

QURRATULAIN HYDER

Photographer*

THE EXTREMELY BEGUILING GUESTHOUSE is visible from a distance, perched on a verdant hilltop surrounded by a girdle of fresh, spring flowers. A bubbling mountain lake runs down the hillock and a narrow track winds its way up along this lake reaching all the way to the gate of the guesthouse. A photographer with a walrus moustache sits indolently in a metal chair near the gate, his equipment lying on the ground beside him. This relatively unknown mountain town is off the usual tourist route and, therefore, is rarely frequented by regular travelers. If perchance some honeymooning couple or traveler wanders towards the guesthouse, the waiting photographer gets up and starts walking on the garden path, holding his camera with hope and patience. There is an unspoken understanding between him and the gardener that the latter will beckon him when going to present a morning bouquet of flowers to the guests, preferably the young ladies. And when the young damsels walk down to the garden after their breakfast, they find the gardener and the photographer waiting vigilantly for them.

The photographer has been here a long time. He refuses to go anywhere else and establish his own permanent studio. This is his birthplace. The hills and lakes belong to him. Why should he leave them? He has spent his life here quietly, watching the myriad colors of a changing world. The earliest visitors to the guesthouse, in his memory, were the sahibs, the British planters wearing white sun hats, the wives of arrogant officers in the colonial service, and their children. They would spend their nights upstairs drinking heavily like horses, while the gramophone blared maddeningly. The wooden floor of the drawing room downstairs was reserved for dancing. During the Second World War, the Americans started coming.

And then the country won independence.

The visitors to the guesthouse now are occasional tourists, government officers, newlywed couples, or painters and artists in search of solitude—

*“Fōṭōgrāfar,” from the author’s collection *Rausbnī kī Raftār* (Karachi: Friends Publishers, n.d.), 29–37.

people who want to capture the sight of colorful rainbows arching over the lake on rainy evenings. They are seekers of everlasting love and peace—two passions that have no existence in this life. And this life is itself followed closely by death. It goes with us wherever we go. It is our constant fellow traveler.

Tourists to the place keep coming and going. The eye of the photographer's camera captures everything around silently, secretly.

One evening a young man and a young woman landed at the guesthouse. They did not appear to have come for their honeymoon. They looked quite happy but serious as they carried their luggage to their suite on the first floor. The entire floor was empty. There was a dining hall near the staircase, and three bedrooms in a row joined by a common sitting room.

"I'll take this one," the young man said, entering the first room, whose windows looked out toward the lake. The young woman dumped her umbrella and overcoat on the bed in the room.

"Take your things away!" the young man snapped.

"Okay, fine!" The young woman picked up her things and went through the sitting room to another room which had a tiled passageway at the back. From the large windows of the room, laborers could be seen climbing a ladder, busy fixing the back wall.

A porter brought her luggage to the room, closed the curtains, and left. She changed her clothes and came back to the sitting room. The young man was sitting in an armchair near the fireplace writing something. He lifted his eyes and looked at her. Outside, darkness had suddenly started to spread over the lake. She went near the windows and gazed at a rainbow arching over the garden. When it grew darker she gave up looking at the rainbow and moved toward the young man, settling into the chair beside him. They started talking. Down near the gate, the photographer was still waiting for them. His camera had eyes but no ears.

By that time a European tourist had also entered the guesthouse. He was now sitting quietly in another corner of the room writing letters. Some picture postcards lay in front of him on the table.

"Look there! That tourist must be writing to his wife back home telling her that at the moment he's in the mystifying East, at a mysterious *Dak Bungalow*. And that a mysterious Indian girl clad in a red sari is sitting in front of him. It's an incredibly romantic atmosphere....," the young woman whispered, and her companion gave a short, amused laugh.

The two of them went to the dining room for dinner. They returned to the sitting room after some time and sat together. The young man was now reading something to her. The night had worn on. Suddenly, the young woman sneezed loudly.

She felt uneasy and, drawing a tremulous breath through her nose, pronounced, "We should go to sleep now!"

The young man reminded her, "Don't forget to take your medicine!"

"O yes, thanks! Good night!" she replied and went to her room. The passageway at the back was bathed in darkness. The room was pretty quiet, cozy, and comfortable. Life too had been quite peaceful and easy. She changed into her nightdress and was taking her medicine out of the dressing table drawer when there was a knock at the door. She slipped into her black kimono and opened the door. Her young companion was standing there nervously.

He quickly uttered, "Sorry, but I too have started getting a nasty cough!"

"Really?" the young woman looked surprised and gave him the cough syrup and a spoon. The young man dropped the spoon on the floor, bent down to pick it up, and went to his room. The young woman switched the lights off and went to sleep.

The next morning, she got ready and walked to the dining hall for her breakfast. The fragrant smell of fresh flowers was floating in the air in the hall. Huge, brightly polished, brass vases stood in a neat row on the glittering hardwood floor. Bunches of fresh, brightly colored flowers were lying near the vases. The lake outside was sparkling in the light of the morning sun and yellow and white butterflies were fluttering across the lush green garden. After some time the young man appeared coming up the stairs to the hall. He was laughing and held a bouquet of flowers in his hands.

He entered the hall and held the bouquet out to the young woman. Smiling up at her he said, "The gardener has sent this for you. He's standing downstairs."

She picked a tiny flower out of the bunch, stuck it carelessly in her topknot, and started flipping through the morning newspaper.

The young man continued his speech, "A photographer is also hanging around downstairs. He asked me very seriously whether you weren't a certain film star!"

The young man sat down on a chair near the table and started making tea. The young woman couldn't stop laughing. In truth, she was a very famous dancer and the young man was an even more celebrated musician. But nobody recognized them here. They were enjoying their temporary anonymity and quiet solitude at the guesthouse enormously.

The European tourist, having his breakfast in another corner of the dining hall, looked at them and smiled. He had also joined in their quiet happiness.

After breakfast the young couple went down to the garden and stood together under the *gulmohar* tree on one side of the garden, watching the

winding lake.

All of a sudden, the photographer appeared as if from nowhere, bowed to them removing his hat in a very dramatic way, and inquired, "Photographer, lady?"

The young woman looked at her watch and said, "I'm sorry! We have to leave right now or it will be too late."

"Kind lady," the photographer placed one foot on the coping of the low garden wall, and stretching his hands out towards the world outside, continued, "A furious fight is raging on the battleground of life. I know you've broken out of the battleground to steal some moments of happiness in the peaceful atmosphere here. Listen, the rainbow over the lake is going to vanish in seconds, but I won't take much of your time. Please, come closer for a second!"

"The man appears to be a very eloquent speaker!" she said softly to her companion.

The gardener, as if waiting for his chance, emerged from behind another *gulmohar* tree nearby and, darting forward, presented a bouquet to the young woman. She broke into peels of laughter and moved near the life-size statue of Parvati¹ at the end of the garden for a picture with her friend. She squinted her eyes against the strong glare of the sun and smiled faintly.

"Click, click!" The photographer quickly took their picture.

"You'll get your pictures this evening. Thank you lady ... thank you sir!" The photographer bowed again and touched his hat.

The two young people walked down towards their car.

They returned late in the evening after their outing, flopped down into the garden chairs placed on the grass outside, and stayed there awhile in the mellow evening light. When the evening mist started rolling over the grass, they moved to the quiet, spacious drawing room on the ground floor and fell into a long, hushed conversation in the gentle light of the orange, hanging lampshades. After dinner, they went up to their rooms. Both of them were leaving early the next morning and were so engrossed in their conversation that they forgot to retrieve their pictures from the photographer.

The young woman was still in her room in the morning when the room boy entered and handed an envelope to her.

"This is for you, madam. The photographer gave it to me last night," the room boy said.

"Fine! Leave it in the drawer over there!" She gestured to him carelessly

¹Parvati, a Hindu goddess, is considered a complete incarnation of eternal beauty, with all other goddesses being her incarnations or manifestations.

and started arranging her hair.

When she was packing up she didn't remember to take the envelope out of the drawer and, casting a fleeting glance around the room, walked out to the car. The young man was waiting for her there. As they sped off, the photographer got up and saluted them. They waved back to him and the car ran down the slope of the hill and vanished.

The photographer with the walrus moustache has now grown old. But he continues sitting in his metal chair near the gate taking pictures of the tourists at the guesthouse. With the expansion of new air services, their numbers have increased considerably.

But the tourist coach that was now coming through the guesthouse gate had only one lady passenger—a woman well past her prime. When the bus stopped at the entrance portico, the woman got off, holding a suitcase, looking quizzically at the photographer. The poor man rose quickly from his chair, but slumped down into it dejectedly when he found that the center of his attention was not a young woman but a lady well into middle age.

The lady entered the guesthouse office, registered her arrival, and went up to the room allotted to her. The guesthouse was quite deserted. A tourist group had just left for an onward destination and the cleaners had set the entire place back in order. The brass vases standing on the polished wooden floor of the hall, waiting for fresh flowers, were still shining brightly. The beautiful silver knives and forks on the bright white table under the French window in the dining hall had not yet lost their original sparkle. The lady passed by the middle room and went to her own at the end of the passage. She dropped off her baggage there and went straight out to have a good look at the lake. She returned to the empty sitting room after quite some time, stayed there for almost an hour, and then went back to her own room.

When the lengthening shadows from the passage peeped into her room, she got up, walked over to the window and looked out to find that, after having toiled the whole day, the laborers had left the ladder leaning against the wall. The passage too was completely abandoned. She went back to her bed and was going to stretch out when she heard a sudden knock at the door. When she opened it she found no one there. The sitting room was strangely still and silent. She closed the door and while returning to her bed felt that the room had suddenly become extremely cold.

The next morning, she packed her suitcase and went over to the dressing table to do her hair. Pulling the drawer open accidentally, she discovered an envelope with her name written on it under a transparent

yellow sheet. Amazed, the lady took it out instantly. A cockroach fell onto her palm from underneath the envelope. She jerked her hand violently out of sudden fear and a picture fell out of the envelope. It showed a young man and a young woman smiling gently, standing near the statue of Parvati. The paper had yellowed but the photo was intact. The lady kept looking at the picture, rapt in deep thought, and then put it into her purse.

She heard the room boy announcing from outside that her airport coach was ready to leave. She came down with her suitcase and found the photographer walking on the garden path, looking for new tourists.

She went near him and spoke quite frankly, "Isn't it strange? The dressing table upstairs must have been cleaned many times during the past fifteen years, but this photograph has been left there in the drawer, untouched."

Her voice suddenly thickened with anger, "And look how the maintenance and upkeep here has gone down miserably during all that time. There are cockroaches all over the place in the rooms."

The photographer looked at her flabbergasted and tried to recognize who it was behind the wrinkled face. Unable to do so, he turned his face away. The woman continued pouring out her verbal disgust over the state of affairs there. Her voice had changed, her face appeared rough and hard, and her manners betrayed fretfulness and displeasure.

She continued her tirade in her shrill, hoarse voice, "I've retired from the stage. Who would be interested in taking my photo now? No one, for sure! I just stayed here last night on my way home. The new air service to my town has started now and this place falls on the route. I had no other option."

"And ... and ... the young man with you ...?" the photographer asked her softly.

The coach horn honked.

"Don't you remember, you told us yourself that a furious fight is raging on the battleground of life? He's lost in that furious battle. I couldn't find him anywhere."

The coach honked again.

"It has been ages since I lost him ... Goodbye, then!" The lady cut the conversation short and hurried towards the coach.

Stupefied, the photographer with the walrus moustache returned mechanically to his seat near the gate of the guesthouse.

Life has devoured the human beings. Only the cockroaches are going to survive. □

—Translated by Syed Sarwar Hussain