleep. I wanted to peek out from behind the curtain but hesitated thinking that someone might recognize me, although few people in town knew me. Instead, I tried to guess which parts of the city I might be passing through, but I was having difficulty figuring out directions. The *yakka* seemed to be going whatever direction I came up with. Sometimes it seemed to be turning in the direction of my house. I started to feel sleepy again. The path the carriage was moving along now was riddled with fairly large potholes. My body started to ache from the repeated jolts, but finally the trip ended. A shrill

voice ordered the coachman, "Stop!"

The *yakka* halted. After the curtain was lifted this same voice said to me, "Get down."

I got down. I wasn't used to traveling by *yakka*, some parts of my body had become numb. As soon as I got out I tottered and the coachman steadied me. Night had deepened and it was dark everywhere. I looked at the person who was speaking. I couldn't make out the features clearly, but it did seem to be some man of small stature. His voice, though, resembled a woman's, or rather a child's. I greeted him and he replied with great courtesy. I had some loose change on me. Sticking my hand into my pocket, I asked the coachman, "How much?"

"Murad Mian has already paid the fare," said the coachman, removing the curtain from his carriage and folding it.

"Come on," the man said, setting out in one direction. As I set off behind him the coachman called, "Take this."

I turned around. He was holding up the folded curtain in my direction.

"It's not mine," I said.

"Murad Mian said to give it to you."

I hadn't packed any covers in my bag so to me it seemed like a godsend. The man also said, "Take it. It gets quite cold toward morning." After that he went through a door. Some time later his voice came, "Come in."

Inside there was a kerosene lamp burning and on one side of it there was a pile of unprocessed pasteboard and colored paper. Nearby was a brick hearth.

When I saw his face in the glow of the lamp, I recognized him. I had seen him quite a few times in the bazaars riding on an open cart loaded with piles of paper and pasteboard, and sometimes big bundles of bamboo sticks, cloth bags, and scraps of cloth. He was a mature man yet no beard or moustache had grown on his face; in fact, he had no eyebrows either. This is the reason his face had stuck in my memory, and perhaps it was also the reason he was called "Childhood Love."

He quickly spread something out on the floor and threw my, or rather Murad Mian's, cover on top of it. He set my bag beside it and said, "A cot will arrive in a day or two."

"No need for a cot. I'll sleep right on the floor."

"Ok, I'll get some food now."

"I've already eaten with Murad Mian."

For some time he talked to me about his quarters, but I didn't pay much attention. Thoughts of the future were swirling around in my

head. Finally he got up.

“You must be tired. Get some rest. Early tomorrow morning you’ll get work.”

Has Murad Mian already filled him in about me? I wondered after he was gone. But soon my eyes became heavy with sleep. For a while strange inconsequential matters occupied my mind; sometime in the middle of that I fell asleep.

The next day I woke quite early. I saw Childhood Love cooking something in a large pot on the hearth. Breakfast—so early in the morning? I wondered, and went back to sleep. When I woke up again the day was far along and he was standing near me. At that point I looked at him closely. Contrary to what I had supposed, he seemed to be around fifty or fifty-five, and yet his face still had the aura of childhood.

“Slept well?” he asked and pointed toward the other door of the room. “Go, wash up, have something to eat, then the work will begin.”

The door led outside to a courtyard. I went into it with him. There was a well on one side and a bathroom, etc. near it. This wasn’t a courtyard, it was a walled enclosure behind several houses. Later I found out that it was known as “Destitutes Compound.” There were many neighborhoods in my city that were named “compounds.” I was familiar with almost all of them, but I’d never heard of “Destitutes Compound.” This one had a number of trees, including one neem. God knows how old it was. The branches appeared to have been pruned several times but still it was the biggest tree. There was a neem at my house too, and I was the one who used to prune it. The sight of that tree in the compound reminded me of home. I snapped off a twig to make myself a toothbrush and started to clean my teeth with it. Childhood Love was standing nearby. He said, “If you need anything, let me know, I go to the bazaar every day.”

I had taken just a few clothes and a small amount of cash when I left the house. As I was assembling in my mind a list of items I might need, a voice rose from one of the compound’s houses: “Childhood! Tea is ready. Bring him too.”

“Right away, Bari Begam.”

We entered through the back door of that house. Bari Begam was a woman over sixty years old, of fair color, and there was a certain dignity and grandeur about her face, but everything about her and her house bespoke poverty. I greeted her and she blessed me profusely. I remember one expression to this day because, afterwards, whenever I greeted

her, she never failed to repeat it: “May God increase your good fortune!”

She served us tea in two cups without saucers and chatted with Childhood Love. She addressed him only as “Childhood.” And that was what most people in the compound called him; though some called him “Love.” Rarely did anyone use his full name.

Once we’d finished our tea, Childhood got up to leave saying, “All right, I’ll go get the things now. Bari Begam, explain the work to him.”

After a short while he delivered a pile of pasteboard and papers to Bari Begam’s. Then he carefully carried the large pot over which I had seen earlier on the stove at his place.

“Divali is upon us,” he said. “Boxes are very much in demand.”

“The two of us will make them,” Bari Begam said.

“You won’t run short of *le’i* (starch paste)?” Childhood said, pointing at the cooking pot.

“No. It’ll be enough.”

“Make all of them big enough for half a *ser*,” he said and went out.

Bari Begam spent a long time teaching me the work. She explained in detail how to cut the pasteboard and the paper and how to paste the paper on the pasteboard. And we both started making boxes. She worked much faster than I did; all the same, I was able to make a substantial number.

So this is the work I’m supposed to do, I thought and remembered Murad Mian’s words: “And what skills do you have?” Well, at least now I knew how to make boxes for sweetmeats. I had seen such boxes at the sweetmeat shops and had bought sweets in them too, but I’d never thought that one day I would end up making such boxes myself.

I worked until evening. During this time Bari Begam got up once and returned after she had cooked some food. She got up a second time, brought the food over and placed it before me. When she saw me hesitating she said, “Childhood also eats here. He’s the one who keeps the accounts for food and work. Your earnings will be collected by him too. Whenever you need money, ask him, understand?” But she didn’t tell me, nor did I ask, what my earnings would be. It was satisfaction enough to know that now I would be able to at least make enough to cover my expenses. And what expenses did I have besides food anyway.

Within a few days everything fell into place. Now I made more boxes in a day than Bari Begam. Childhood bought the pasteboard and paper for us and prepared the *le’i* paste, and we kept working away all day long. I seldom had any need to go outside the compound because Childhood brought me the simple little things I needed.

All the things I did that used to gall my father had come to an end, yet I firmly believed he wouldn't leave me in peace even now. I would still have to sneak into my house like a thief. Even if he was out, I would still feel nervous from the thought that he might come back and take me by surprise and start interrogating me and demanding answers about God knows what. So, even if sometimes I had an urge to visit my home, I pushed it aside, and at that point even the neem tree in the compound began to annoy me.

Although I remained pretty much aloof from everyone, I had, thanks to Bari Begam, come to know quite a bit about the residents of the compound. These were mostly people who made handicrafts or did other odd jobs. There were many women, most of whom did stitching and embroidery work. The women and girls of one small family made paper-flower vines. Another family received bamboo sticks, which they chiseled and planed and fashioned into frames for paper kites. There were also several people who chopped betel-nuts. The sound of their *sarotas* as they chopped the nuts into small pieces reminded me of my blind grandmother in the *devrhi*. Childhood Love brought all of them work and took the finished products to the bazaar. Several times during the day he would come into the compound loaded down with things and go out loaded down the same way. He collected his own income from the shopkeepers. The responsibility to provide a means of sustenance for the compound's residents fell on him alone, and he was the most important person in the whole place. The second most important person was Bari Begam. I spent the greater part of my time with her. She had a lot of say in the household matters of the compound's residents, and she was the one who looked after the treatment of their minor ailments, their celebrations, and so on, more than anyone else. Everyone had a lot of respect for her too and they all called her Bari Begam, some girls called her Aunt Bari Begam, but I never could find out whose "*begam*" (wife) she was.

I had no interest in the affairs of the compound-wallahs, although now and then I did wonder about why the place was called "Destitutes Compound." No one was a destitute there; everyone supported themselves by their own labor.

Early one morning Childhood told me, "No work today," and then explained, "I have to take Bari Begam to the doctor."

"Why? What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing's wrong with me," came her voice from the compound.

“This Childhood, he’s gone mad.”

“Mad?” Childhood shot back from inside. “You’ve been harboring this chest pain for God knows how long. And last night you were moaning too. Today you’ll have to go to the doctor.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming” and she entered the room covered by her burqa. I got up and greeted her.

“May you live long! May you be happy!” she said and again repeated that phrase, “May God increase your good fortune!”

I never saw her again. From the doctor’s she was sent straight to the hospital and within a few days she was gone. From the hospital her body was carried to the bathhouse and from the bathhouse straight to the graveyard. Most of the male residents attended her funeral and the women gathered in her house, but I stayed in my room.

After Bari Begam was gone the realization hit me that I was still more or less a stranger in the Destitutes Compound. As long as she was there, I had no need to interact with anyone else. She talked to me a lot and through her I found out most of what transpired around the compound. She knew countless recipes for dishes fit for lords and masters as well as for their servants and for ordinary people. I often asked her about different types of dishes. It was a favorite subject, especially at meal times. She would describe every type of food and how to prepare it in such a way that I could taste it in my mouth. On top of all that, remembering her loving tone of voice made me restless.

Childhood gave me work even now, but I no longer felt connected to the place. One night around bedtime I said to him, “Murad Mian never even bothered to inquire after me.”

“So you finally remembered him,” he said. “No, he asks me about you regularly. Ever since he was sent to prison ...”

“Prison?” I asked. “Murad Mian’s been sent to jail?”

“He was, but he got out quickly. Since then he’s gone away somewhere. Or perhaps he’s back now. I haven’t been to his area for quite a while. I’m always too busy.”

“I want to meet with him. Since I came here ...”

“You’re something else! Sixteen years have passed and never once did you set foot outside the compound.”

Sixteen years? So I’ve spent sixteen years in the compound? I wondered. I was finding it hard to believe, but then it occurred to me that several of the boys from the compound who came at first to Bari Begam asking for *le’i* to mend their torn kites were married now, some even

had children of their own already.

I looked closely at Childhood Love. His face still looked like a child's, but now he'd started complaining about his weak sight.

He was looking at me closely too. Finally he asked, "Tired of the compound?"

"Yes, since Bari Begam ... I'll leave in a few days."

He became somewhat melancholy and lay quietly, then he turned over on his side and fell asleep. I remained awake quite a while and started thinking about my home, but I couldn't remember anything about it now. I rarely stayed home for long. Mother spoke so little that her presence or absence made no difference. And whenever the face of my father floated in front of my eyes, I could only see him frowning, so now, even after sixteen years, I couldn't think about home without feeling annoyed. However, I did remember the neem tree quite well, and even now I felt the same attachment to it. I remembered that in childhood I used to climb on it a lot and had fallen from it quite a few times. Sometimes I hid in its thick foliage and my father, who loved me dearly then, used to search for me.

In the morning when I got up I told Childhood Love, "I'll leave the day after tomorrow."

"For where? Home?" he asked.

"Perhaps," I answered. "But first I'll try to locate Murad Mian."

He thought for a while and then said, "All right, I'll bring the carriage. Don't forget to collect your things."

"What's to collect. Just a bed, the rest will easily fit into a bag."

The next day Childhood had me sit near him and gave me an amount which was much more than I expected and said, "These are your earnings. The amount spent on you has been deducted."

I didn't know quite what to say. I took the money and put it away.

He woke me early in the morning. The carriage was ready. I didn't have to take leave of anyone. I picked up my things and went out. Childhood stood by quietly. I said to him, "I'll remember Bari Begam and you often."

He continued standing quietly. I said, "I'll come to see you now and then."

Even then he didn't say anything and I left.

This time I didn't sit behind a curtain, but I didn't know this part of town. After traveling for quite a while along unknown roads, familiar streets began to appear and finally I arrived in Murad Mian's neighborhood.

His gambling den was nowhere to be seen but the people who

lived in the area recognized me. One of them said, "It's been a long time since you were here."

"Sixteen years," I said. "Where will I find Murad Mian?"

He said to a boy standing nearby, "Take him to Haji Murad's," and then he told me, "He's built himself a house not far from here."

Murad Mian's house was two or three houses away. A nice house. Murad Mian happened to be sitting in the outer room. He sported a beard on his face now but didn't seem to have aged much. As soon as he saw me he came out, hugged me exuberantly, and escorted me into the room. "Goodness Mian, you practically made the compound your permanent home. Didn't look back to even inquire about us. So when did you arrive?"

"Just now."

He called to someone to bring breakfast. He told me about himself: how after going to jail he had closed up his gambling joint and performed the hajj, then he did another and another. Now he had his own business. He asked me what I'd been doing. I had only one answer: "Making boxes."

I didn't ask him about my own home, but from what he said I could guess that both of my parents had already died. I told him that I'd given up living at the compound and he asked, "What do you want to do now?"

"Whatever you say," I replied. "I have my earnings from sixteen years. Please get me started in some small business."

"How much money do you have?"

I told him how much Childhood Love had given me. He said, "Not enough. But ... well, stay with me a few days before you go."

I stayed at his place for a few days. On the last day he came and sat near me and said, "I have a complete account of all the money my father borrowed from yours. After I returned from the hajj I told your father that I don't have even one cent of illicit money now and would like to pay my father's debt, but he wouldn't listen to me at all and started rebuking me and my father up and down."

He fell silent as if some memory was distressing him. I could also guess how my father would have spoken to him, so I said nothing. After some time he said, "That money is weighing heavily on my chest. Now I'm giving it to you, you're his only heir."

It was quite a large sum. Now I began to understand all the anger my father had continually felt toward Murad Mian's father. Then Murad Mian said, "Go home now. Fix up the house. Later I'll tell you about some work."

I didn't feel like going home but I picked up my things nevertheless and set out.

The alley in front of our house was the same as it had been sixteen years before. I approached our *devrhi* and stopped. The sound of betel-nut being cut into small pieces was coming from the *devrhi*, just as I'd heard it from my childhood.

Blind Grandmother? I wondered. Then I thought my ears were probably ringing and I went in. It really was Blind Grandmother chopping betel-nuts. The reed mat was exactly the same too. I was amazed, and I was even more amazed that she had immediately recognized the sound of my footsteps. She turned her face toward the inner door of the *devrhi* and announced, "Bahu (daughter-in-law), Bhaiyya is back. Get out all those sweaters you've made for him, cook his favorite dishes."

I stood there in a daze. Finally I asked, "Mother is alive?"

Even more astonished than I was, Blind Grandmother said, "Goodness Bhaiyya, during all this time have you even forgotten how to wail, how to talk to the dead?"

I had never wailed, but I did remember that I'd heard the wails of many women in which the dead were addressed as though they were living.

Blind Grandmother continued her wailing for some time. Finally I said, "I'm going inside."

The door to the inside of the house had a padlock on it. I turned around. Grandmother had already removed the key from her waistband by then and said, "Bhaiyya, take the key."

I opened the door and went inside.

Everything was topsy-turvy. The neem tree, however, was the same as before; in fact the foliage had become even thicker. Except for the tree, I didn't remember anything about the house. I stood under the tree for a long time, unable to grasp anything. My heart wasn't stirred. I missed my parents, but the feeling didn't last long.

Right from that first day I threw myself into repairing the house.

I have my own business now, which has grown thanks to the help of Murad Mian. I've married too. Several times I've wanted to visit the Destitutes Compound, but I don't even know where it's located, and I feel too embarrassed to ask anyone.

I still see Childhood Love in the bazaars going along on his open

cart loaded with things, the same sorts of things he's always been hauling back and forth from the compound, although minus the pasteboard and paper. His eyesight has probably gotten weaker; nevertheless I raise my hand and inquire how he's doing, to which, of course, I get no reply. □

—*Translated by Mubammad Umar Memon*