

NAIYER MASUD

Dead End*

THIS TIME, after returning home, I started wandering around the city all day because I had nothing to do. The little my mother earned doing sewing and needlework was enough to fill our stomachs. As a matter of fact, good food was always prepared for me. Regardless of what my mother ate, I at least was sure to find meat and something sweet at both meals. In the morning, along with my milk, I would sometimes have a breakfast of jalebi and sometimes *shirmal* before leaving the house to wander around Sheesh Mahal, Husainabad, Muftiganj, Thakurganj, the Chowk, and Saadatganj until noon. I hadn't made any friends so I used to look at old buildings and roam about in the narrow lanes without talking to anyone. When I went home at noon, I would find my meal sitting on Mother's prayer platform covered with a platter. After eating, I'd place the dirty dishes near the well and lie down for a while on that very same platform to take a nap. In the afternoon when my mother returned from work she always brought something for me to eat: some fresh fruit of the season or some wonderful sweetmeat from Akbari Gate, or sometimes paan with cream, which I enjoyed immensely. I wasn't hungry; nevertheless, I ate a little of what she offered so lovingly and then went out again. At that hour I didn't roam around, rather, I would sit in the tower of Rumi Gate and watch the evening darkness descend on the city. At nightfall I came down from the tower and, winding my way through the bazaars, I'd arrive home to find my mother cooking, and I'd be given nice warm food. There would be meat and rice in front of me, and in front of my mother, chapati and some plain vegetables or dal, but I would insist that she eat some of mine. Before it got late, I would go to sleep. Judging from this, you might say that ours was quite a comfortable life, although in our home there was nothing of comfort to speak of. Five dented pots for cooking, a dilapidated tape-bed, a wobbly prayer platform, a lota, a bucket, ordinary bedding, a clay water-

*"Bun Bast," from the author's collection *Tā'ūs Čaman kī Mainā* (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēñ, 1997), 139-47.

pot, a small metal bowl, and two rush-mats: this was our total inventory. I didn't even have proper clothes to wear. I had only two changes of nearly worn-out clothing and every day my mother announced her intention of buying me something new. Gradually my clothes began to look like rags made wearable somehow by Mother's skills. She never told me that I too should find some work. I had already turned twenty-eight, but I wasn't conscious of my advancing age nor did I think about my fine education. Even when I saw young men my own age, I didn't compare their condition and my own. Now I think that was a pleasant period in my life, but one day that period began drawing to a close.

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Night had fallen. I came down from Rumi Gate and having gone through Goal Gate was now passing through the Chowk. When I reached the middle of the Chowk I realized that it was deserted and all the shops were closed. I was still reckoning the days of the week—which like the days of the month I never managed to keep track of—when I heard a commotion of some kind in the distance and started walking faster. Then the sound of a commotion also started coming from another direction and I noticed there wasn't a single soul in the whole Chowk except me. The noise grew louder and a stir of activity could be heard in the narrow lanes that branched off here and there from the main road of the Chowk. Someone shouted something to someone else and I heard the doors of houses banging shut; then a throng of people came into view advancing toward me through the Akbari Gate with lamps. I also heard a clamor in the wide lane to my right and, without thinking, I darted into a narrow lane on my left. Going forward a ways, I spotted another twisting alley off to one side. I turned into it, but after about fifty steps it started veering slowly in one direction and then suddenly ended. Mostly the backsides of houses opened into this blind alley. Just ahead, where the alley ended, I saw the main entrance of a house. The door was slightly ajar. As I was moving toward it someone closed it from the inside. When I went forward a bit more, I heard the clanking of the iron ring being secured on the other side. It seemed to me that whoever was on the other side was having a hard time securing the ring. Just then I heard the sound of footsteps rushing toward the entrance to the alley so I leapt toward the door and pushed on it. There was weak resistance from the other side. Suddenly something flashed with a noise at the entrance of the alley so I pressed with the full force of my whole body on the door. It resisted for a minute and then opened. I jumped over the threshold and went inside. In the darkness of

the *devrbi* I heard the jingle of bangles and a slight fearful shriek, but without giving it much thought I quickly closed the door and stuck my back up against it. With great difficulty I groped around behind me with one hand for the iron ring of the door and secured it in place. It was quiet in the *devrbi* now.

“Who’s here?” I asked.

No one answered. I remained still for some time. It was quiet inside the house. I moved toward the interior door of the *devrbi*. Beyond the threshold there was a curtain barrier across the door. Staying behind the barrier, I came down into the inner courtyard. My foot collided with something tin and it rolled to one side making a slight sound. I heard the clucking of hens close by and cautiously poked my head around the other side of the barrier to have a look. Everything was dim. Up ahead I could see a verandah with a lantern which gave off a faint light hanging from its middle arch. Feeling around with my foot, I tapped the tin object and the hens clucked again as if in response to that sound. Feeling a bit more confident, I walked straight to the middle of the courtyard. In the dim light I couldn’t quite figure out the exact layout of the house, but I could surmise that there were verandahs on three sides of the courtyard, the house had no upper story and, adjoining the *devrbi*, there was a kitchen, a bathroom, a henhouse, and so on. In back of the verandahs there were storerooms and they all seemed to be fastened from the outside.

Only then did I think about the one who had wanted to latch the door of the *devrbi* from inside. I went back to the *devrbi* and struggled for some time to see in the darkness. Then I said, “There is no need to be afraid of me. I’m frightened myself.”

There was no response. Then I went back into the courtyard again. After taking down the lantern hanging from iron hooks on a pole in the outer hall, I returned to the *devrbi*. The chimney of the lantern had become almost black, nevertheless there was enough light for the dark *devrbi*. The *devrbi* was empty, but adjoining one corner a low door which was half open was visible. Holding the lantern, I stuck my hand through the doorway and then poked my head in to look around. It was a smallish store-room filled with dilapidated door panels, the side sections and legs of beds, and the frame for a mosquito net along with tangled skeins of dirty bed tapes and other similar paraphernalia. I was moving the lantern around examining the room when I noticed a slight movement by a rather large skein of bed tape, so I went inside. A woman was trying to hide behind that skein.

“Please come out,” I said, “don’t be frightened of me?”

She remained silent. “I came here because I feared for my life,” I said.

"I'm afraid myself but if I'm frightening you then I'll go."

Even then she didn't say anything and I suddenly sensed that I was somewhere I shouldn't be. I said, "There are people going around outside with knives and daggers. But well, so be it."

After that I left the room. The iron clasp on the front door was very tight. I placed the lantern on the ground and tried to open it with both hands when I felt a slight warmth behind me and turned around to look.

In the faint light coming from the lantern, her face seemed rather menacing. I stooped down to pick up the lantern. Just then I heard her voice.

"Why have you come here?"

"It was the only door in the alley," I said, "but I'll go now."

"What's going on outside?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's some riot."

She remained silent for quite some time and again I sensed that I was somewhere I shouldn't be. I tried to open the iron clasp with one hand but couldn't manage it. I was surprised to think that just a short while ago I had no difficulty securing the clasp easily with my hand behind my back. Just then she asked, "Isn't it dangerous outside?"

"Dangerous?" I said. "Oh no, except, when I step out they'll butcher me."

"Then please don't go right now," she said, taking the lantern from my hand. Just then the muffled sound outside in the alley picked up along with the sound of heavy objects falling.

"Please come inside," she said.

Following behind her, I ended up in the inner courtyard. She hung the lantern by the middle arch. Now her face could be seen a little more clearly. At first glance she seemed to be someone who'd been ill for years, but I couldn't really see her well. With her face turned away from me, she contemplated the lantern quietly for quite a while. Then, with her face still turned away, she pointed at the verandah and said, "Please sit down. You must not have eaten yet."

I really felt very hungry but I said, "No, I'm not hungry."

"I'll bring something," she said. "You sit down."

I saw her going toward the *devrhi*. For some time I sat on a low stool on the verandah listening to the light clanking of kitchen utensils and looking at the blackened chimney of the lantern. Then I noticed her coming toward the light carrying a round platter. She came into the verandah, placed the platter on another stool and said, "This is all I have to offer right now."

I looked at the platter and saw two or three dishes on it but couldn't

see what was in them.

“You shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble,” I said. “I’m not particularly hungry.”

“Please start,” she said. “I’ll bring the water.”

I saw her turning toward the courtyard but just then the lantern flared up making a slight sound. She was right under it and lifted her head to look, then she looked at me, and now it seemed as if she was frightened again like before.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she said, her voice choking. At the same moment the lantern flared up one last time and went out.

In the pitch darkness I heard the rustling of clothes and the clinking of bangles. Then behind me on the verandah a door opened and closed with a bang. Now there was a very eerie silence in the house although somewhere in the distance there was a noisy tumult going on.

In that pitch darkness I got up and probed my way toward the *devrhi*. I didn’t think about the curtain barrier so first I collided with that. While trying to regain my balance, I again bumped against that tin object and it rolled some distance away. In the chicken coop some rooster flapped his wings loudly and crowed. I went into the *devrhi*. With one jerk I pulled open the tightened hasp of the front door and went out.

After walking a few steps it occurred to me that leaving the front door unfastened wasn’t the proper thing to do at such a time, but, after closing it from the inside it wouldn’t be possible for me to go out. So, leaving it the way it was, I came out of the dead end alley. □

—Translated by Jane Shum and Muhammad Umar Memon