

MOHSIN KHAN

Zohra^{*}

ZOHRA MOVED THE *niqab*, the screened flap of her burqa, back slightly and all the sights that had looked rather hazy and lusterless suddenly became clear. They were now adorned in beautiful colors with real designs—nice-sized parks full of the bustle of life, buildings so tall and grand that she had to lean back to gauge their height, shiny cars being driven even by women and young ladies. One young lady flew by Zohra's rickshaw riding her scooter like a sparrow that quickly vanished in the air flapping its wings. Her shoulder length hair fluttered like a flame struggling to escape the lamp in a strong wind. The attractive clothing on her back was flapping like a flag. Zohra thought of her maternal uncle who used to say quite often: "It's not like the old days anymore, when girls remained closeted inside the four walls of the house. Nowadays, they're working alongside men."

Some of the things Zohra saw were things she'd never seen before—quite unusual. It was like being in a dream that wouldn't end. She wanted to pause to examine everything slowly and carefully, but that wasn't in her power.

When the rickshaw was coming out of the narrow alley onto the main road, she caught sight of a really huge fan inside a park. Its long blades were rotating sluggishly. She removed the *niqab* from in front of both eyes and began looking at the fan with pleasant surprise. Then looking over at Jamil with wonderment and obvious delight, she gently gushed, "God! Look, *Bhaijan*, such a huge fan!"

Jamil turned his face a little to look at her sideways. She understood that her brother hadn't approved of her chirping that way. She straightened the *niqab* and sat there a little intimidated.

"Stupid girl!" Jamil said after a moment, "When will you learn how to speak?"

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The censure felt somewhat disagreeable to her, but not so disagreeable that she would have gone on worrying, as she had in the old days, about one thing after another, as if pulling out the threads of a raggedy comforter one by one until her brain was completely muddled and the only thing she wanted to do was wrap herself in a sheet and lie down. She knew that “stupid” was an expletive Jamil used quite often. Getting angry was something different; he used “stupid” even when objecting to trifles. It was the delivery of the word that changed its import. Sometimes he would stick it into a curt or pointed statement such as “you’ll never learn,” or “you won’t understand.” She would often smile at such bitter and predictable comments, but when she was feeling tired and down even the slightest dose of gall would leave a bad taste in her mouth for a long time.

“I know I’ll always be stupid and thickheaded,” she thought. “A young girl should never talk to her older brother in that chirping manner. And besides, this wasn’t something big; there are hundreds of things here that I know nothing about. How long can *Bhaijan* go on telling me about them? I should have figured out myself what things to ask him about and what not to. *Bhaijan* is forever reprimanding me; why do I keep on doing such silly things despite all that?”

She committed a stupidity even in the bus.

When she was sitting next to the window looking at the scenery outside, her *niqab* flew off her face and hit the back of her neck without her noticing it. Perhaps Jamil saw her face unveiled. He leaned toward her and said sternly, “You must be very keen to sit near the window!” She understood Jamil’s intent and very quickly veiled her face and held on to one edge of the *niqab* carefully. But despite this, it seemed to her that she had been exposed in front of all the passengers. To begin with, she was the only veiled person in the bus; hence everyone was looking at her. Secondly, she wondered what someone would think if they heard her brother’s comment: perhaps that her brother scolded her every step of the way and that she was reluctant to wear the veil? It would have been better if she hadn’t sat in front of the open window. The window didn’t even have a pane that she could pull down to stop the air from rushing in. For a long time after Jamil’s rebuff she felt regretful and embarrassed. Eventually, as always, this feeling also disappeared.

“It’s called a wind turbine,” Jamil said. “It produces electricity.”

She looked furtively at her brother. *Bhaijan* answered now, after such a long time. Would anything have gone wrong if he had said this earlier? ... But how could electricity be produced by a fan? In the old days fans ran on electricity and now fans produce electricity! The Good Lord

has indeed done strange things. Nature is indeed wondrous! She thought of one of her father's favorite sayings.

A big, colorful picture hung like a pendant on the forehead of a stately building. Something was written under it in English. "Perhaps this is a cinema hall," Zohra thought. Outside the building, men had lined up on one side and women on the other. As the rickshaw passed by she tried to look carefully at the huge, colorful picture. It hadn't even become clear yet when she turned her head away. Behind the black veil, her face reddened. Only once before had she seen a picture like that one. She was making Jamil's bed and as soon as she picked up his pillow a picture fell to the floor. Her heart pounded furiously as she looked at it. With shaking hands she placed it back under the pillow, retraced her steps and quickly ran out of the room. For many days afterward she avoided looking at Jamil, as if the picture had been discovered under her own pillow, not his.

"Why was such a big picture hung up in the city square?" she wondered. "And if the city square is displaying such a picture, what must the film being shown inside the hall be like? Who would watch such a film?" She tried to look at Jamil discreetly but his attention was turned elsewhere at that time. "If the rickshaw hadn't passed by the cinema so briskly I still wouldn't have looked at that photo. Why would I look at such absurd photographs?"

When Azra had returned from her in-laws' the second time, she told Zohra that there were films in which nothing at all was hidden, everything was laid bare to look at.

"Have you seen such a film?" Zohra had asked her.

"Of course, why not? Many times," Azra had replied nonchalantly, as if it weren't a serious matter, as if she were saying, "Yes, of course I look at the mirror."

Then Azra had started describing the details of those films, but Zohra couldn't take any more and pulled her hand free of Azra's, hid her face, and rushed into her room. Her heart was pounding and every limb of her body seemed eager to disgrace her.

Zohra didn't believe Azra was telling the truth. She thought Azra was trying to embellish her conversations by mentioning things that no one could even imagine. Zohra's consciousness wouldn't accept such things, but an unknown itch lingered in her subconscious that gradually turned into a sense of unease or longing.

She felt an acute burning in her lungs so she stuffed the *niqab* in her mouth to stop her breath. It didn't seem nice to cough sitting with Jamil and passing through the crowds. But how long could she go on holding her breath? It wasn't within her power. Finally, when she did cough,

poison seemed to have spread from her lungs to her throat. In the morning when she was doing her ablutions for the *fajr* prayers, she had a coughing fit. After coughing a long time she spat out a blot of blood as big as a sparrow's liver that stuck to the ground. She hid it by rubbing it in and then lay panting on the bed for quite a while. When Amma called her after saying the salutation, she got up hastily lest Amma guess her condition.

Amma had sent them out of the house as quickly as possible. "Leave as early as you're able to, otherwise the bustle will begin and whoever meets you will ask where you're taking your sister." As if she wasn't his sister but only a butcher's goat to be slaughtered.

After that she couldn't see anything clearly. The snatches of whatever she did see were hazy and fleeting.

"No problem," she thought, "On the way back, if it isn't too dark, I'll look at them again."

The rickshaw stopped at a corner. It was a neat, clean area and it was quiet, but it wasn't the quiet of the village. It was an elegant silence. Spacious bungalows, expensive cars parked in the porticos, *gulmobar* trees clad in their garb of red flowers—as if all this was for the management of that same silence. There was a tall building a short distance away. Really tall. Lifting her head, she tried to see the top. "Dear God! So tall!" she thought, pleasantly surprised. "How far would a person be able to see from its top story?" But she wondered, "How would people get up to the top story? Weren't they even afraid? The rains come, strong winds blow, doesn't it fall down?" After a short pause she thought, "Well, how long will it keep standing? One day it's bound to collapse."

Jamil paid the rickshaw-driver. Then he looked at her: "Are you going to get out of the rickshaw or go on sitting there?"

She leaped out and landed heavily on the ground. Her burqa got tangled in her feet and if she hadn't grabbed on to the hood of the rickshaw, she would have fallen flat on her face. Looking at her sideways, Jamil walked into the clinic. Going up the verandah stairs carefully, she also went in.

"Sit down here," Jamil pointed towards an empty chair. Dutifully, she sat down quickly to make up for the blunder she had made getting out of the rickshaw. Jamil went and said something to the compounder. Then he told her that he'd come back soon and went outside the building. She heaved a long sigh and leaned her head against the back of the chair. The majority of the people inside the clinic were women, young girls and children. Their emaciated bodies, tubercular faces, and large, lusterless eyes peeping from the deep hollows of their sockets bespoke their illness,

but some of them didn't look sick at all. One healthy-looking woman who had perhaps accompanied some sick person to the clinic, sat with a handkerchief placed firmly over her mouth, as if the slightest imprudence would allow the disease to enter. The men sitting on the chairs around the edges were reading newspapers. A couple of them were strolling on the verandah. "Women keep sitting patiently in the same place, but menfolk can never do that ... Oh God, how hot it is!" she thought. Perspiration, collecting on her forehead and temples, crawled ant-like towards her neck where it got sucked in by her dupatta. When she wiped the perspiration with her *niqab*, she felt sick.

"What an unpleasant odor the *niqab* gave off! Her burqa hadn't been washed for a while either. How often can a person wash it? How much work can a person go on doing? As it is, there's so much to do in the house one feels faint. Poor Amma helps a lot. Ever since my sickness surfaced, she doesn't even let me do any household chores that might make it worse. There's no question of ever lifting any weight. No sooner do I pick up the masala-grinding slab than she rolls her eyes and screams: what are you trying to do? Such a heavy slab and in your condition? All through the winter she didn't let me wash any pots and pans. That's why the skin on my hands has improved a little, but the hardness and yellowness are increasing every day."

She pulled her hand inside her *niqab* to look. She didn't like her fingers, which were as yellow as a gecko's stomach.

"When Azra got married her hands were hennaed and her fingers bloomed. They looked so nice. Whichever of her friends came to visit looked at her hands. Now she has grown her nails and applies different kinds of polish on them. If I grew my nails, no one would even accept water from my hands. One shouldn't grow long fingernails anyway; whatever you eat or drink becomes detestable. Azra, however, kneads the dough and makes chapattis, and all the others eat them. Well, she's a different sort of girl! How openly she lived even before her marriage, wearing whatever she felt like, visiting the homes of people she wanted to visit, laughing at things not fit to be laughed at. No one in her house questioned her about anything. How many fights did she have with Aadil? But she never conceded and ultimately made Aadil give in. She's changed a bit since her marriage, but even now when she visits home she always manages to create some sort of commotion there."

And then there was Zohra's own house—less a house than a school. She would get a scolding if there was even the slightest slip. From one corner Amma would reprimand, "Zohra, wear your dupatta properly"; from the other, her father would remind her in loving tones, "Daughter,

don't talk so loudly, one's speech needs to be modest as well." Sometimes Jamil would exclaim in irritation, "When will you learn to use common-sense?" She would be the one to get it no matter who the real target of the other's anger was. Zohra felt like a sickly cat; whoever she passed by began spurning her and shooing her off. Because of his responsibilities and occupations, her father would sometimes forget her, but not Jamil. He seemed to have been born just to watch over her: "Why are you standing here? ... Why are you walking so fast? ... Don't set foot outside, stupid." Ever since Jamil got a job, he left home in the morning and returned late at night. She felt a sense of relief while he was away. But after a few days Adeel began to display hidden qualities, exhibiting the same tendencies as Jamil. Even though Adeel was two years younger than Zohra, he managed to dictate to her. Because of Adeel's unreasonable demands, she would sometimes wrangle with him, but it never had any effect. Her father sometimes defended her, but her mother always agreed with Adeel. "He's quite right. If the women-folk aren't kept in check, they dance about without anklet-bells. Look at Shakila! That's what came from too much laxity in her case! The people at her home might sit with their blindfolds on, but why would her in-laws have tolerated her demands, fair or unfair? And if you want the truth, no one knowingly does something that might harm them. Look now, how she's rotting at her parents' home with a child!"

"But what about Suraiya *baji*?" Zohra thought. "She was always dealt with harshly, never allowed to dance without anklet-bells. She attended to everyone's needs even at her in-laws' without uttering a peep. Why is she rotting at her parents' home?"

In the old days Suraiya *baji* used to look so nice, as if God's own hands shaped her. When she laughed, it seemed as if brightness had spread everywhere. But now when she laughs she seems to be crying.

"Poor Suraiya *baji*!" thought Zohra. "And, yes, why is it there are no flies to be seen around here? It's good that there aren't any. It would be impossible for a person to sit here if there were. I think there aren't many in the cities anyway. Don't know why. It may be because there isn't any filth around here. Perhaps there wouldn't be any mosquitoes here either. Or if there were, only the local residents would know. Oh, look at that!!" she exclaimed and laughed. A fly was sitting on the floor rubbing its arms together.

Periodically, a man would turn the pages of his newspaper and look at her stealthily. She felt a great aversion. "I'll never even see him again," she thought and turned to look towards the verandah.

"When a man stares at you like that you feel like putting out his

cursed eyes. Don't know where *Bhaijan's* gone? It's so hot in here; what would he be doing here? Must be standing under a tree smoking. He's started smoking too much these days. Before, when he smoked in secret, I would smell a strange kind of rank odor coming from his room whenever I went in. Then one day when I was making his bed I saw a packet of cigarettes under his pillow. I sniffed it and felt sick. That day I understood why his room had that strange odor. Azra used to ask me about *Bhaijan*: what does he do in his room all the time? Does he smoke? Did I ever find any girl's pictures in his books? and so on. At first I used to tell her everything, but later, after Amma strictly forbade me from telling anything about our household to Azra, I would either get irritated at her questions or just make up something. But I don't know how Azra knew all the things that even I hadn't figured out. For instance, for a long time I didn't understand why she was so curious about *Bhaijan*, but by and by I understood everything. Then even *Bhaijan* began to behave differently. At first when Azra came to our house, he wouldn't, like, even care; he would continue on with whatever he was doing. But later, he would begin feeling thirsty as soon as she walked in the door. He would come out of his room, go to the pitcher-stand and pour some water into the metal cup. The water would inevitably spill out of the cup and splash on the floor, and the pitcher would make a sound as if it just got smashed. In the kitchen Amma would get angry and upset and scream: 'Only one unused clay pitcher's left intact. Get rid of that one too.' *Bhaijan* would act as if he'd heard nothing. He would hold the cup to his lips, raise his eyelids as far as they would go, and look at Azra—in the process spilling more water than he would drink. Then, tossing the rest of the water on the ground, he would put the cup back, face down, on the pitcher and take a deep breath as if he'd drunk too much. Before going back into his room, he would look at Azra again, very attentively, and she would quietly do the same. Affecting ignorance, I would look around here and there and then I would hear Amma call, 'Have you up and died, Zohra?' so I would run to her in the kitchen. She would look at me and say, 'Are you at all concerned about the things that need to be done?' and I would quickly occupy myself with some chore or other. Then she would ask in a low voice, 'What was Azra saying?' 'Nothing at all,' I would answer. 'The same old nothing at all,' she would say growling and grinding her teeth. 'Was she sitting mum all this time?' Then as usual she would warn, 'Beware! Tell her nothing about our house or I'll pull your tongue out with a pair of red hot tongs!'"

"What a remarkable mother we have! What treasures are hidden in my house that I could tell Azra about, or what secrets could I expose that

would bring on tempests? Of course, the secret being nurtured in my chest will be out one day anyway, whether I talk to anyone about it or not.”

A short time later Jamil came back inside, signs of vexation on his brow as if embroiled in some difficulty. For a while he strolled about, his hands clasped behind his back, then he sat down in a chair a short distance from Zohra. “*Bhaijan* could have sat in the chair next to mine,” she thought. “Since Azra’s wedding, he’s become a lot more subdued.”

Now there were only a few patients left in the clinic. The man whose looks Zohra had begun to detest had left long ago; also the woman whose shirt sported a wonderful silk design. Zohra had looked at it from various angles but because of the distance couldn’t figure out if it was made by hand or machine.

“Anyway,” she thought, “no matter what, I’m going to make a design like that as soon as I get home.”

A lengthy yawn cracked her temples and a wave of pain almost split her jaws.

“Dear God! It seems a whole lifetime will be spent sitting here. I’m feeling very uneasy as well. Haven’t eaten anything much since morning. We left home after just a cup of tea and half a chapati. And you wouldn’t expect *Bhaijan* to bring something, would you? Something he would give me and say, go on, have it, you must be hungry. He must be getting hungry too.”

A wind was blowing outside. The branches of the thick trees were moving up and down as though they were laughing heartily.

“These are the *gulmohar* trees,” she thought. “What a gorgeous multitude of flowers on them! There’s a tree at our house as well—a cursed *gular* fig tree that has neither flowers nor leaves. Bare and leafless. Just drops damned *gulars*. Crows and mynahs keep defecating in it. The neighborhood kids can’t seem to find any other place either. Whenever you raise your eyes, you see them hopping and jumping over the walls. When strong winds blow, unripe *gulars* fall from it and land hard on your body, as if someone had pinched you. Father practically shrieks when a *gular* hits him. He lifts his head and swears, ‘Go ahead, do such villainy to your heart’s content. Very soon I’ll erase every trace of you from the world.’ Everyone laughs secretly and hides their faces at his comment.”

She wiped the perspiration from her forehead with her *niqab*. Lifting the lock of hair dangling there, she thought, “How brittle my hair has become! Amma wouldn’t even let me bathe during winter. Now that it’s summer, I’m going to shower every day. My, how close it is in here!”

She felt like taking her burqa off, putting it aside and sitting down on

the cold floor under the fan so she could draw innumerable deep breaths and fill her lungs with air.

“There are times when this burqa feels really annoying, as if I’m undergoing some punishment. Ever since Azra got married she’s folded hers away under seven layers of clothing and now she struts about in high spirits, going from one street to the next and from there to a third as if she’d never worn one. No one even dares question her. If anyone did she would bad mouth all the females on the offender’s genealogical tree. If anyone asked me to take off my burqa ... I would never do that. How could I let the growths of my body bob about in front of everybody? Dear lord! The very thought puts me to shame.”

This time when the compounder called out a name, the young man sitting across from Zohra was startled and looked up at him. Another man got up and went inside the clinic. The young man leaned his head against his chair and dozed off again. Other than Jamil and Zohra, this tubercular young man was the only one left there; the longer he waited the more emaciated he seemed to get.

“If *Bhaijan* hadn’t been sitting so near me, I could have raised my veil a little and felt some fresh air on my face. What could be so wrong about lifting one’s veil in front of dried up, shriveled men?”

My maternal uncle once said, “The custom of wearing the burqa is coming to an end. I haven’t made any of my daughters wear one. Who does it now? The world has advanced so much. Girls are doing jobs, getting drafted into the police force and the army, and you fellows are still having your daughters wrap themselves in burqas.”

“Of course they’re getting into jobs, getting drafted into the police and the army. They’re also doing many other things. Are you aware of those?” Father had replied irritably.

“You people always look at the negative side of things, don’t you?” Uncle had responded.

“Yes, yes, we people do only what we think is right for us. You may remove your daughters’ veils or make them dance naked. My daughter will live as she has been living,” Father said staring at Uncle in visible anger.

“Do I make my daughters dance naked?” Uncle’s voice choked in his throat.

“What else?” *Bhaijan* also got angry. “Who do you think you are to interfere in our affairs?”

“You be quiet, Jamil,” Amma said softly putting her finger on her lips.

“Why should I?” *Bhaijan* roared. Amma remained silent. She never confronts *Bhaijan*. To argue with young adults is to get one’s name

sullied.

“Uncle left quietly and he hasn’t set foot in our house since that day. Didn’t even show up on Eid day this year. Amma even went and apologized but he kept saying: those who make their daughters dance naked don’t visit the houses of gentle folks. It used to be so nice when he visited our house.”

When the compounder called Zohra’s name, her heartbeat quickened and her body began quivering, as used to happen when she was startled in her sleep. Slipping her feet into her moist sandals, she began moving towards the doctor’s chambers along with Jamil.

“I may also sit down if *Bhaijan* does,” she thought.

“Sit down, please,” the doctor said very gently, pointing towards the chair. She sat down.

A very pretty girl sat next to the doctor. Her features were similar to the doctor’s. Both of them looked at her inquisitively.

“Lift up your veil,” Jamil said. She lifted the *niqab*.

“Yes?” the doctor asked Jamil.

Jamil spoke as well as he could about her illness, but there were some things he knew nothing about. For instance, what was the nature of the pain in her chest, how long did she sleep at night, did she sleep at all, how many clots of blood got washed down the drain from morning till evening, what did food taste like to her, and many other things which no one except the patient himself could explain.

“See, for instance,” she thought, “*Bhaijan* was saying my sickness started a year ago, when actually it began a year and a half ago.”

“You tell us,” the doctor told Zohra.

“How can I speak in *Bhaijan*’s presence?” she was confused.

“Yes, yes, go ahead,” the doctor assured her.

Trying to remain composed, Zohra began describing her condition in a halting, unsteady voice. Some things she herself was unable to put into words.

After listening to her, the doctor came close and began examining her. The girl assisting the doctor also came close. During the examination the doctor always answered the assistant’s questions in English.

“Has anyone in your household ever suffered from tuberculosis?” the doctor asked Jamil.

“No, sir” Jamil answered.

“Anyone in the family?”

“No, no one,” Jamil said.

“*Bhaijan* doesn’t remember at all,” Zohra thought, “Grandma perhaps had the same disease. That’s why she used to cough the night away and

became so emaciated.”

“Did you consult anyone before this?” the doctor asked.

“Yes, sir,” Jamil said, “She was under treatment for a few days in a government hospital in town.”

The doctor looked at his assistant and then a sarcastic smile appeared on their faces.

“When the case becomes untreatable, you people take the patient and run to the city,” the doctor said harshly. “For now, I’m writing down some medicines. Start with these. Come back again in a week with the x-ray and the blood report. There’s no need to bring her along.”

“Doctor Sahib, she doesn’t take any precautions,” Jamil said.

The doctor looked over the top of his glasses at Zohra. “Why don’t you take any precautions, Bibi?”

She blushed.

“All right, if you don’t guard against eating the wrong foods, let it be, but you must take your medications. You’ll take them, won’t you?”

“Yes,” she nodded her head.

“You’ll heal much sooner if you also take precautions.” Very gently the doctor began giving her instructions about what to avoid or take.

She liked the doctor’s way of talking to her and giving instructions very much; it sounded as though he wasn’t talking but singing a lullaby.

“He talks very much like Uncle.” She was reminded of him.

When they were leaving the clinic, Jamil thought of something and suddenly halted. “You go on, I’ll be back in a minute,” he said and went back in. She went out and began looking at the *gulmohar*. Laden with flowers, the branches were still undulating as before.

A little while later Jamil came out. She looked at him questioningly. The look on his face was filled with anxiety.

“Why did *Bhaijan* leave me to go back to the doctor?” she wondered. “Perhaps he needed to ask him something. Lord knows what the doctor may have told him.”

On her way to the lab from the clinic she continued to worry about just what the doctor might have told him. At last she asked, “What was the Doctor Sahib saying?”

“Nothing,” Jamil answered easily. “What could he say? He needs to see the x-ray and the blood report before he can say anything. Now we’ll have to come back in a week,” Jamil said as if talking to himself.

When the compounder pricked her finger, her sense of worry transformed itself into the depth of pain. She looked at her finger. The compounder was busy squeezing blood from it as though trying to milk a famished goat. She turned her face away. If Jamil hadn’t supported her,

she would have reeled and fallen. After giving the blood she sat down in a chair. Jamil took her hand in his and rubbed methylated spirits where the finger had been pierced. The unfamiliar touch of Jamil's hands sent a shiver through her whole body.

"I'll do it myself," she said and Jamil handed the swab to her. Slowly she began rubbing the spirits on it.

The compounder came to her again. "Come inside," he said. She went in with Jamil.

"Remove this," the compounder pointed towards her burqa. She directed a puzzled look at him.

"Take off your burqa and give it to me. There's going to be an x-ray," Jamil said.

Bewildered, she took off the burqa and pushed it toward Jamil.

"Give me the dupatta as well."

She unfurled the sweat-soaked dupatta from around her neck and handed it to him. While she stood there vulnerable in front of the x-ray machine, Jamil was looking at the calendar hung on the wall, his hands folded behind him. One edge of the dupatta had come loose from his hands and flapped in the air being blown by the fan as if it was in the throes of death.

The x-ray machine operator moved Zohra's hands together unconcerned and told her: "Stand just like that."

She lowered her gaze and became immobile like a lifeless body in a casket.

"More than the disease itself, Amma is unnerved by little things such as these. That's why she doesn't pay any attention to little worries. And Grandma was so petrified by them that she never even visited the hospital. What terrible hardships she went through in her old age! She was trying to sit down on the takht once when a nail pricked her leg. The whole leg began drying up. People counseled her a thousand times to consult a doctor, but she never consented. Instead she scratched the faces of those who gave her that suggestion: you want me to wear the garb of shamelessness? That I show my legs to strangers? No thank you, sirs. May God take me away before I see that day. For many days Uncle just described her condition to the doctor and got medications for her, but she never got better. Then one day the disease just carried her off to the next world. Everybody said she was suffering from TB of the bones. How does one get that? Even worse, I've heard that women can get cancer lumps in their breasts and their growths are removed. Oh, God! Please save every woman from such ailments!"

"Hold your breath, please," the x-ray man said. Quickly she held her

breath.

When she came out with Jamil after getting her x-ray done, he looked at her strangely and asked, "Have you ever seen a film in a cinema hall?"

She looked at him. There was an affectionate smile on his face at that moment. She was surprised. "*Bhaijan* is asking me this as if he doesn't know me. When did I ever see a film in a cinema hall? In the whole time since a television arrived at Uncle Haji Ahmad's, I may have watched it once or twice for a short while, and that was secretly."

"No," she answered.

"Would you like to?" There was an unimaginable gentleness in the tone of Jamil's voice and a strange gleam in his eyes.

She wasn't very keen to watch a film, but did have a curiosity about what a film looked like on the screen. She felt like saying yes, but then she thought of the many words of advice Amma had given her: don't go strolling about lest you get late, don't start making unreasonable demands on your brother, and look—she said to *Bhaijan*—don't let her be alone in a crowd, hold on to her hand, come back while there's still light, don't be too late. "If we're late, Amma will be very upset. She may not reprimand *Bhaijan*, but I'd get a hiding. And when I get home I still have to wash the dishes. I also didn't sweep the house this morning. Amma may not have had time to do that. I also still have to do the dusting when I get home, particularly if we get there before the sunset prayer."

"What do you say?" Jamil asked.

"We'll be late. Amma will scold us," she answered.

"We'll tell Amma we got delayed at the doctor's," Jamil said smiling.

"Uh-uh," she declined.

"Okay, as you wish. All right, let's go sit in a restaurant and have some lassi."

"I'll start coughing," she said.

"Yeah, that's right," Jamil said. "All right, so you tell me what you would like to eat."

"Why is *Bhaijan* talking with such a sense of kinship?" she wondered. "Wants to show me a film as well! He never talked like that before. Anyway ..." The truth was that the manifestation of gentleness and affection in Jamil had awakened such an exquisite state in Zohra that she no longer felt either hungry or thirsty. Behind the *niqab*, her parched lips quivered and her eyes became moist.

"I don't want anything at all. Let's just go home quickly," she said tearfully.

"All right. Let's buy some apples. You can eat them in the bus," Jamil said.

She was tempted to laugh. “Will I hide them from everybody and eat? How different *Bhaijan* seems today?”

During their journey back home, Jamil told her, “Sit by the window.”

It’s too windy on that side,” she said, even though it was very close and sultry at that moment. Her refusal created no reaction on Jamil’s face. He plunked down contentedly by the window.

“Hold these apples,” he handed the polythene bag to her and pressed down on the latch to lift the window glass. Then he opened his collar and pushed it back. The headstrong wind on the other side of the glass was, as it were, ready to strike. It came bursting in.

“*Bhaijan* went back by the same route he had taken earlier. The same tall building, the big park, the cinema hall with dirty pictures outside, the same big, slow-moving fan—all the things we saw before. Now if someone asks me to go alone to the doctor’s, I could do it easily. First, I’ll get off the bus and into a rickshaw and then I’ll ask the rickshaw driver to take me there. Where? Yes, to Nirala Nagar, next to the tall building. Along the way, I’ll keep watching for these signs carefully. If anything is missing or if I see something new, I’ll know that the rickshaw driver is contemplating something evil and I’ll raise a hue and cry. When the rickshaw arrives at that tall building, I’ll walk a short distance down the street on the right-hand side. *Bhaijan* had spoken to the rickshaw driver about another route, but that would have taken longer. That was why he hadn’t gone that way. Well, it’s easy to think about all this, but hard to do. I might not even be able to go.”

When the two of them were walking to the village after getting off the bus, the sun was stuck in the green branches of the trees and the birds were alighting in the tree for their nightly rest. Besides the chirping of the birds, a familiar, earthquake-like sound was echoing in the air. She looked up: in the distant sky a crooked trail of grey smoke had formed.

“It’s good that we’ll get home while there’s still light. Amma will be happy,” she thought. “But now I’ll have to walk a long distance. The cursed rickshaw drivers here also leave before sunset. I’m sure my calves will be aching the whole night. It’ll be impossible to sleep.”

After traversing the bumpy pathway that was choked with dust and protecting herself from the filthy sewers at the same time, she was walking along her own street when Tamizan Bua suddenly came around one corner casually walking her usual way carrying a big platter on her head. The edges of the embroidered dupatta covering the platter were swinging over her shoulders.

Tamizan Bua fastened her grip on the platter and looked at Zohra lifting her eyelids quite high. Even if Zohra weren’t with Jamil, she would

have recognized her.

“Greetings, Tamizan Bua,” Zohra said.

“May you have a long life,” Tamizan Bua returned her greetings in a shaky, tremulous voice. Then she looked at Zohra with questioning eyes and asked, “Where you coming from?”

She was at her wits’ end. What reply could she give? She had a fit of indecision. Jamil was walking a little ahead of her. He stopped, looked askance at Tamizan Bua and answered a little sternly: “We went to take care of some business.”

Tamizan Bua suddenly felt flustered. Before moving on she said, as though talking to herself, “I’m carrying the suit of betrothal clothes for Jareena’s daughter.”

After her departure Jamil looked at Zohra scornfully and said, “What was the need to greet her?”

She felt alarmed. With a sense of regret she thought, “*Bhaijan* is right. I shouldn’t have greeted her. If I had walked on without saying anything, Tamizan Bua wouldn’t even have known who it was inside the burqa. But now, of course ...”

At that very moment Amma saw them and heaved a long sigh of relief and said, “Thank God, you came home before it got dark.”

Zohra walked across the courtyard quickly and when she reached the portico she collapsed onto the takht. Amma followed Jamil to his room as if she needed to ask him about something terribly confidential.

“Amma should’ve come to me first and asked how I was doing. Instead, she’s rushed to *Bhaijan*’s room. She really has become crazed silly.”

Because Zohra had walked so long, her calves were throbbing and her heart was beating fast. She closed her eyes so that she might forget herself for a little while, but the fatigue had awakened her mind. No sooner had she shut her eyes than the things she had seen and heard on the tumultuous streets of the city forced her to open her lids again. “How noisy it was in the city and how quiet it is here!” she thought.

After a little while, Amma came out of Jamil’s room walking slowly. Feeling drained, she sat down near her on the takht.

“Take off your burqa, at least. It’s so hot,” Amma said. “You can’t have eaten anything since morning.”

Zohra didn’t answer. She just kept her eyes open, staring up.

“If you go out with these people, they make you long for some food or even a cup of tea. Should I bring you a cup of tea? Would you like a glass of milk?”

“Uh uh,” she shook her head.

Amma placed the cold palm of her hand on Zohra's forehead and held her breath.

"It's warm. Make sure the fever doesn't shoot up. There's no sense of responsibility at all: the young fellow forgot to bring the medicine. You didn't remind him either. If he had brought it, we could've got you started today. Now he'll return with it tomorrow evening and you'll begin it the morning after. Has the same habits as your father—inside the house the patient may be on the verge of dying and he'll just sit idly by."

"Now Amma will empty her brains babbling," Zohra thought. "She'll thrash over every little detail and make a mountain out of a molehill. No wonder she gets scolded by Father and *Bhaijan*."

But this time, perhaps because of Zohra's illness, she remained quiet. She moved the lock of hair from Zohra's forehead, wiped away the perspiration with Zohra's dupatta, and picking up the hand fan from the foot of the bed started fanning her. Zohra's eyes started closing from a sense of contentment, but in a little while the speed of the fan gradually began diminishing. She looked at her mother hesitantly. Her eyes were fixed somewhere else and her face looked as if she had been sitting in front of a fire for a long time. Her eyes were bloodshot and her lips were quivering gently.

At that moment Adeel walked into the house casually tossing a ball. He was startled to see Amma sitting like that with Zohra and slowly approached the takht.

"I'd like some water," Zohra said.

"Fetch some water for your sister," Amma told him in a strained voice.

Adeel quickly brought some water, "Here, *Baji*."

She paused three times while drinking the cold, brackish water from the new clay pitcher. Then she passed the empty glass back to Adeel and said, "More."

Adeel again went quickly and brought another glass. She emptied the second taking the same three pauses. The water filled her stomach but failed to quench her thirst. She lay down again just as her father came in walking in his dignified, balanced manner, clearing his throat. Closing his umbrella, he looked over at Zohra with a little trepidation. Then placing his umbrella on the hook, he came towards her. She sat up quickly.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"She's tired," Amma answered in the same strained voice.

"Hunh," he thought about it. Then, after a pause he said, "It's too damn hot. We might get some relief if it rains. What are you doing just standing there? Why don't you fan your sister?" he ordered Adeel. "First lay my shirt in the sun, though."

He took off his shirt and handed it to Adeel. Without his shirt her father looked more intimidating, even murderous, with his hairy body.

Adeel spread the shirt in the sun and came back to the takht smelling his hands, sticky because of the sweat. Then, taking the fan from Amma's hands, he began fanning Zohra quickly.

Zohra began to be weary of all this doting over her. She wanted everyone to just leave her alone and let her be. She pulled her burqa away from her body and threw it aside. At that moment Amma got up and walked into the second verandah.

"Now Amma will slowly walk into the storeroom and, under the pretext of taking out some clothes, will open one trunk after another. She'll take out a piece of clothing, spread it, then slowly fold it and put it back in the trunk. She'll keep doing the same thing for a long time."

Zohra knew that whenever something distressed Amma, she walked slowly into the storeroom and cried there for a long time. Zohra turned onto one side to peep into the storeroom. One panel of the door was open but it was very dark inside. Just then a sound came from the vestibule close to the main entrance.

"Azra *baji* has come over," Adeel said.

Startled, she looked up. In front of her, Azra was coming in walking like a child with a familiar, friendly smile on her face and a sparkle in her eyes. As soon she saw Azra, the fatigue and anxiety that had overcome Zohra gave way to a sudden burst of energy. She sat up quickly. Her father, a dhoti over his back, was taking off his pajama bottom. Suppressing her excitement, she got off the takht and walked carefully over to meet Azra. If her father hadn't been there, she would have run like a kid and jumped into Azra's arms.

"Today I was thinking of you, and you showed up. When did you get here?" She surveyed Azra from head to toe. The new style of clothes was becoming on her and her complexion had grown even lovelier than before.

"Got in just this afternoon. I came to see you then, but you weren't in. Where had you gone to?" Azra asked.

Zohra had her heart in her mouth. What could she tell her now? She was just standing there perplexed when Amma came out of the storeroom. On such occasions Amma's sixth sense suddenly comes to the fore. Walking quietly like a cat she approached her. "Listen, Zohra," she whispered secretively as she walked off into the courtyard.

"Amma always behaves this way," Zohra thought. "Now what was the need to call me away from Azra like this? What will she think?"

"Sit down Azra. I'll be back soon," she said to Azra and willy-nilly

walked into the courtyard. There, her mother stood horrified as though some accident was about to happen.

“Listen, this girl is a real witch and draws a long bow like her mother. She has come to find out things, so beware. She’ll ask you many questions, but don’t tell her anything. Don’t answer any of her questions. Seal your lips. After a while she’ll leave on her own. Understand?” Amma looked at her as though she wanted a yes right away. She knit her brow and stared at Amma. Then she lowered her gaze.

“And at least fix up the way you look,” Amma said and went mumbling towards the kitchen: “No sooner the cursed ax falls, the policeman appears.”

The joy and contentment she had felt when she saw Azra disappeared, replaced by the old sense of weariness and boredom. She stood for a while in a state of uncertainty, then went quickly and lay down on her cot. Covering her face with her dupatta, she began crying bitterly. After a while it grew dark and she heard the call for the *maghrib* prayer. She got up hurriedly, heaved a long, gasping sigh and thought: “What’s wrong with me today? The *maghrib* prayer is at hand and it’s dark in the house. Lord knows when the cursed light will return!” Quickly she came into the courtyard, stopping suddenly to cover her head with her dupatta and use its edge to wipe the little wetness still in her eyes. Then, as usual, she moved towards the kitchen to light the lamp. □

—Translated by Faruq Hassan