

NAIYER MASUD

## Essence of Camphor

For on its wing was dark alloy,  
And as it flutter'd—fell  
An Essence—powerful to destroy  
A soul that knew it well.

—Edgar Allan Poe

*Gar nau-bahār āyad-o-pursad ze dūstān*  
*Gū ay ṣabā keh ān hame gulhā gayā shudand*  
If Spring comes asking after friends, sweet Breeze,  
Say that the blossoms—ah, the blossoms turned to straw.

—Amīr Khusrau

### I

I NEVER LEARNED the intricate, tenuous art of perfume-making practiced in ancient times, now nearly lost or perhaps already extinct; nor am I acquainted with the new methods of concocting artificial fragrances—that is why no one understands the essences I prepare, nor succeeds in imitating them. People assume that I am privy to some rare formulas, locked in my breast and bound to die with me, and that is why they insist that I preserve them somehow for posterity.

In response, I remain silent. There is nothing unique in my perfumes except that I prepare common fragrances on a base of camphor extract. In fact, every perfume I make is an extract of camphor, disguised behind a familiar scent. I have experimented with fragrances aplenty. At one point, I had gathered so many aromatic items that it was dizzying simply to be near them. The fragrance of each source would spread and evaporate by itself. Finally, a moment would come when only the source remained but

its fragrance had risen into the air, and I had to see it or touch it in order to identify it. But camphor is very different, because it evaporates along with its odor: it is not possible for its substance to remain after its scent has vanished, though it is possible for the camphor to evaporate and the smell to remain.

In my extract, however, one doesn't smell camphor, nor any other fragrance for that matter. It is a colorless solution inside a white, square-bottomed china jar. No fragrance of any kind wafts through the jar's narrow opening when the round lid is removed. Attempting to smell it one feels a vacant forlornness, but the next time around, breathing deeply, one detects something in this forlornness. At least, that's what I feel; what others might feel I cannot say, since no one but me has ever smelled the extract in its purest form. It is true that when I prepare a perfume essence with this foundation, those who inhale it think there is something else underneath the expected fragrance. But, obviously, they cannot recognize it, for there is no fragrance at all in my extract of camphor.

Like camphor itself, extract of camphor of course evaporates and dies out with its scent, or even sooner. My achievement—if that is what it should be called—is simply that I manage to keep the camphor from expiring with its fragrance. When I transform camphor to the solution stage, its odor becomes pronounced. Then I retain the solution, but cause its scent to vanish. The essence sometimes perishes altogether, leaving the solution indistinguishable from plain water, and I toss the whole thing away. This happens only when I am distracted and there is hesitation in my hands. Normally, my concentration is hard to break. Once absorbed in preparing the extract, I do not hear loud noises, or even nearby voices, yet the call of a distant bird or some equally faint background sound can throw me off. Then my hand stops, and as I try to turn back to my work I detect the lowest point of the fragrance pulling up like the end of a string, rising from the solution toward the ceiling, and it cannot be brought back. I don't mourn the loss of my labor and get back to work, resolved not to be distracted again. Soon I see the essence of the new solution as it struggles to ascend. Slowly, slowly, I swirl the solution until a whirlpool begins to form. The fragrance revolves in the whirlpool, then rises up like a nascent tornado. I let it waft upward, its upper end spiraling to the ceiling, but at the instant its lower end is about to lift out, I swirl the solution in reverse, forcing the whirlpool to reverse as well, and the wispy tornado of scent begins to descend. I can never keep an eye on the time, but I believe this takes a long while; still I never let my hand pause, swirling the solution in one direction, then the other, over and

over. At last the rising and falling fragrance, fatigued, begins to get foggy. Nothing must distract me at that moment. The fragrance lazily rises and falls, and then, sometimes in a trice, disappears. After pouring the colorless solution into the square-bottomed jar, I shut the lid while diverting my attention elsewhere. In that moment of distraction my hand seems to move toward the jar of its own volition.

A feeling of forlornness, then the revealing of something in this forlornness, is now induced by merely inhaling the camphor essence, but whatever is revealed in this forlornness already existed before the extract's conception; indeed, the preparing of the extract relies on its existence.

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My ability to recognize birds is quite poor. During my childhood years, I only knew the names of a handful of pet birds. I would enquire from the family elders the name of some bird that was chirping on the fence around our house or on a tree in the garden, only to forget it the same day, yet I assigned each of the birds in my home a human name. Whenever I addressed a bird by its assigned name it would turn its attention to me. In due course these birds would die, and I would remember each one only for a few days after its death, then forget it, and later even the name I had given it. Now I have forgotten all the names I bestowed except one, and the one I remember happens to be neither a human name nor that of a bird. It was a name I had given to the portrait of a bird.

A girl from my family had made this portrait, and since the girl had died only a few days later the portrait had been set on the mantel above the fireplace in the living room, so that anyone entering would notice it at once. A newcomer would look at it a good while, then examine it from closer up. It was really worth a good look. The creator had glued onto a dark-colored wooden board a piece of bark resembling a long, thin branch, above which she had constructed the bird out of tufts of spotless cotton. For its outstretched wings, she had added real feathers to the cotton; a piece of red glass was used as an eye; the pointed claws were made of thorns from a bush. The bird's claws were raised in the air instead of resting on the branch, making it difficult to know whether the bird was landing on the branch or flying away; perhaps that's why it was disturbing to look at for long. My family, however, took it to be the portrait of a bird rising.

I had named it "the camphor sparrow." I used to feel a cool, almost

frosty sensation when looking at the clean washed cotton and the whiteness of its spotless wings. I had a similar frosty feeling whenever I saw camphor, which was always present in my house because my family prepared camphor balm. This emollient was distributed free and was referred to as “the cool balm.” One day a woman-servant of the house was grinding camphor for the ointment on a stone slab as I sat nearby. When the servant went off to run some other errand, I heaped the powder on the slab into a mound. I smacked it with my palm and scattered it all over. Now the servant returned.

“Look,” she complained to someone deplorably, “he’s spoiling the whole lot!”

Dusting my hands, I stood up. When my eyes lit on the white powder strewn on the slab, I remembered the outspread wings of the bird in the living room and the frosty feeling I experienced when looking at it. That day I named it “the camphor sparrow,” and this became its name in my house, partly because no one seemed to know its real name; perhaps, indeed, no such bird existed and its maker had created the image from her own fancy, though it resembled many other birds, including some birds of prey. I didn’t know this until one day I came upon some guests who had just returned from the hunt and were chatting in the big room as they stood before the effigy. Pointing to various parts of the sparrow’s figure, they were debating among themselves, bringing up the names of different birds. I didn’t understand most of their conversation, but all at once the camphor sparrow seemed too complex a thing, and long after the guests had left I stood puzzling and peering at the bird. To all appearances, it had not been complicated to make. I studied its every facet. At last, I was convinced that its maker must have completed it quite simply and easily in a relatively short time, and that I too could make one without much effort. I wondered why I hadn’t tried it before, and from that moment I started gathering materials for the attempt.

For many days I tried to make an imitation of the camphor sparrow; I stood in front of it holding the wooden board in my hand, but nothing seemed to come out right. Each of these efforts left pieces of pinched cotton, and twisted, broken feathers were spread all over the living room, which—since guests were brought here—was always kept neat and tidy. At last, when milder restrictions failed, I was forbidden to bring my things into the living room at all. Now I had to work within the confines of my tiny room; every now and then, however, I would go back for a look at the portrait—not a long trip, since one door of my bedroom opened onto the large room where it was kept. I would examine the cam-

phor sparrow in detail, then rush back to my room to add more cotton pieces to the wooden board. Sometimes I thought I'd formed a section of the bird quite accurately, but as I started on the next part, the earlier one seemed wrong, making the addition also appear unsatisfactory. Despite these numerous setbacks I still believed I should be able to copy it easily, so time and again I would find myself standing in front of the portrait wondering why I couldn't duplicate it.

One afternoon, I was staring at the bird when a playmate of mine entered the room looking for me. He, too, looked at the bird for a while, and then said, "There's one just like that across the way."

"Where?" I asked.

"In the tree by the well," he said, pointing outside.

"You've been over by the well?" I asked.

He nodded: "I go there every day."

"Who lives there now?"

"No one. It's empty."

Pointing to the camphor sparrow, I asked, "Is she exactly like this one?"

"It was hard to see through the leaves," he said, "but it looks like this one. Come see it."

"She must have flown away by now."

"No. It's been sitting there since this morning."

This piqued my curiosity.

"Come on, let's have a look," I said, and we went out.

As we walked toward the western edge of the compound, I inquired again, "No one's living there?"

"I told you: it's empty."

The house, which was the only one besides ours in the large field, usually stood empty. Its main door opened onto the road, but the small door of its large walled backyard was directly across from our main door. The panels of this small door had come loose, fallen to the ground and nearly sunken into the earth; a boy of my age could slip through where the panels had been by contracting his body. When playing in the field, if my friends and I found the house empty we would often go into the yard, our only means of entry and exit this loose double-door.

One by one, we slipped through the panels and entered the enclosure. Despite my hurry to reach the tree, I stopped at the door and scanned the yard. Heaped with rubbish and overgrown with weeds, it had the appearance of a forest. The people who had lived here had left

mementos of their occupancy everywhere, in the form of piles of rubbish. Glancing around the area, I asked my companion, "Where is it?"

He silenced me with a finger to his lips, and we both tiptoed around to one side of the well. It was nearly filled with soil, trash and broken tree branches; only the top two or three circular layers of six-cornered bricks were free of debris.

The tree stood between the left-hand wall and the well. Since the wall obstructed its growth in one direction, the tree had leaned over the well. We had never climbed this tree; though its heavy branches appeared strong at first sight, they often wouldn't bear the slightest weight. Its large round leaves had a light fuzz of permanent dust on them, which made your body itch if you accidentally brushed against them. There was no wind now, and the tree looked still and lifeless; when the wind blew, the entire tree swayed, in motion seeming somehow even more devoid of life. In a strong wind the tree might creak and a branch snap, then fall to the ground.

Craning his neck, my friend stood under the tree and stared into the branches in deep concentration. I tiptoed near him, leaned against the trunk and I looked up into the tree. Its leaves had withered and were about to fall. In certain areas, the whiteness of the sky showed stark through the web of leaves. I kept thinking I saw a bird in the patches of light. Finally, my companion nudged me with his elbow and pointed upward. I had thought the little body, half visible, half masked by three or four large leaves, was just another patch of sky; then I saw that one edge of the whiteness had the stepped contour of a wing. The bird was not very high, its face hidden by leaves. I informed my friend with a gesture that I was going to climb the tree. He signaled for me not to do it, but my foot was already on the trunk.

I had started up that tree once before, on a bet with my playmates, but had come down right away since everyone had run off on seeing that I was going to win the bet. Nonetheless, I had been able to assess that the tree could be climbed if not too much weight were put on it. This in mind, I began moving up, keeping to the thickest branches. At last I was high enough to grab the bird with my right hand. I grasped a branch with my left hand, planted my feet firmly on a lower branch, and leaned my whole torso toward the bird. From my vantage point, only one wing was visible, and I wanted to seize both wings in one motion so it would have no chance of fluttering away. To do so, I moved one foot slightly forward on the branch, which creaked ominously. My friend called to me from below in an urgent tone. I clamped my arm around the branch above and

lifted both feet with a jerk. My hand was inches from the bird. The lower branch squeaked again, and the whole tree seemed to rock. My playmate called again plaintively, but now the bird was in my hand. I glanced down at the groaning branch and tested all the others one by one, but their weakness was apparent at the slightest touch of my foot. I held the bird outstretched in my hand, which was itching furiously. Hanging on with only one hand, I slipped down with difficulty, barely keeping my balance. As my friend hastened around the well to meet me, a large branch crashed down to the well's edge with a great cracking sound, trapping my friend lightly in its descent. I grabbed his hand and helped him out from under the branch, and we stood together a few steps from the well.

“Did you get it?” asked my friend, dusting off his clothes. I looked at my fist. There were tiny red ants crawling all over my hand. The bird had been dead for days; it was hollow inside. Some of the web of tangled leaves was caught in its pointed claws, its head rested on its chest, and its eyes were completely eaten away. I quietly lamented my lost labor. I threw the bird in my friend's direction and started blowing the crawling ants off my hand. Just then I heard a strangled scream from my playmate. The bird was lying on the ground under one of my friend's feet, which was paralyzed on top of it. Then I remembered that he was frightened of dead things, and his body would go rigid when he'd had a fright. I pulled him gently toward me. He remained stunned for a moment, then jerked away, staring at me in a daze. Then he looked down at his feet and backed away a few more steps. I started toward him but he spun around and ran out the back door.

I made to follow him, but when I reached the door it occurred to me that I hadn't taken a good look at the bird, so I turned back. I drew near and bent over the bird. It had been flattened by my friend's foot, and had there been a wooden board beneath it instead of the soft earth I would have thought I'd created a slapdash copy of the *kafoori* sparrow.

After that, I lost interest in the *kafoori* sparrow and once again set to making other things. Even when I was very small I would put together ill-assorted pieces of things picked up here and there, and then ask people to say what it was. My family members would name something, and I would believe that I had really made that thing, and even convince myself that I

had set out to fashion that specific object; I would display the new sample of my craftsmanship on the mantel and consider my work the equal of the *kafoori* sparrow. I never admitted that the things I made were toys, and once when I had tied two or three blocks of wood together and was told that I had made a remarkable car, for days I insisted that my family members use it to go out for a drive. After a short while, however, I would forget anything I constructed, and at last someone would remove it from the mantel. Gradually, I collected quite a few tools and other implements with which I fashioned many different articles. Their resemblance to their real-life models was rather slim, but they were recognizable. Underneath the bed in my small room I kept different types of tools, pieces of wood, snippets of gaily colored cloth, scraps of tin, metal wire and even fruit pits, and I could put my hand on any of these objects I wished, even in the dark.

In the fervor of my attempts to duplicate the *kafoori* sparrow I had quite forgotten all these items, but they now reclaimed my attention even more intensely than before. The racket of banging and nailing might erupt from my room at any hour of day or night, disturbing the rest of the household, but no restrictions were imposed on me because I was the dearest son of the house; when I accidentally injured my hands, however, my work would come to a halt for a day or two. After I had injured myself often enough, a big bottle of *kafoor* balm was kept in my room permanently, though such salves were usually for serious injuries and old wounds. My cuts were ordinary and temporary, and any remedy from the market would have healed them, but I was, as I said, the dearest son of the house. The objects I made were displayed on the mantelpiece without any prompting from me and were made much of to guests. Sometimes, when I couldn't think of anything to make, I would go up to the roof, from which one could see clearly across the field the top of the other house and the wall of its backyard. There I would sometimes sense on the soft pulses of the breeze the embrace of some familiar or unfamiliar fragrance, whereupon a picture would form in my mind, then disappear at once. As I experienced the forming and dissolving images, I would suddenly decide to make something and would hurry back down and lock myself in my room.

One day I stood on the roof of my house watching the clouds that had been gathering in the sky since morning after the long season of scorching heat and white-hot winds. Near me stood the same friend who had earlier been frightened by the dead bird. We both enjoyed going out to get wet in the first rain of the season, and seeing signs of a shower he



had come up to the roof to look for me. We pointed out shapes made by large and small clumps of drifting clouds. Here and there the blue of the sky peered between them, but as we stood there the patchy clouds congealed into a smooth sheet of dark gray. In my anticipation of the gusting wind and falling rain I forgot about my playmate entirely. Shortly, little puffs of wind began to blow. One of them seemed to bear a fragrance as cold as ice, but this scent somehow met my eyes instead of my nostrils, appearing as the end of a white string before me, then pulling upward and vanishing. Just then I heard my friend's voice:

"That looks just like the other one."

He was looking up. I did the same. A bird was hovering above our heads, and circling with it was a white string.

"What is that string?" I asked myself.

"She must have picked it up," said my friend, "to make her nest."

The bird descended slightly, then circled upward again.

"No," I said, "the string is tied to her claws."

"Then she must have broken free from somewhere," my friend observed. "I wonder whose bird it is."

We continued to stare at it in silence. The pattern of its flight belied great weariness. Flapping its wings slowly, it hovered near the roof as though searching for a resting place. Finally, it landed on the turret that rose from the roof to the left of where we were standing. It seemed to be staring at something straight ahead in the distance, oblivious to our presence. I motioned to my companion to be silent and began edging slowly toward the turret. I stopped very near it. I could not see the bird, but the string was dangling before me within reach of my hand.

I turned toward my friend and gestured for him to be silent once again, but just then I heard the sound of feathers, and when I spun back to the turret, the end of the string had risen beyond my reach. I returned to my friend's side. The bird was now flying swiftly toward the other house, veering left and right like someone staggering across the ground, the white string wavering behind it like a snake.

"Isn't she just like the ...?" my companion began

I kept my eyes fixed on the bird without answering. Now it had passed the wall of the enclosure and was circling in one spot, descending slightly with each revolution. At last it disappeared behind the wall of the house. In a moment, the bird rose again at the same point, fluttering its wings rapidly, and sank again from view. It reemerged. It fluttered its wings for some time, riveted to one spot. Again it descended slowly out of sight. We waited for it to rise again, but it didn't.

“What is she doing there?” my friend asked, staring fixedly at the wall.

There was a faint rumbling of thunder, and lightning bolts flashed and vanished at several points in the dark gray sky. The thought struck me at the same moment my friend said aloud: “That’s where the tree by the well is.”

We looked at each other and fell silent. Above, the sound of the thunder shifted, then descended, ricocheted across the earth and vanished into the sky. I grabbed my friend by the hand. “Let’s go and free her,” I said.

“No,” he said, tugging against my grip.

“Come on,” I insisted.

“No,” he repeated. “I’m not going over there.”

“This one’s not dead,” I said, “but if it rains ...”

But his hand had begun to turn cold in mine and he stared at me in a daze.

“Okay, as you like,” I said and climbed down from the roof, leaving him there.

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The heat still hung in the atmosphere and the tree’s large leaves drooped, but their greenness struggled through the dust settled on their fuzzy surface. I walked halfway around the well and stood under the tree. There was no movement or noise in the branches above, but I believed the bird was hiding somewhere in the leaves, and I continued to peer into the treetop. At last I began to think it might have flown off before I had arrived, and as I stepped out from under the tree I heard a faint noise which I could not identify, but decided must be feathers rustling in the leaves. Pausing, I looked up. The sound seemed to be coming from everywhere in the tree. I realized then that the rain had quietly begun. I hesitated, then walked out into the open. After a short distance I turned back to look at the tree.

It was metamorphosing before my eyes. The raindrops were tracing green lines on the fuzzy leaves as they washed away the dust, and the drooping leaves were slowly rising. The rain suddenly began to fall more heavily and I turned toward the door in the wall. The faint smell of earth rose to my nostrils, then the sound of rapid fluttering met my ears. I turned again to look back at the tree. The bird was fluttering in one place just above the tree. As the fat drops of water were scattered by the swiftly-flapping wings, the entire bird appeared to be enveloped in a white fog.

On all sides of this trembling tuft of fog the incessant rain was drawing white strings from sky to earth.

The whole yard was awash now. The familiar smell that rose from the mud at the first rain had abated, and now fragrances buried in the deeper layers of the earth were emerging. At my feet, these fragrances would rise from the ground and hover at a certain point for a while, then the rain would dash them back down, but I paid them little heed: I was looking up at the tree, where the trembling fog and sound of feathers were no longer in evidence. Bathed in rain, the tree's leaves had turned dark green, its trunk black. The entire tree blurred as the rain picked up even more. I realized that my clothes were soaked. I had hardly started to dash for the door in the wall when the wind too began to blow harder. I shivered all over with cold; the door seemed a great distance off. I turned and ran in the opposite direction until I stood under the verandah, a long, narrow tin-roofed shelter attached to the back of the house. The water spilling from the roof of the shelter formed a curtain before me through which the driving rain looked like giant sheets of smoke, billowing and contracting in the gusts of wind.

The wind swept under the verandah roof, making the tin shudder. I felt the cold descend into my bones and my eyes cast about for some better protection from the downpour. Behind me were three doors whose top panels were set with round panes of blue glass. I had seen the house many times and knew that behind these doors was the living room with three fireplaces. As a child, whenever I went past these doors in the company of my family, I would insist that someone lift me up until I could look through the glass of the middle door, for the expanse of blue gave me a feeling of contentment. Now I recalled the last family that had lived in this house. They were six or seven people who mostly sat in silence with their heads bowed. The women would get up to do some work, then return to their places and sit with their heads down; the men would return from work, go quietly to their rooms, reemerge after changing clothes and sit with their heads down; a girl would ask another girl something, the other would answer, then both would fall silent and lower their heads. All of them seemed to be wrapped in a fog. In those days I had to go to the house frequently. Each time I would return irritated and angry, parody their way of sitting and ask not to be sent to the house again. My folks would laugh at this, and two or three days later blithely send me back on some other errand. Then one day, the family left the house without informing anyone. The house had remained empty ever since. The room with the fireplaces had not been opened since that time,

and now I was standing outside it getting soaked in the downpour. The cold was unbearable, and I started shoving at each of the doors in turn. I soon realized that if the doors had not been barred from the inside, the wind, which was growing steadily fiercer, would have flung them open a long time ago. The wind intensified and the water falling from the verandah roof sloshed in on me. Garbage that had collected on the tin roof slid off along with the water. I noticed several dark black stains on my clothes. Leaving the verandah, I dashed back under the tree. I thought again of the bird and, though I knew it was hopeless, tried to spot it among the branches, but water filled my eyes. At that instant the tree gave out a creak which I took to be ominous and with a calculated leap I sprang out of the way and ran to the verandah again.

That's all I remember about that day.

## 4

That year it rained and rained, and the entire compound turned into a marsh. The ground inside the walls didn't dry out for days and days, and disappeared under a carpet of weeds and grass. The front door of my house was closed off and everyone came and went through the back door, which opened onto the street. During this period I spent most of my free time inside my room. In view of my fondness for constructing things, I had been given new tools of high quality, and with their aid the processes of chiseling wood, cutting everything from hard tin to thick glass, snipping and shaping heavy iron wire, and joining materials together had become much easier for me. I built tiny houses and various kinds of conveyances. In my earlier endeavors, the things I had made would seem pale and ordinary after a few days, and I would toss them away or leave them lying about, but some of the things I made during these rains I liked much better when I looked at them later, and when they were set up on the mantelpiece I even wondered when and how I had made them.

At one point the main door of the house was opened so the compound could be weeded of the plants that had sprung up with the rains; I noticed that the waters had carved away a quarter of a small hillock to the left of the door, and a whitish, sticky mud had flowed off, spreading in a puddle for some distance. When I came near to have a look at the diminished mound, the mud clung to my feet, and as I tried to walk on it lightly, one foot slipped so swiftly that if the other one hadn't been firmly stuck in the clay I would have had a nasty fall. An elderly laborer who was helping to clear the field happened to be watching. He advised me to

walk carefully away and told me that this was a rare kind of soil from which delicate objects could be fashioned. He said that the soil had been brought from some other part of the country and that an old man who used to live nearby in this very compound a long time ago had used it to make sculptures of small birds. As he mentioned the artisan, the old laborer pointed to the back door of the other house, near which a crumbling wall could be seen.

Then and there I became fascinated with the idea of working in clay, and at my request the laborer dug some dry soil from inside the mound and deposited a little pile of it inside the door. He explained to me the method of wetting and preparing the clay; I set to work at once, and he turned back to his labors. I took a bit of mud, pressed it between my palms and observed the result. There were no stones or sand in the clay, and the finest lines of my palm were visible on its surface. Suddenly, I felt the faintest whiff of *kafoor* leap up like a flame and vanish. I breathed in, bringing my palm up to my nostrils, but there was nothing but the cool smell of ordinary earth. I took another deep breath, then became aware of the silence extending in every direction, which the sound of grinding on the stone slab inside the house enhanced rather than subdued. I scooped up a little mud in my hands and returned to my room.

Now I branched out into making things of clay, which did not require any tools. There was always a batch of well-kneaded sticky clay in my room. I could not make animals and birds, but I could easily fashion little beads for jewelry and oddly-shaped pots. By the time the dry season arrived I had made numerous small objects, and when the sun grew stronger I began drying them, then baking them with fire and painting them. I burnt my hands many times in the process, but worked on undeterred because the pain from the burns would vanish with the application of *kafoor* balm. However, as the fires I lit sometimes damaged various household items as well, at length I was prohibited from using fire inside the house, and I arranged to bake my wares outside in a corner of the compound. The main door, which by now had been closed permanently, was reopened for my use alone. The fierce rains had carved deep channels into the tender earth, making access to the main door difficult for vehicles, and in the dark even for people; for this reason, and because the back door opened onto the street, the latter had come to be used as the principal entrance instead. Thus the field remained largely silent and empty and I could go about my work undisturbed.

One day, as I was dusting the ash off my baked pots I thought I heard a sound and turned to see what it was. Two men I had never seen

before were coming across the field, picking their way through the gullies. They reached the main door and halted. They did not knock. They appeared to be unable to decide whether to go up to the house or not. After observing them for a while, I began to clink my pots together, which was my way of determining whether they were fully baked. When they heard the sound, they noticed me and slowly drew near. They looked at my pots, I at them. They differed in height, complexion and facial features, but there was a strange resemblance which convinced me that the two were brothers. One of them pointed at the main door and asked me, "Is this the house that's empty?"

"No, sir. That one is," I said, pointing at the other house. "It has a door on the street side. The one you see is the door to the backyard."

Just then I noticed that new door panels had been put in to replace the old loose ones, and the door appeared to be firmly closed from the inside.

"This house ..." He gestured again at my door. "Is this where you live?"

I nodded.

"Did you make these?" he asked, looking at my pots.

I nodded again.

"Very pretty toys."

"They're not toys."

"No?" he smiled. "What are they?"

"Pots."

"They're very beautiful pots. What else do you make?"

I reeled off all the items.

"But none of them are toys?"

"No, sir."

"You seem to be a true craftsman. What do you do with the things you make?"

"They're for decorations," I said. "And I give them away."

"Are you going to give us something?"

"Any of these you like, you're welcome to have," I replied. "But I haven't painted them yet."

"Well then, later," said the man, and took another look around the field.

"Are you going to move into that house?" I asked.

"We two are always traveling," he replied, "but our families will be moving in."

"Are there any boys my age?"

He laughed: “No, sir. Just two or three women and the rest girls, all girls.” He laughed again: “And all older than you—but,” he added, pointing to the pots, “Mah Rukh Sultan is also very fond of this sort of thing.”

He glanced around the area once more, then said:

“All right, we’ll have a look at our new house now.”

As they turned away I raised my hand in *salaam*, ashamed that I had not thought to show them this respect when they first entered.

When they had left and I had returned to my work, I realized that only one of the men had conversed with me. At that moment I heard another sound and turned around. The fellow who had said nothing was standing near me. Without meeting my eyes, he asked:

“Which doctor do you consult with?”

I gave him the name of our doctor.

“Does he live far from here?”

“No, he’s nearby,” I told him, and asked, “Is someone in your family ill?”

“No.” He said something more, but I didn’t understand it. Then he walked silently away.

When I told my family members that some new people were arriving in that house, I found that they already knew about it, and learned that the repair of the house had been in progress for several days and was nearly finished. However, I was plied with questions about the men who had spoken with me. Of course, I could tell them no more than what had been said in the conversation. My family knew very little, only that the two were indeed brothers and that they came from another country, having left their home in childhood. I remarked that they didn’t look like foreigners, then retired to my room.

I arranged the things placed on the mantel with great care, changing their placement and order several times. Satisfied, I stepped back for a look. The most outstanding piece was still the *kafoori* sparrow. Days later, I found myself staring at it for a long time. It looked alive. I had the repeated impression that it was lifting off the branch and coming back down. I still thought it must have been constructed fairly easily and wondered anew why I was unable to reproduce it. I also wondered why I hadn’t thought of a good human name for it yet. My musings transformed into a light regret.

If it weren’t for the fact that everyone called it the *kafoori* sparrow now, I thought sadly, I would have named it Mah Rukh Sultan.

I saw Mah Rukh Sultan that very week. That day I had been tidying my room since morning, putting in order all the objects I had left lying about. The articles I had made were all stacked on my bed and the table that stood against the opposite wall. My tools were all over the floor and I was yanking more stuff out from under the bed when I realized that a crowd of guests had come into the living room. Leaning back from the bed a little, I peeped through the thin film of the curtain hanging over the half-open door. The living room was filled with masses of girls, all of them older than I. I looked at their colorful dresses with interest, then set back to work, but voices filtered in from the larger room. An older woman with a harsh voice was prattling on at a great clip, as though afraid of forgetting her next sentence, recounting the difficulties of traveling with great quantities of luggage, describing the floor plan of the house she had left behind, ticking off the advantages and disadvantages of her present abode. The women of my house showed sympathy but now and then one of her own girls would point out some exaggeration in the old lady's account and start to giggle. Then the old lady introduced the girls by name: Mah Rukh Sultan, Seem Tan Sultan, Dil Afza Sultan, Zar Taj Sultan, Pari Paikar Sultan and so on. My kinswomen remarked on the lovely names and the girls giggled and giggled; then their laughter changed to sounds of wonderment and shrieks of joy. I guessed from their voices that they were standing by the *kafoori* sparrow. Its creator was mentioned and the voices grew momentarily subdued, then the cries of wonder and excitement rose once more. Now the objects displayed on the mantel were named one by one. At first, this made me feel good, but the thought that I might be called in and introduced to the crowd unsettled me. I rose slowly to close the half-opened door leading to the larger room, but realized I would surely be seen behind the curtain as I did so. I hesitated, uncertain what to do, then noticed on the floor a twisted piece of sturdy wire and reached down for it. At that moment a voice came from the area of the fireplace:

“Mah Rukh Sultan! Do you see that? It looks like it's alive.”

I pressed the crooked wire across my knees to straighten it, and had just lifted it to poke the door shut when a sudden silence descended on the living room. It was as though the room were empty. Listening attentively, I began to hear the rustling of dresses and the sound of whispering,



but I couldn't make out what was being said. Barely had I extended the wire toward the door when the double-doors were flung open wide and a woman relative of mine walked into the room. She took in the mess in a glance, then pointed to all the things piled on my bed and said, "Get this stuff off here, and hurry—then out you go!"

I had barely opened my mouth to protest when she silenced me with a wave of her hand. "Mah Rukh Sultan isn't feeling well," she said. "She needs to lie down."

My relative began moving things off the bed herself and piling them onto the table. I was obliged to lend a hand. She launched into a lecture on the benefits of good housekeeping as she removed the objects. One leg of the bed was shorter than the others, and kept striking the floor with a clunk. I was searching for a piece of wood to put under it when I heard the voice of another woman relative at the door: "Right here," she was saying, holding the curtain aside. "Bring her in."

I saw a cluster of women and girls at the door, but only one girl and an older woman came in. I couldn't tell who was supporting whom. The girl, however, kept her eyes lowered while the older woman craned her neck to examine everything in the room. With her help the girl sat down on the bed, and the short leg hit the floor. The girl's head tilted back a little, but her eyes remained downcast. The old woman peered round the room again, her eyes lighting briefly on me. I was standing with my hand resting on the table. My relative tapped me lightly on the shoulder and asked me to leave, and I went out the room's other door, which opened into a small yard enclosed by a low wall, beyond which lay the field. It was easy enough to get into the field from here, and I wandered around it for a while.

I hadn't been able to get a good look at Mah Rukh Sultan. I recalled only that she had one end of her white *dupatta*-scarf draped over her head and that the other hung down to her feet, one of its corners wrapped around her hand. There was something else I couldn't quite recall, but as I walked by the mound of oily earth it came back to me that I had felt a very light caress of *kafoor* when she had walked past me.

After a while I got bored wandering in the field and returned to the yard. I stood near the door of my room and strained my ears. There was no sound from inside. The door was not fully closed, and I pushed it open an inch farther. I saw at once that the bed was empty, then heard the sound of conversation in the living room, so I opened the door the whole way and walked into the bedroom.

Mah Rukh Sultan was standing there with one hand on the table. She was still holding one end of her *dupatta*. A clay necklace I had made but not yet painted was trembling gently in her other hand. Hearing me, she turned in my direction and with a motion of her head gestured for me to come near.

“Did you make this?” she asked, holding the necklace up to her face. “It’s very beautiful.”

I just stood there, embarrassed.

“Very lovely,” she repeated, then asked, “Is this sort of clay found around here?”

“Oh no,” I said. “Someone brought it here from far away and left it in the yard.”

“Who was that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It was a long time ago.”

“He doesn’t bring it anymore?”

“I guess not,” I said, and repeated, “it was a long time ago.”

She continued to look at the necklace in silence. Its large round beads and flowers suddenly seemed dull, and I said, “I still have to paint it.”

“It looks better the way it is,” said Mah Rukh Sultan.

One by one, she lifted up the other things for a look: pots, vehicles, houses. I was annoyed at my woman relative who, while counseling me to be tidy, had just piled everything into a heap on the table. The thought never entered my mind that this disorder was due to Mah Rukh Sultan, but I did notice that Mah Rukh Sultan, after inspecting the items, was putting them down on the table in a new arrangement that was even nicer than the way I set things out on the mantel. She picked up a little car, looked at its wheels, ran it across the table and then said:

“If you had a mind to, you could also make very fine toys.”

I tried to say something, but nothing came out; I opened my mouth again, again hesitated, then said softly, “These *are* toys.”

Now Mah Rukh Sultan smiled for the first time, looking perfectly healthy, but she just went on picking up objects from the table and putting them down again, saying nothing. She picked up a wooden carving of an old-fashioned house, inspected the cut of its arch at length, then said, “Don’t you cut your hands doing this?”

“Sometimes,” I said, and looked down at the marks on my hands. Mah Rukh Sultan looked at her own hands, but I didn’t notice any marks there.

The voices from the big room grew louder for a moment. I realized that Mah Rukh Sultan must have been standing there for quite some

time. At the same moment, she picked up a little square clock from the table and said, "This one's real."

"No, it's just ..."

"It's late," she said, peering at the hands of the clock, then turned toward the door and said, "They must be worried."

"How are you feeling now?" I asked, suddenly aware that I should have enquired much sooner.

"You've been put to a lot of trouble on my account." She said this as though delivering a message. I asked again:

"Are you feeling better now?"

Lifting her eyes from the clock, she glanced at the door. I followed her gaze and once again felt the light embrace of *kafoor*. Mah Rukh Sultan was saying, "You must come visit us."

And I noticed that she was unwrapping the folds of her *dupatta* from her fist. I caught a glimpse of what looked like a little pot, even before all the folds had been unwound. I felt I should look away and did so. In a few seconds she said, "I brought this for you."

I looked. It was a short, square jar of white china. Then, as she held out the jar to me, I noticed light marks on Mah Rukh Sultan's hand. I took the jar from her and studied it closely. It wasn't as small as I had thought. I wondered how she had been able to hide it in her hand for so long.

"This is very nice," I said. "Did you make it?"

"I made it when I was your age."

I was about to ask her how one made such a thing when she noticed something on the table, picked it up and said, "This looks like the lid of a bottle."

I looked at the lid, then the table, then the floor. The bottle of *kafoor* balm lay open, tipped over on the floor near one of the table legs. A little of the ointment had spilled out onto the ground. I picked up the bottle and held it out to Mah Rukh Sultan without thinking, but Mah Rukh Sultan was handing the lid to me. Taking the lid, I screwed it onto the bottle.

"The cold balm," I told her.

She smiled again and said, "You must cut your hands a lot." Then she said gravely, "Do come to our house, won't you?"

She stepped soundlessly toward the double door, opened one side and went out. The voices in the big room paused momentarily, then came cries of happiness, audible kisses and the sound of Mah Rukh Sultan's name.

The family did not live in that house for long, and I never grew close to any of them but Mah Rukh Sultan, though I had more contact with her sisters. I could never get the count of the sisters straight, nor their order of seniority. They all wore colorful clothes, talked loudly and laughed boisterously, and their faces turned red with the slightest hint of mirth. When expressing wonder they would shriek and when very happy would cry. There were one or two women like this in my family as well, and whenever they visited, our house seemed to be bursting with their presence. But I was terrified of running into Mah Rukh Sultan's sisters and did my best to avoid them. Even Mah Rukh Sultan seemed to be lost among them, and sometimes when she escaped from the thicket of girls to talk to me, I was unable to hear her voice clearly for some time.

I visited them for the first time five or six days after they had come to our house. I was delivering an invitation to a religious ceremony at our home. An old woman, whether servant or family member I could not tell, ushered me into the room with the three fireplaces, where the harsh-voiced woman was seated, putting tiny bottles inside a black box. After promising to come to the ceremony, she began interrogating me about my family members, close and distant, then volunteering information about herself, speaking faster and faster. Soon I realized she was actually talking to herself, unaware of my presence, and I allowed my eyes to wander. The three doors with the blue panes were open and the backyard could be seen almost in its entirety, but the corner with the well and the tree was beyond my sight line. The ground had been smoothed level and cleared of twigs and rubbish. Opposite the verandah, in the distance, I could see the exterior wall with the double doors that opened to the field. Both doors were open, and across the field I could see the closed main door of my own house. Intense sunlight flooded the compound. Two or three days earlier I had made some more clay jewelry pieces, and today, as I had been about to put them in the sun to dry, I'd been sent to the old lady. I had come the long way around, via the street leading from the back door of my house to the front door of theirs, and was to return by the same route. Reflecting on this while looking straight across at my closed main door, my house seemed at once too close and too far.

The old woman's voice, which I had disliked on first hearing, seemed even more repugnant now. She was recounting the difficulties she had

faced in giving birth to her children, raising and training them, and in the telling mentioned matters which were not spoken about to boys of my age in our family. Here and there she would touch on other matters, and I learned that one of the two brothers who had rented the house traded in perfumes and the other in chandeliers. At this she gestured broadly upward and I saw three large chandeliers suspended from the hook in the ceiling. Their triangular glass lustres glinted from countless angles. On the center chandelier, cut-glass balls dangled from the ends of chains, and even the links of the chains were made of glass. The balls swayed gently, shattering the light into myriad colors.

All at once the sound of many footsteps was heard on the stairs. A large group of girls spilled down them, shouting and laughing, and a darkness of many colors filled the room. They all gathered in front of the center fireplace, talking among themselves, and I asked the old lady's permission to leave, but suddenly the cluster of girls came toward me and I found myself engulfed by them. They all began lauding the things I made, mentioning specific items. They peppered me with questions, too, as they prattled on, but I was given little opportunity to answer, which I found a mercy. One of the things they did insist on knowing, however, was why I gave away the things I made. Before I could finish telling them, they started requesting the things they wanted; two or three sisters would ask for the same thing, then laughingly shriek and paw at one another. The chandeliers in the room seemed to be tinkling with their voices. I felt dizzy on and off, and seemed to be experiencing the room full of melodious voices in a dream.

My thoughts strayed to the people who had lived here before. Today was the first time I had come into this room since they had left. For an instant, all of them appeared, sitting at their places with their heads bowed. My head spun again, then colors rose before my eyes and the band of girls was visible to me again. They were still asking for various things I had made. Finally the old woman scolded them for bothering me and they all dispersed amid more giggling. The old woman told me to ignore the girls' requests, but I promised to bring what they had asked for the following day. The dreamlike sensation had not abated; maybe that was why I hadn't been able to sense whether Mah Rukh Sultan was among the band of girls, and had failed to notice that Mah Rukh Sultan's sisters had requested things that were still lying on my table and had never been displayed on the mantel. Among them was the unpainted necklace.

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On my return home, I learned that everything the old woman had said to me she had already told my folks at their first meeting, that and even more, and not once but many times over, so rather than reporting to them I was informed of what they knew: that all the girls were the issue of one of the brothers, but that the other one had adopted Mah Rukh Sultan. Just then I recalled that Mah Rukh Sultan had invited me to visit and I had returned without seeing her. I decided then and there that I would bring my finest piece for her. I examined the objects on the mantel, then those on the table in my room, put the things that had been requested in a basket and then scrutinized the remainder of the collection. I noticed one or two defects of some sort in each of them; my mind grew muddled and I stood motionless before the fireplace for a long time. My eyes fixed on the *kafoori* sparrow; I regretted not having given it a good name. Then I thought of Mah Rukh Sultan standing at the table in my room and recalled the square clock which she had taken for real. I headed toward my room, but midway there remembered that I had given the clock to one of my relatives two days before. He was very fond of me and always brought some new tool for me when he came to visit. I had given him the clock without his asking, had even insisted that he take it when he refused, but now I was as angry at him as if he had snatched it away from me. I soon convinced myself that the clock was the best thing I had ever crafted, though the process of making it, while time-consuming, was not at all difficult. I decided I would fashion another one, and locked myself in my room.

I worked on it straight through until midnight and the following day until noon. There were cuts all over my hands and the bottle of *kafoor* balm was almost empty by now, but I did not stop. When it was finished I placed it on the table to view it, then moved it to the mantel to see how it looked there. This one was not as finely made as the original because the pain had stiffened my hands, but it was better than all my other pieces. I wrapped it in clean paper and put it in the basket underneath everything else.

I arrived at the house in the afternoon. The old lady was not at home. Another woman, of middle age, brought me to the room with the fireplaces, and I took the articles out of the basket and set them on the mantel in no particular order. When the woman came over to have a look, I said, "They asked me for these."

"Who did?"

I felt uncomfortable repeating all the names, so I said, "All of them."

“Very well—I’ll call them,” she said, and was gone.

I was mentally rearranging the things on the mantel when Mah Rukh Sultan’s sisters burst into the room en masse and made a beeline for the fireplace; holding the clock in my hand, I stood wordlessly in the midst of the chaotic hum of girlish exclamations and squabbings over the articles. At last they calmed down, turned to me and spoke in seriousness, and I became aware again that they were all older than I was. Distressed, I was wondering how I might get to see Mah Rukh Sultan. My problem was solved when one of the sisters asked me: “Didn’t you bring anything for Mah Rukh Sultan?”

“Where is she?” I enquired.

Another sister, opening the blue-paned door in the center, said, “She’s in here. Come this way.”

That is how, after so much time had gone by, I found myself on the tin-roofed verandah of this house again. Mah Rukh Sultan was sitting on a *takht* that had been placed against the wall. Before her was a black box similar to the one I had seen the old lady filling with vials. Mah Rukh Sultan was taking the vials out of the box and arranging them on the *takht*. With a soft smile she beckoned me to sit down, and without preamble I handed her the clock wrapped in its paper. She looked at me, then unwrapped the paper, lifted out the clock and with her eyes fixed on its hands, remarked:

“How beautifully made!”

I assumed she thought it was the same one she had seen in my room that day, but she asked, “Did you make this just today?”

“Yesterday and today,” I said, a little disappointed. “I was in a hurry; it’s not very polished.”

“No,” Mah Rukh Sultan said as she turned it to different angles, and added, “This one is much nicer. The other one looked real.”

She removed a few of the vials in front of the box and set the clock down in their place. The delicate gleam of the clock’s colors became more pronounced against the black background of the box, and even I began to like it better than the first one. Mah Rukh Sultan picked it up again, holding it at arm’s length and bringing it up to her face a few times, then put it down and said suddenly, “You like *kafoor* very much.”

I didn’t understand right away.

“*Kafoor*?” I asked.

“You call that sculpture the *kafoori* sparrow, too.”

“That ... that’s because it’s white,” I said. “But I don’t like that name, really.”

“A lot of people are scared of it.”

“Of the *kafoori* sparrow?” I asked, astonished.

“Of *kafoor*,” said Mah Rukh Sultan. “It makes people think of death.”

“*Kafoor*?” I repeated. “But *kafoor* is a cure for many pains.”

“Death too is a cure for many pains.”

There was a hint of teasing in her voice, so I glanced up at her with a laugh, but she wasn't smiling. She appeared to be lost in thought. With the nail of her middle finger she was lightly tapping the black box behind the toy clock with a faint, regular click, so that the clock seemed to be ticking. Beneath this sound I could hear Mah Rukh Sultan's sisters talking and laughing in different parts of the house. One of the voices came nearer, reaching the door. A sister came out onto the verandah, leaned over Mah Rukh Sultan, kissed her on the forehead and went back in. Mah Rukh Sultan's eyes followed her for a moment, then she began to line up the little bottles again. She picked up the clock, placed it alongside the box, then asked me, “Who taught you all this?”

“Nobody.”

“No one at all?”

I told her that I had always been fond of making things, even as a small child, and had gradually accumulated a collection of tools; I described the sorts of things I had made at first and those made in later years. During this account, one sister or another would come out from time to time, give her a kiss and return, and when one of them leaned over and whispered something in her ear, I suddenly became aware that I had been talking uninterruptedly for some time and stood up to leave, but Mah Rukh Sultan stopped me:

“Stay awhile longer,” she said, and began to put the bottles back in the box. “Talking with you takes me back to my childhood.”

Her words pleased me, but I didn't know what to say next, so I asked, “What's in the bottles?”

“Perfumes,” said Mah Rukh Sultan, and placed the black box in front of me.

At that moment I could sense all the fragrances under the verandah as they rose and sank, over and over. One fragrance would arise, then another would soar above it, pressing it down; at times many fragrances would merge into one, scatter, then unite. The scents brought to mind colors and voices, and the colors and voices brought to mind Mah Rukh Sultan's sisters, perhaps now gathered around the fireplace again. When I lifted the box it seemed to be tinkling with the scents inside. I asked,



“What are these perfumes made of?”

Scarcely had Mah Rukh Sultan begun to list the various flowers than I sensed a pale, cold, silent, white smell caress all the other fragrances and flit away, then leap back, touch them all once more, and creep away again. Now I asked, “Is one of them *kafoor* perfume?”

Mah Rukh Sultan stopped and looked at me closely, and then she smiled with an effort.

“You can’t make perfume of *kafoor*,” she said. She took the box from me, touched each bottle in turn and named the kind of perfume it contained. Then she closed the lid of the box.

“The scent of *kafoor* is not among them,” she said at last in answer to my question. Once again she made an effort to smile, placed her hand on the clock and said, “The smell of *kafoor* is in this.”

“In the clock?” I asked in wonder, and picked up the little object.

“There was the same smell in your room that day.”

“That was the *kafoor* balm,” I replied, and now recalled the many times, while working on this clock, that I had cut my hands, smeared ointment on my wounds and kept at my task. Now I felt the creakiness in my fingers and wondered whether I should mention any of this to Mah Rukh Sultan, but before I could decide she asked me:

“Do you really cut your hands a lot?”

Just then another of her sisters came out to hover over her. Mah Rukh Sultan stood up.

“Come here a moment,” she said, motioning toward the door with the blue glass. I followed her back to the room with the fireplaces, where refreshments had been set out in lavish arrays, their aromas filling the room. Every one of Mah Rukh Sultan’s sisters insisted on feeding me a little of every single dish. Their attentions began to make me feel uncomfortable, the more so since they had gone to all this extravagance on my account, and Mah Rukh Sultan was sitting next to me and eating nothing.

All I had managed to learn about Mah Rukh Sultan’s illness was that at certain times she would suddenly feel as though she were suffocating, and didn’t want anyone near her then; she’d remain alone for a while and the attack would abate on its own. Sometimes I would go to visit, bringing her something I had crafted, only to learn that Mah Rukh Sultan wasn’t

feeling well and was resting in her room. I would leave the new item on the mantel of one of the fireplaces and go home after chatting briefly with her sisters. I'd venture there again two or three days later and there would be Mah Rukh Sultan, sometimes surrounded by her sisters, sometimes sitting on the takht under the verandah. She always opened the conversation with the question: "What are you making these days?"

Once I got started on the topic I gave her no chance to speak; she only put in a few querying words here and there that let me know she was listening.

One day I made two houses so tiny I could hold them both in one hand. I was sure Mah Rukh Sultan would like them. And I was sure I'd be able to see her. I knew that she had had one of her spells just the day before. But on arriving I learned that she still hadn't recovered and was in her room resting. I conversed with her sisters for a while, the little houses concealed in my hand, and at last got up to leave. Just then, the door to her room opened slowly, and Mah Rukh Sultan stood at the threshold. Her sisters leapt to greet her, shrieking with joy and calling her name, kissing and hugging her in turn. They wept, too, in their displays of affection. Mah Rukh Sultan patted each sister's cheeks with both hands and then moved them gently aside. In so doing her eyes fell on me, and she came over and asked, "Did you just arrive?"

I stood there in silence.

"Were you about to go back?" she asked again after a pause.

Again, I remained silent. In the meantime her sisters had disappeared somewhere; even the sound of their chattering had died away. I recalled the clamor of a few moments earlier and asked, "How are you feeling now?"

Her eyes fell on my hand, and instead of answering she asked, "What have you made?"

Then I remembered the little houses. Stretching out my hand, I opened my fist to display them to her on my palm.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed.

"I made them for you."

Mah Rukh Sultan stared in marvel at the houses on my palm, then said, "I have something for you, too."

With slow steps, she walked back to her room. Reaching the door, she turned to me and said, "Please come in."

When I entered the room, Mah Rukh Sultan was already seated in the center of the *masehri*. She motioned me to sit on a cushioned chair near the bed. The room was sparsely furnished and had little decoration,

but the finely woven curtains hanging before the alcoves built into the wall were quite beautiful, and at first glance looked like white carpets. One door opened to the large room with the fireplaces, and another led to the verandah. I could see some of the yard through the second door, but couldn't figure out which part I was looking at. I felt mildly confused as I turned this over in my mind, trying to orient myself by my recollection of the yard, so I shifted my attention back to Mah Rukh Sultan. She was lost in thought, her head bowed. After a while she raised her head, but her eyes were still downcast. I suspected that she had fallen asleep while sitting upright, but this was disproven when in the same absorbed state she got up from the *masehri*, walked to the almirah in the wall and returned with something in her hands. At first it looked like a handful of irregular pieces of clear glass. Sitting again on the canopied bed, she set the pieces down before her, stared at them for a second as though searching for something, then grasped a round piece between thumb and forefinger and lifted her hand. I heard the light clink of little bottles and saw a tiny glass chandelier dangling from Mah Rukh Sultan's fingers, its faint reflections trembling on her face. Then she spoke: "Do you like things made of glass?"

"It's beautiful," I said. "Did you make it?"

"No, I don't know who made it," she said. "I've only altered it."

As she spun the chandelier slowly, holding it out toward me, I noticed that hanging from each of its dangling pieces was a delicate vial. All the vials were spinning in a circle as the chandelier rotated, thus I was unable to count them, but had the impression that there were at least ten. All were made of clear glass but were filled with different colored liquids.

"Is there perfume in these bottles?" I asked.

"One is empty," Mah Rukh Sultan answered; then she smiled with some effort and went on: "You may fill it with whatever scent you like."

She handed me the chandelier and I examined it in the light coming through the open door. It was no bigger than the span between the tips of my pinky and thumb. Behind its transparent pendants I could see a portion of the yard. As my eyes played over the wall with loose bricks, I realized with a jolt that this was where the tree and well had been. The well had been filled in with earth and the site leveled over; a faint bump in the ground was all that remained of the tree. Still holding the chandelier, I stepped through the doorway onto the verandah, then out into the yard. It looked to me like a different yard entirely, and I returned to Mah Rukh Sultan's room. She must have gotten up again, I thought, for a colorful cardboard box had appeared on the cushioned chair.

“You can put it in here,” she said, indicating the box, then fell silent.

Once again, I suspected that she had fallen asleep sitting up. I put the chandelier in the box and stood by the chair in silence for a long time, but she didn’t invite me to sit down. At last I asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Not well,” she answered faintly.

“You should call for someone.”

“No,” she said, more faintly still. Her head fell back a little and her eyes nearly closed. I hesitated, and finally tiptoed out to the large room.

There stood the old lady, facing one of the three fireplaces. At the sound of my footsteps she turned, came over to me and enquired after my family members, but her eyes were riveted on my hands. At last, pointing to the box, she asked, “What’s in there?”

I handed her the box. Lifting the lid, she pulled out the chandelier a little way, and on recognizing it said, “Mah Rukh Sultan gave you this?”

I said nothing. She pulled the chandelier a little farther out, looked at it carefully, then replaced it in the box and closed the lid.

“She’s had this since she was a child,” she said in a tone of mingled sadness and reproach. “She would never let anyone touch it.”

Then she turned back to the fireplace and set to dusting again as though she were alone in the room. My ears felt her tone as an assault. The brightly colored box was suddenly a heavy burden in my hands, and I wasn’t sure what I should do. At last, I quietly placed the box on the mantel directly behind her and went out.

For the next several days, I spent as much time as I could at the houses of other relatives. I would return home only to sleep at night and leave as soon as I got up in the morning. The little chandelier twirled before my eyes, and everything I saw resembled some part or aspect of it; at length I decided to make a similar chandelier, and though I knew I had no way to mold glass, I went ahead and bought a number of vials of ordinary scents from the bazaar.

On the third or fourth day, as I was leaving the house, it struck me that I could construct the same chandelier in clay, and as this project seemed much easier, I returned to my room to attempt it. I started by trying to sketch the chandelier from memory, but I hadn’t really looked at it for very long. Again and again I sketched it in my mind, but each time it appeared in my imagination suspended from Mah Rukh Sultan’s hands, spinning slowly and steadily so that none of its parts could be firmly envisioned. I wasted sheet after sheet of paper, my mind in a muddle, and at

last I got up and went into the living room. Nearly all my family members had gathered there. Two or three elderly women chided me for staying away from the house day after day. Then one of them ordered, "Now go and enquire after Mah Rukh Sultan."

"What's happened to her?"

"She's taken a turn for the worse."

Then everyone began arguing about Mah Rukh Sultan's illness, and the oldest woman in my family declared, "The first day she set foot in this house I said there wasn't much left in her."

She began asking others to bear witness to this claim. I wondered what in the world they thought they were talking about, and was ready to dispute this prediction against any and all of them, but they sent me on, repeating their admonishment not to stay out all day, and I went out of the house.

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The middle-aged woman escorted me to the large room with the fireplaces. There I found the two men I had spoken with that day by my house; they didn't acknowledge my presence, but only sat there with their heads bowed. The old lady was sitting slightly apart from them. I went over to her; she raised her head, saw me, and before I could ask, said, "Things don't look good."

Then even she lowered her head. I stood rooted to the spot. After some time, she raised her head again, pointed to Mah Rukh Sultan's room and said to me, "Go in and see her."

Reluctantly, I entered the room. Mah Rukh Sultan was lying on the *masehri* with two of her sisters hovering over her. I leaned over her as well. Now and then her hand would lift up, then fall back on the bed. The marks on her hand were apparent even in the dim light. Again the hand rose up and dropped back down on the bed. I asked, "Is something wrong with her hand?"

"No," answered one of the sisters. "She's unconscious."

Just then Mah Rukh Sultan's hand rose a bit higher and halted in the air just under my nostrils. I held my breath, but soon, suffocating, inhaled deeply; as though drawn up with my breath, Mah Rukh Sultan's hand elevated until it touched my nostrils. My eyes half-closed, I could sense a sort of forsaken fragrance descending on the *masehri*. Again I held my breath, again felt suffocated and drew in a lungful of air. I experienced an immense forlornness. With another breath, I saw something in this forlornness. First, the *kafoori* sparrow, then the bird carcass, my hand

swarming with ants, the bird with the white string and the rain flapping like sheets of white smoke above the yard, Mah Rukh Sultan standing by the table in my room, Mah Rukh Sultan sitting on the verandah, the chandelier spinning in her fingers, the dangling vials, one of them empty. I opened my eyes fully now; the reflections of the chandelier seemed to be flitting across her face, and her hand rested on the bed.

I went out to the large room, my head bowed, and left the house without saying a word to anyone.

I was sent over again in the afternoon with the message that all my female family members were coming to the house, but I had scarcely reached the door when I heard voices wailing the name of Mah Rukh Sultan, and turned back. □

—*Translated by Moazzam Sheikh and Elizabeth Bell*