

HASAN MANZAR

The One Upstairs

THE STORY GOES BACK to the days when some people spent their Sundays like Fridays, and others their Fridays like Sundays; that is, it goes back eight or nine years, not further than that.

Around 1:30 on Friday afternoon was an awkward time to visit anyone. But what difference did it make? thought Yasmeen. Perhaps her visitor was from out of town. Out-of-towners, when they did come to the city, usually had a number of chores to do; for example, they might have a doctor's appointment, they might have to buy new eyeglasses, might have to sell a few things, or make a deal for some big items, might have to talk to a lawyer, to deliver a sack of vegetables to someone's house, to inquire about the health of a relative (their own or somebody else's) in the hospital, to go see a movie, to buy an earring or a necklace for the wife, to buy knick-knacks for the children, etc. and so on.

And when they had nothing else to do, they made a tour of the area behind the Memon district, among the fruit vendors' trolleys and the flower sellers' stalls, even if that tour was made just out of habit, and was, in reality, without any point or purpose.

So, Yasmeen got up and opened the door. She recognized the man, even though her eyes were only half open because of the glare of the sun. Her visitor was the seed salesman, and had been to see her many times before.

She rubbed her eyes and said, "At this time?" She abruptly asked, "What's that under your arm?"

The man standing outside the door was drenched in sweat. Even then he moved his hand gently on the head of the thing he held under his arm

"Ūpar-wāli," from his collection *Insān kā Dēsh* (Lahore: Qausain, 1991), pp. 50-62.

and answered, "Don't you recognize it? You eat one almost daily."

Yasmeen took a step back and said, "A rooster?"

"Yes," he answered, and without seeking her permission walked into the room. "This is a rooster, and I am Rafeeq Khan. Recognize us now?"

Yasmeen was gradually getting over her lassitude and drowsiness. Walking towards the earthen water pot in a corner of the room she asked, "What time is it now?"

"One-thirty, or maybe a little later," Rafeeq Khan said, laughing a little shamefacedly.

She drank some water from a glass, and adding some more to what remained, she handed it over to Rafeeq Khan. She lifted the drape at the window and began to peer out back into the gully, where there was a mosque. She said, "People are going to say their prayers."

"I've already gone. There are dozens of mosques. This is the only place around here where you can hear the call to prayer, though, isn't it?"

Then he came and sat on the bed near Yasmeen and, laughing a little more shamefacedly, said, "I had to come and see you, so I got mine out of the way."

He started undoing the string around the rooster's legs. Yasmeen sat on the bed leaning against the wall. She had pulled her legs up and encircled them with her arms. Everything that was going on before her eyes was altogether new for her.

Rafeeq Khan took off the string around the rooster's legs and lovingly rubbed them with his hands, as a prisoner's companions rub his wrists when his handcuffs are removed; he tickled the rooster under its neck, patted it on the head, the back, the feathers, and then, gently tying one end of the same string to the rooster's leg, attached the string to Yasmeen's bedpost.

As soon as the rooster could move about freely, it flapped its wings and crowed.

"Look at it! It thinks it's the morning," Rafeeq Khan said.

"Or maybe it wants something else," Yasmeen said.

"What?" Rafeeq Khan asked, surprised. Then getting the drift of her comment, he laughed and said, "Do you have a bowl or something? This silly bird is making a call to prayer at its own death."

"Do they do that?" Yasmeen asked incredulously.

"I don't know. Maybe. My job is only to sell seeds and to come see you when I can."

Yasmeen got up from the bed and after some effort found a handleless cup. She poured some water into it, placed the cup in front of

the rooster, and said, “Are you going to slaughter it?”

“The one I’ve brought it for will do that; doesn’t look like it’s a fighter.”

“Who did you bring it for?” Yasmeen asked.

“Well, first I thought I’d give it to the doctor. He’s treated my sister-in-law with so much care—must have given her at least ten bottles of glucose. I was going to see him for the last time today to tell him how she’s feeling, and I thought I’d take this for him. But it doesn’t look like it’s meant for him.”

“Why?”

“The clinic is closed; he’s gone somewhere. Maybe his own brother-in-law has died,” he said and laughed.

Yasmeen sat near the rooster and began rubbing her fingers on its head. Earlier, at the door, her reaction upon seeing it was not one of surprise, but of fear. In her adolescence, which was not too long ago, only six or seven years back, she had often raised chicks, red and yellow ones, each one bought for a rupee. She had cried when, one after another, they died, for there was nothing else in the house to amuse her. People came to the house, sat with her mother or sister, talked to them in different languages; she knew, as a trained nurse does without being told what instrument or needle or swab the surgeon needs, when to leave their company, and would quietly slip away and go upstairs.

Some of those who visited her house were such bastards—this word was used in her house as commonly as words like “greedy” or “generous” or “true to one’s word”—that despite having beards which looked like mottled grass, they wouldn’t hesitate to grab and paw at her, as though estimating her fleshiness.

Rafeeq Khan lifted the side of his shirt, took out a wad of bank notes from his waist pocket and examined them. Some notes were loose, separate from the wad. He passed one of these on to Yasmeen.

Yasmeen pointed towards her pillow and went on stroking the rooster lovingly.

Rafeeq Khan placed the bank note under the pillow. Then he lay down on the cot thinking. His hand accidentally went under the pillow where there was some change and a watch.

He brought the watch out from under, looked at it, and said in astonishment, “Oh God! It’s four o’clock!”

Yasmeen burst out laughing and said, “This watch is fake, only for decoration.”

“Really,” he said and pressed it close to his ear. Then, playing with

the watch and counting the roof-beams, he went to sleep.

“Don’t you want to give it something to eat?” Yasmeen asked, but his snoring, instead of stopping, became louder, as though after being dead tired, he had come to a very peaceful place where all his cares and responsibilities had ceased, and he had effortlessly gone to sleep.

Yasmeen was now getting tired of sitting on her haunches. There wasn’t even a decent chair in the room, so willy-nilly she sat on the foot of the bed, her head resting against the side wall and her legs pulled up to her chest and circled by her arms.

Soon, she began to nod off.

Her visitor’s watch lay on the floor near the rooster and his briefcase also stood nearby. The deep henna-dyed rooster, whose feathers at places showed a dark green or blue fringe, had walked around the room as far as its string would allow, and not finding anything worth eating, was now standing on top of the watch. The sole of one of Yasmeen’s feet was near its head; it tickled her foot with its beak.

In response, she lazily leaned her back against her visitor’s hips. From outside, somewhere very far away, at intervals, the call of a *falsa*-vendor came into the room. But neither that call nor the occasional sputtering of a scooter’s engine in the yard could disturb their sleep.

The rooster jumped up to sit on the briefcase, but found it difficult to keep its balance; so, flapping its wings, with a loud bang it came tumbling down to the floor along with the briefcase. Its sudden shrieks said for sure that one of its legs or wings had been squashed under the briefcase.

Startled by the sound, Rafeeq Khan woke up. So did Yasmeen. Both were drenched in sweat, as often happens during siestas on summer afternoons.

A little later, after Rafeeq Khan had offered the rooster some sample seeds from his briefcase and Yasmeen had refilled its upturned cup with water, she asked, “So what happens to it now? The doctor isn’t at the clinic; will you take it to his house?”

“I don’t know where his house is. But it doesn’t matter. If I don’t offer it at one shrine, I’ll offer it at another. They’re all the same.”

“One shrine is the doctor’s; whose is the other?”

“The lawyer’s. The bugger has left my case hanging for three years.”

“So you’ll go to his shrine now?”

“Yeah.”

“Where does he live?”

“Why, are you in some trouble? Come on, tell me, I can get you

help.”

Yasmeen kept quiet.

“The police don’t bother you, do they? Or the pimps? Not in a wrangle with someone, are you? But you don’t look like that kind of a girl. I knew that the first day I came to you, five Fridays ago. I said to myself, this kid is different. She can’t even tell the good from the bad. That day you gave me something to eat and you also massaged my feet. And when I was about to leave, you remember, I stood and waited in the doorway? Maybe you don’t remember. I don’t blame you. Do I remember all my clients? I thought maybe you’d ask for some money for milk, that’s why I’d stopped in the doorway, but you just went to your bed and lay down there. You looked a little flushed that day.”

Yasmeen kept watching him with a look of gratitude.

Then with an effort she put her hand on Rafeeq Khan’s hand.

Rafeeq Khan placed his other hand on top of hers and kept looking at her lovingly. There was neither any craving in his heart nor guilt in his eyes; in fact, even the little regret that he had felt in the beginning, about having come, of all places, to Yasmeen’s, on a Friday, was all but gone now.

It was peaceful all around—no noise of the motorbikes, nor of the haggling clients in the street below. Unlike some young men, or even middle-aged ones, who go to railway platforms to feast their eyes on beautiful faces and then, satisfied with a little ogling, go their own way, the clients in the street below were mostly frightened creatures, often out of breath and panting, their eyes open but their blinkers down, so to speak, for fear someone might be watching them, disappearing in a flash, briskly, either inside to the world of pleasure, or outside, well away from it.

The only sound audible was that of the rooster pecking.

Then Rafeeq Khan put his hand affectionately on Yasmeen’s shoulder and said, “Today I want something different.”

“What?”

“I want you to cook this rooster. Let you and I both eat it together.”

Yasmeen was wide-eyed with surprise.

“Want me to cook it?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And you want to eat with me...?”

“Yes, of course. Why, is it forbidden to eat your cooking?”

Yasmeen’s face fell. Rafeeq Khan felt embarrassed. He said, “Oh, oh, what did I say there? I meant just as all the other women of a household

cook and everybody eats, in the same way, I thought ... Did I offend you? I didn't mean it; it just came out of my mouth. I don't see any difference between you and the other ..."

Yasmeen waited to hear him say more. But just as earlier he had said more than was necessary, now he was unable to say what needed to be said. He laughed and said, "So, what do you say? I can slaughter it for you if you want to cook it. It's a real home-grown bird. My kid cried when he saw me carry it—where are you taking it, he asked. Even my wife said if you had to please the doctor, buy him a farm-grown chicken from the store. Have we not been paying him the fees, she said? But I said, the doctor couldn't have tasted a *desi*, home-grown one. But today, you eat it. I'll do something for the lawyer later on. Every week, either my father-in-law or one of my cousins takes a basket full of onions or peppers or okra to his house. If he's lucky, he'll get a *desi* chicken as well. But today, it's your turn to eat, and to feed me also."

Gently, Yasmeen asked, "How many times have you been here, Khan Sahib?"

"Been coming here for five Fridays now, with the exception of one. You add it all up."

"And since when have you been coming to this district?"

"I don't remember now. Since before my wedding."

"Did you ever see a stove in anyone's house? I mean in the house of someone like me?"

Rafeeq Khan pulled his hand away from Yasmeen's shoulder as if someone had splashed acid on it.

He thought for a while and answered, "I haven't noticed. There have been stoves. But if you say so, maybe not. I don't go around peeking into the different corners of people's houses."

"There aren't too many corners to peek into," Yasmeen answered, a little curtly. "Both our meals come from the restaurant. In the morning we get a cup of tea and a bun."

"And what do you get in your meals?"

"Oh, what we've been allowed. Meat and potatoes, lentils, oven-baked flat-bread."

"Meat and potatoes all year round?"

"No," Yasmeen smiled and said, "I used that as an example. Actually, we eat what the madam upstairs gives us."

Rafeeq Khan laughed and said, "For everybody else, it's the God above, in the sky, who feeds them. For you it's the madam above, on the upper story, who gives you food. Who is she, anyway? Your mother?"

“No, she passed away long ago.”

“Someone else then.”

Yasmeen nodded her head.

Somewhat sorrowfully, Rafeeq Khan asked, “Ever get anything else to eat?”

“Of course. I get many other things. Not always, though. Sometimes someone brings curried lamb’s knuckles in a bowl from his house. Or if someone feels too loving, he brings fish cooked with rice, of course telling his wife it’s for a friend. The next time he says, ‘May I have my dish back? The wife’s asked for it. I forgot to take it the last time.’ ”

Both of them laughed.

Rafeeq Khan said, “Okay, why not do one thing? It’s less hot now, and there’s really no one around here who knows us. How about covering yourself in a *burqa* and going out with me to have some fun?”

“And what about this rooster?”

“He’s yours anyway. Let him stay tied up here. Looks like he’s used to you already. Let’s first go to the truck stand; there we’ll have tea first, and then ... No, I said it all wrong. Let’s first go to the place where films are shown. There are restaurants there. We’ll first have tea there. The rest I’ll leave up to you. You may watch a film or take a walk to the park. Then we can go where the truck stand is and have a feast there. After that I can go home and you can come back here. Today, let it be a break for the lawyer also.”

Yasmeen open wide the window panels. Outside were the sounds of people walking about and talking on the street below. The breeze coming in was also a little cooler now.

She looked at Rafeeq Khan and said, “Firstly, evening is the time for work; we’re not allowed to go anywhere. Secondly, if I lock the door from outside, the woman upstairs will begin snooping around. She has the duplicate key.”

“No! Really?” Rafeeq Khan said indignantly.

“Oh, yes.”

“The bitch.”

“Whatever else may happen, first of all, she’ll untie this one and take him away,” Yasmeen touched the rooster’s wings with her toes, as she sat on the cot. “And then he will be in her tummy.”

Rafeeq Khan shook his head and said, “In that case, it’s useless even to bring *ghee* for you. That too will end up in her stomach. You earn so much, but it seems she’s the one who enjoys your share. Look at you! You’re practically skin and bones.”

A little later there was a knock on the door. Rafeeq Khan started putting his things together. Yasmeen pushed her head out the opening in the door and whispered something to someone. Then she shut the door and went quickly towards her bed. Lifting her pillow, she picked up the bank note that Rafeeq Khan had given her and asked him, “Do you have change for this?”

Rafeeq Khan lifted the edge of his shirt and from his waist pocket took out two bank notes the same denomination as the first one, and put them under the pillow.

Yasmeen stopped for a moment to look into his eyes; then, moving towards the door asked him, “No change?”

Rafeeq shook his head.

After the person at the door had left, Yasmeen said, “Now that it’s evening, there’ll be interruptions like this.”

Rafeeq Khan said, “I was thinking of leaving anyway. I guess I should visit the lawyer, or my older brother will get upset.”

“Then take your rooster along.”

“No, no. I told you he was yours. Now your apartment won’t look so lonely.”

“And what about his crowing in the morning and waking me up?”

“Well, don’t the others—the mullahs from the mosques around—do the same in the morning?” Rafeeq Khan said laughing. Before leaving he took her hand in his and said, “The next time I come, I’ll get my sister-in-law to cook some chicken for you. Not this coming Friday, but the one after. And also some flat-bread fried in butter.”

“Is your sister-in-law a good cook?”

“Oh, yes, yes,” Rafeeq Khan answered. “Nobody in the world can cook like her. She’s herself as nice as her cooking is. If once you see her ...”

Again his sentence remained unfinished.

“If once I see her, what then?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

Going down the stairs, Rafeeq Khan was feeling miserable. Yasmeen peeked out the door and, trying to cheer him up, quietly said, “And will this rooster stay tied up to my bedpost even when all my clients come and go?”

“Yes,” Rafeeq Khan said, enjoying the prospect.

“Tell me one thing,” Yasmeen asked.

“What?”

“When you went to that place today, before coming here, where did

you keep it? With you, under your arm, or did you leave it at the door? I hear that even the shoes left outside by the worshippers get stolen.”

Rafeeq Khan laughed whole-heartedly. He said, “Yes, outside, it would have been swiped in a minute. There’s a sweetmeat store nearby; I left it inside the store. I know the owner.” Then staying quiet for a moment, as though in thought, Rafeeq Khan said, “How about going out next time? Will you come out with me?”

As if submitting herself unconditionally to fate, Yasmeen said, “It’s all in hands of the one upstairs.”

—*Translated by Faruq Hassan*