

NAIYER MASUD

## Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire

*Ba kujā sar niham keh čūn zanjīr*

*Har dari ḥalqa-e darē digar-ast*

Hide—but where?

Each door I close opens another.

—Anonymous (found in a ghazal by Mīr Taqī Mīr)

Thou holdest mine eyes waking;

I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

I have considered the days of old,

the years of ancient times.

—Psalm 77

*“We kept on looking at each other in silence for the longest time. Our faces didn’t betray any kind of curiosity. His eyes had an intensity and brightness. Never for a moment throughout this time did they seem to me devoid of feelings. All the same, I couldn’t at all understand whether his eyes were expressing something or just observing. I did feel as though we were coming to some silent understanding between us. All of a sudden a terrible feeling of despair came over me. It was the first time I’d felt like this since I’d come to this house. Just then his nurse placed her hand on my arm and led me out of the room.*

*“Outside, as I spoke with his nurse, time after time I realized that my speech was a shortcoming and that the patient was traveling far ahead of me on a road which I knew nothing about.”*

**I** HAVE GIVEN UP TALKING, not looking. It isn’t easy to stop looking if one happens to possess a pair of eyes. Keeping quiet, even though one has a

tongue, is relatively easy. At times I do get an urge to close my eyes. But so far they are still open. This may be due to the presence of the person who is looking after me. She is my last link with that old house where I opened my eyes for the first time and learned to talk. When I lived in that house, she was just a cute little doll, only a year-and-a-half old. And so affectionate toward me. I would call for her as soon as I entered the house and then she would cling to me the whole time I was there.

Now she has no memory of those days. All she's been told is that I am the last representative of her family. She does not know much else about me. In spite of this, she is very fond of me. She thinks this is the very first time she has seen me. She does not remember that I used to call her my "Little Bride." Actually, I started calling her that because she would refer to me as her bridegroom whenever someone in the family asked her who I was. This amused everyone. They would all laugh and then just to tease her, someone would claim me as a "bridegroom." When she heard this she would have a regular little tantrum. Among those who teased her were several older relatives, both male and female. In those days, her small world was crowded with rivals. But even then, the ranks of her rivals did not include the person for whom she had the warmest feelings, not counting her mother or myself. And in return, this woman cared more deeply for the little girl than anyone else.

## I

She was at least two years older than me. Twelve years prior to the time I'm talking about, I had seen her at my older brother's wedding. She was the younger sister of my brother's wife. But due to a complicated pattern of kinship, she also happened to be my aunt.

At the time of my brother's marriage, she was a mature young woman and I was a mere boy—a shy, awkward stripling. She adopted toward me the attitude of someone much older than myself. Of course, we often chatted, shared jokes and teased each other. But despite all this informality, she maintained the air of an elder. However, I never detected any affectation in that attitude, which perhaps would have irritated me. She treated me not as though she were much older than I, but as though I were quite a bit younger than she. And I liked that.

There were times, however, when I got the distinct impression that I was, after all, just her young nephew. This happened when she compared her hometown with mine and insisted that hers was a much better place. I

would immediately leap to the defense of my town and argue with her endlessly in a rather childish manner. During those years, she visited us once in a while and stayed with us for long periods of time. And during this particular visit she had been with us for three or four days.

I came into the house and, as usual, I called out to my “Little Bride” as soon as I’d stepped into the courtyard. But the house was silent. No one seemed to be home. However, Aunt was there. She had just emerged from the bathroom after her bath and had sat down in a sunlit spot to dry her hair. I asked her where all the others were and she said they had all gone to a wedding somewhere. Not knowing what else to say, I asked her about my “Little Bride” even though I had a hunch that she might have gone to the wedding with the others. I went and sat next to Aunt and we started talking about this and that. Most of the time we talked about my “Little Bride” and chuckled over her antics. After a while her hair was dry and she stood up to tie it in a bun. In an effort to arrange her hair, she raised both arms with her hands at the back of her head. Her bare waist arched slightly backward, her bust rose and then fell back a little, causing her locks to fall away from her. I saw this in a fraction of a second but it had no particular effect on me. She continued to put up her hair in a chignon and we went on talking. Suddenly one of her earrings fell off and landed near her foot. I quickly bent down to retrieve it for her. As I knelt at her feet, my eyes fell upon the pale curve of her instep and I was reminded once again that she had just taken a bath. I picked up the earring and tried to put it back in her ear while I kept up a rapid patter of conversation. I could smell the musky odor which arose from her moist body. She continued to fiddle with her hair and I kept on trying to put her earring back in. But for some reason I couldn’t get it to stay, and her earlobe began to turn red. I must have jabbed her with the post of the earring. A little cry came from her throat and she chided me mildly. She then took the earring from me with a smile and quickly put it in by herself. Soon afterwards, she went up to her room and I went to mine.

A little later, I went upstairs looking for a book. On the way back, I glanced over toward Aunt’s room. She stood in front of the bamboo screen. Her hair hung loosely about her shoulders and her eyes looked as though she had just woken up. I went into her room and again we started talking about the same sort of trifles. She started to tie up her hair all over again and once again I saw what I had seen earlier. Seeing her waist bend backwards once again, I felt a bit uneasy. We talked about the wedding that my entire family had gone to attend and I told her that there was a great difference in height between the bride and bridegroom. Exaggerat-

ing rather wildly, I insisted that the bride barely came up to the waist of the bridegroom.

Aunt laughed at this and said, "Anyway, at least she's a little taller than your bride."

We started talking once again about my "Little Bride," whose absence made the house seem quite empty. I was about to introduce some other topic when Aunt stood up from the bed and came toward me.

"Let's see if you're taller than I am," she said with a smile.

Grinning we came and stood facing each other. She moved closer to me. Once again I became aware of the fragrance which arose from her body, a warm, moist odor which reminded me that she had just bathed. We drew still closer and her forehead almost touched my lips.

"You're much shorter than me," I told her.

"I am not," she retorted and stood up on her toes. Then she giggled: "How about now?"

I grabbed her waist with both hands and tried to push her downwards.

"You're cheating," I told her. And bending down, I grabbed both her ankles and tried to plant them back on the floor. When I got up again, she wasn't laughing anymore. I clasped her waist firmly with both hands once again.

"You're being unfair," I said to her as the grip of my hands tightened on her waist.

Her arms rose, moved toward my neck, but then stopped. I felt as though I were standing in a vast pool of silence which stretched all around us. My hold on her waist tightened still more.

"The door," she said in a faint whisper.

I pulled her close to the door without letting go of her waist. Then I released her slowly, bolted the door and turned toward her again. I remembered how she had always behaved like an older relative toward me and I felt angry at her for the first time, but just as suddenly the anger melted into an awareness of her tremendous physical appeal. I bent over and held her legs. I was still bent over with my grip around her legs progressively tightening when I felt her fingers twist in my hair. She pulled me up with a violent intensity and my head bumped her chest. Then, with her fingers still locked in my hair, she moved back toward the bed. When we got to its edge, I eased her onto it, helping her feet up with my hands. But she suddenly broke free and stood up. I looked at her.

She murmured: "The door that leads up the stairs ... it's open."

"But there's no one in the house."

“Someone will come.”

Silently we went down the stairs and bolted the door at the bottom. Then we came back up together, went into her room and bolted the door from the inside. Apart from the tremors running through our bodies, we seemed fairly calm, exactly the way we were when we talked to each other under normal circumstances. She paused near the bed, adjusted her hair once again, and taking off her earrings she put them next to the pillow. In a flash of recollection, I remembered all those stories I'd heard about love affairs that started after the lovers stood together and compared their heights. But I decided at once that these stories were all imaginary, wishful tales and the only true Reality was this experience I was having with this woman, who was a distant aunt—but an aunt who also happened to be the younger sister of my brother's wife. I picked her up gently and made her lie down on the bed, reflecting that just a short time earlier I had entered the house calling for my “Little Bride.” It is possible that the same thought may have crossed her mind. A light tremor ran through our bodies. I had just begun to lean toward her when she suddenly sat up straight. Fear flickered in her eyes.

“Someone is watching,” she said softly and pointed at the door. I turned my head to look and also got the impression that someone was peeking through the crack between the double doors. The person appeared to move away and then return to look again. This went on for a few minutes. Both of us continued to stare in silence. Finally, I got up and opened the door. The bamboo screen which hung in front was swaying back and forth gently. I pushed at it with my hands and then closed the door once again. The sunlight streaming in through the door crack created a pattern of shifting light and shade as the bamboo screen moved in the breeze. I turned back toward Aunt. A weak smile flickered around her lips but I could hear her heart throbbing loudly in her chest, and her hands and feet were cold as ice. I sat down in a chair next to her bed and began telling her tall tales of strange optical illusions. She told me a few similar stories and pretty soon we were chatting away the way we always did. Not one word was exchanged about anything which had transpired only a few minutes earlier. At length she said to me, “The others should be coming home soon.”

At that moment it occurred to me that the door leading up the stairs had been bolted from the inside. Just then we began to hear the voices of family members. I got up, opened wide the door of the room and went out. Aunt was right behind me. I unbolted the door that led up the stairs and then we came back to her room and continued to make small talk.

After a while, I heard a noise and saw that my “Little Bride” stood at the door. She really did look like a bride. Aunt uttered a joyful shout, grabbed the little girl, pulled her into her lap and started to kiss her over and over again with a passionate intensity. The little girl shrieked with laughter and struggled to escape from her embrace. Apparently, in the house where the wedding had taken place some over-enthusiastic girls had painted her up like a bride and decked her out with garlands. A few minutes later, her mother came up to the room along with some other children. By this time the little girl was sitting in my lap and I was asking her about the fancy food she’d eaten at the house where the wedding had been. She could only pronounce the names of a few dishes and kept repeating them over and over. Her mother tried to pick her up but she refused to budge from my lap.

“Oh, she is such a shameless bride,” Aunt said and everyone burst out laughing.

At some point we all came down onto the verandah where the other members of the family had gathered. Aunt kept showing my “Little Bride” how to act shy, and every now and then bursts of laughter rose up from the assembled throng.

## 2

By the time the sun had gone down, I’d made many attempts to catch her alone. But she sat imprisoned in a circle of women, listening to anecdotes about the wedding. During the night, I tried three times to open the door that led up the stairs but it appeared to be bolted from the other side. I knew that a couple of women—themselves never married and perpetual hangers-on in the household—also slept in her room, but even so I wanted to go upstairs. Next day, from morning till noon, I saw her sitting with the other ladies of the family. I never did like spending much time with women, so I uttered some casual remarks to her and did my best to stay away. By the late afternoon all my family members had retired to their rooms and most of the doors that opened onto the courtyard were now bolted from within. I went up the stairs and lifted the bamboo screen from Aunt’s door. She lay on the bed fast asleep. I looked at her for the longest time. I had a hunch that she was merely pretending to be asleep. She lay with her head tilted backwards on the pillow and her hands were clenched tightly into fists. She had removed her earrings and placed them next to her pillow. The scenes which had taken place in this

very room just the day before flashed through my mind, but I drew a complete blank when I tried to remember what had happened during the moments that followed. It seemed to me that I had just picked her up in my arms and placed her on the bed. I stepped inside the room and turned to close the door but noticed one of those extraneous women sitting with her back against the balcony, winding some woolen yarn into a ball. She gave me an enthusiastic greeting and the utterly superfluous bit of information that Aunt was sleeping. I pretended to be looking for a book and then, complaining about not being able to find it, I left the room. But while I was searching, I looked over at Aunt several times. She seemed to be fast asleep after all.

Late in the afternoon, I saw the extraneous woman come downstairs and once again I went up and peered into Aunt's room. She was standing in front of a mirror combing her hair with her back toward me, while another extraneous woman recited a tale of woe about the first time she was beaten by her husband. I'd heard this story many times before; in fact, it had been a source of entertainment in our house for quite some time. Aunt laughed and then, noticing me in the mirror, asked me to sit down. But I questioned her about the imaginary book which I had been searching for and went back downstairs.

I was away from the house for most of the evening. I had been sent to take care of some family matter, but I botched the whole business and returned home late at night. The doors of all the rooms were closed from within, including the one that led up the stairs. I went into my room and closed the door. For a while I tried to summon the image of Aunt, but I failed. I did manage to evoke her scent very briefly. As I slipped into sleep, I felt sure I would see her in my dreams. But the first phase of my sleep remained blank. Then toward midnight I dreamt that the extraneous women were dressed up as brides and were making obscene gestures at each other. Soon after that I woke up and only managed to get back to sleep toward dawn. At daybreak I woke up again from a dreamless sleep. My head felt foggy and confused. I decided to go and take a shower. In the bathroom, I got the feeling that Aunt had just been there, and I shook my head again and again to clear my senses. When I emerged from the bathroom I saw Aunt sitting in the sun drying her hair. One of my elders went up to her and began a lengthy discourse on the various ancient branches of our family. On the verandah, the same two extraneous women I had seen yesterday were quarreling over something, but the presence of the old gentleman forced them to keep their voices low. Three other women in the same category soon joined the fray and contributed

their half-witted views, to reconcile the two or perhaps add fuel to the fire. Aunt listened to the elderly relative very attentively and covered her head as a sign of respect. I left her talking to this gentleman and went upstairs. But I came to a dead stop outside Aunt's room. Another extraneous woman was standing outside the bamboo screen. She asked me if Aunt had taken her bath. I told the old hag that I wasn't responsible for bathing Aunt and went downstairs again. Up to now, I'd had no idea we had so many extraneous women crawling about our house. Their only practical use seemed to be to help out with domestic chores, whether exacting or easy. Downstairs, the elderly gentleman was still pacing in front of Aunt. He had dealt with the past history of the family and was starting on the present.

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Late in the afternoon, I was sent out once again. But the situation that I'd been trying to deal with since yesterday deteriorated even more and I returned without accomplishing anything. That night I woke up many times. It occurred to me that the customary visit of Aunt as our house guest was almost at an end and the hour of her return was drawing near. In the morning, I felt as though my head were full of fog once again and in spite of a cold shower I couldn't get rid of this heavy-headedness. I felt sure that if I found Aunt alone somewhere, I would surely kill her. I didn't much care how I'd do this either. I decided that I'd better stay away from her that day.

Much later, just as I emerged from my room, I saw her. She sat talking with some other women of the family and motioned with her hand for me to come over. The verandah was unusually quiet. The little girl slept in her mother's lap. Clearly she was ill. I took her up in my lap and questioned her mother about her condition. Then the old gentleman, one of my elders, came onto the verandah and the atmosphere became even more somber. He made an effort to moderate his loud voice and asked about the child. But the little girl woke up. She looked as though she had almost recovered. The old gentleman began to tease her about her bridegroom. From the way the child responded, it became clear to us that she had not realized she was in my lap. The old gentleman then queried her regarding my whereabouts. Her response made everyone laugh. Finally, I tickled her lightly. She realized who I was and she began to giggle in embarrassment. The elderly relative picked her up and took her away. She was quite fond of him also, and had woken up several times during the night calling for him.



As soon as the old gentleman left, the atmosphere of the room changed and peals of laughter rang out again and again. While they were all talking, Aunt and I began to argue about what the date was that day. As we debated back and forth, the others looked on with keen interest. Aunt simply couldn't be convinced. From where we sat, I could see the corner of a calendar that hung in a room next to the verandah. Long ago a relative had drawn it up for us. With it you could tell the date of any day in any year. But this took a long time and you had to do several lengthy calculations. Eager to prove our cases, we both got up to examine this calendar. Both of us entered the room together. But as soon as we were behind the door we clung to each other convulsively and almost sank to the floor. Then just as abruptly we got up and went out. The little girl's mother asked us if we had decided who was right, but just then there was some laughter, and then some more. Aunt was looking pale. Anyone coming in on us at that moment would undoubtedly have assumed that we had just emerged from the room after spending quite a long time together.

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That day I successfully finished the task I had mishandled twice before, and returned home even later than the previous night. Everybody was in bed, so I also went in and lay down. From the moment that Aunt had risen from the bed and come toward me to compare heights, to the time we had entered the room with the millennium calendar, I had not given much thought to how she might be feeling. I had not even considered that she might be totally unaffected by it all. All the same, I thought about killing her. All night long, I was assaulted in turn by remorse, the allure of her physical charms, and the longing to meet her alone again.

In the morning, when I came out of my room after a sleepless night, I was in the throes of remorse. So when an extraneous woman, the first one to rise, told me that Aunt's brother had arrived late at night with some bad news and that they had both gone away together, the only thought that came to my fogged brain was that I wished I'd been able to apologize to her.

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None of the elders in my family could believe it when I told them that I had grown tired of my sheltered life and that I wanted to be on my own. And when they expressed reluctance, I was quite unable to assuage their doubts and concerns. Nevertheless, I succeeded in making them give in to

my demands, mainly because they cared for me a great deal. Upon seeing all the elaborate arrangements they made for my journey, I realized how comfortable and secure I had been in that house and felt rather fed up with myself. A few days before my departure they gave me a small stone amulet inscribed with sacred names to wear around my neck. It was an heirloom which had been in our family for many generations. This increased my annoyance. Quietly I took the amulet off and put it back in the chest full of old clothes where it had always been kept.

My elders said good-bye to me in a subdued manner, and as I walked away from my home the voices I kept hearing the longest were those of all the extraneous women. They were praying for my safe return.

## 3

I faced great hardships as I struggled to make myself independent. And finally, it was the good name of the family elders that helped me along. Thus, without moving a finger, indeed without even being aware of it, they helped me to stand on my own two feet. The work that I had undertaken involved inspecting houses. Initially, I had the feeling that I would fail in this profession because back then, apart from my own house, all other houses looked to me like piles of inorganic nature or half-dead vegetation. Sometimes I felt a vague hostility toward them, sometimes they looked like cheerless toys to me, and sometimes I stared at them for a long time as though they were foolish children, trying to hide something from me. Perhaps, this is why, though I cannot seem to recall exactly when, houses began to assume a life of their own right before my eyes.

In the beginning, I had no interest in the humanity that existed in these houses, though by merely looking at one I could make an estimate of how old it was, how and when certain improvements had been made over the years as well as the speed with which Time passed inside these structures. I was sure that the speed of Time within these houses was not the same as it was on the outside. I also believed that the speed of Time could vary from one part of a house to the next. Therefore, when I calculated the rate of a home's deterioration and the years still left in the structure, the estimate usually bore no relationship with the outward appearance of the place. Still, none of my calculations ever proved to be right or wrong, because even the smallest estimate of the years left in the life of a house was always larger than the years remaining in mine.

One day, as I was standing in front of a house, something about its

closed front door gave me the impression that it had covered its face, either out of fear or to shield itself from something, or perhaps out of a sense of shame. I was unable to assess this house. Therefore, when I went in I examined every nook and cranny, every ceiling, wall and floor very carefully. I wasted the entire day there without coming to any conclusion and at length came home only to spend most of the night thinking about this place. I reconsidered my assessment strategy and tried to remember all the details. At some point, it finally occurred to me that there was one part of this house which aroused fear and another part where one felt that some unknown desire was about to be fulfilled.

The next day I found myself standing in front of another house. The front door was closed, but it seemed to me that the house was staring at me with fearless, wide-open eyes. A short while later I was wandering inside it. When I entered a certain part of this house, I became very apprehensive. Now I awaited the second sensation, and sure enough, in another part of the house, I got the feeling that some significant but unexpressed wish of mine was about to come true.

I was surprised at myself for having overlooked this fact until now. I returned to the houses I had seen many times and located these domains of fear and desire. No house, whether old or new, nor one among many of the same basic design, was without these domains. Looking for these domains of fear and desire became a vocation with me and, ultimately, this vocation proved harmful to my business. Because I was becoming convinced, asking the least bit of proof, that it was impossible to assess the life span of these homes when they contained these domains of fear and desire. After suffering tremendous losses, I felt I had turned into an idiot or was losing my mind altogether, and I decided to give up this vocation. But inspecting houses was my work and even if I did not look for these domains of fear and desire consciously, I would instinctively come to know where they were. All the same, I made an effort to cut down my interest in them.

Then one day I discovered a house where fear and desire existed in the same domain.

I stood there for a while, trying to decide whether I was experiencing fear or desire but I could not separate the two feelings. In this house fear was desire and desire, fear. I stood there for the longest time. The lady who owned the house wondered if I was having some kind of fit. She was a young woman and at the time there was no one else in the house except the two of us. She came close to me to examine me carefully and I realized that this domain of fear and desire was affecting her as well. She

grabbed both my hands and then with a strange, cautious boldness she advised me to rest for a short while in the front room. I told her that I was quite well, and after a few minutes of conversation with her about business matters, I left the house. Perhaps it was after this day that I started taking an interest in the humanity that lived in these houses.

Eventually I could not imagine one without the other. In fact, at times I felt as though both were one and the same, because both intrigued me equally.

This interest increased my involvement with houses. Now I could look at a house in the most cursory manner and yet discover passageways that were secret or wide open, in use or abandoned. I could tell whether voices rising from one part of the house could reach other parts of the house. I'd examine each room very carefully to ascertain which parts of the room were visible from the crack between the door panels, or from the windows, or the skylights, and which parts could not be seen. In every room, I found a part which was not visible from the crack between the door panels nor from any window, nor from any skylight. In order to isolate this part, I would stand in the middle of the room and paint the whole place black in my imagination. Then, using only my eyes, I would spread white paint on all those parts which could be seen from the cracks or windows. In this manner, the parts which remained black were found to be the truly invisible parts of the room. Apart from certain rooms which were meant for children, I never did find a room in which the invisible part could not provide a hiding place for at least one man and one woman. Around this time, I began to concentrate on the shapes of these invisible parts. They made up the outlines of different images and at times had a truly amazing resemblance to certain objects. But I never did find a complete picture of anything. Everything appeared to be incomplete or broken, even though I examined countless such "invisible" parts. Some of these images had familiar shapes—of a lion, for instance, or a crab, or a pair of scales—but they all seemed like fragments. Other images resembled unknown objects and they looked incomplete although unfamiliar. They left a strange effect on the mind which it was impossible to articulate.

One day I was in the outer room of a new house, looking at the image of the invisible part of the room. The image had an unfamiliar shape. As I examined this shape it occurred to me that long, long ago I had seen a decrepit old house in which the domain of desire had had exactly the same shape.

Until now I had only ascertained the boundaries of the domains of

fear and desire in these houses. I had not thought about the shapes which could be formed from these outlines. But now I began to recall many—or, perhaps, all—shapes, and it occurred to me once again that either I was turning into an idiot or I was losing my mind altogether. Anyway, I became convinced that no one else could look at houses the way I did. I was also quite overwhelmed by the thought that no one else had the kind of rights that I had over the humanity that lived in these houses.

## 4

I didn't stay in any one place. I wandered through many cities and moved in and out of many homes. To me, at least, it began to look as though the cities were crowded with houses and the houses were filled with women. And every woman seemed to be within easy reach. Many women made advances toward me, and I made advances toward many. In this I also committed many blunders. For instance, some women whom I thought to be empty of, or unfamiliar with, or even full of hate for desires, turned out to be saturated with them and more than willing to do the utmost to fulfill them. In fact, at times they made advances so boldly that they frightened me. Other women who seemed to me to be oozing with desire, and just waiting for the slightest sign from me, turned out to be so naïve that when I made a pass at them they were unable to understand my intentions altogether. Some were overcome by depression, others were terrified. In fact, one got so worked up that she abandoned her calm and tranquil domestic life and actually left her home. She had a habit of arranging and rearranging her lustrous black tresses. I thought she wanted to draw my attention to her hair. She went away. That was totally unexpected. So I set out looking for her. I just wanted to tell her that her black hair had misled me, but she kept running away from me. Perhaps she thought that I was pursuing her like some sex-crazed animal. I never found her and I suspect that the fear I induced in her may have been the cause of her death. But I often console myself with the thought that she might have accidentally fallen into the river and resurfaced somewhere and been rescued.

## 5

After this, I gave up making passes at women. Instead, I took to waiting, wanting them to come after me. At times, these waiting periods became rather protracted. During one such lengthy interval, I went to a new city where no one knew me. One morning, as I was wandering around the main bazaar of this city, a woman standing in front of some shops smiled at me and made a sign with her hand. She wanted me to come near. At first, I thought she might be a professional and I kept on walking. But then she called out my name. I stopped and turned toward her and she hurried over to me.

“Don’t you know who I am?” she said with a smile.

I finally recognized her. Many years before she and I had been very close. She hadn’t changed much except for the fact that she looked a little older. I was surprised that I had not been able to recognize her. But I was also pleased to run into someone in a strange town who actually knew me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked her.

“I live here,” she said.

In a few minutes we were chatting away with the greatest informality. Again and again, I got the feeling that she had become a prostitute. I had no experience with professionals. I couldn’t even tell them apart from ordinary women. Then why did I suspect she was a professional? As I stood there staring at her, I became more and more suspicious. She noticed that I was examining her and a smug sort of look came over her face, revealing the source of my suspicions. For quite some time, she had been making a play for me, with words, eyes and even body language. In the past, I had been the one who made advances. Several years earlier, during the period when I’d known her, she was already a woman of some maturity. And now she stood there acting coquettish and coy like a teenage girl. This saddened me. I examined her closely once again. Even now she was quite attractive. But she had also changed a great deal. As I stood there talking to this woman, I felt as though Time were speeding up, there, in that bazaar.

“Where do you live?” I asked her.

She pointed toward a neighborhood behind the shops.

“Come, I’ll show you my house,” she said. “If you have the time.”

I had time. In the past, our relationship had begun pretty much in the same manner. She had shown me her house where she lived by herself in those days. Now we started walking side by side through the busy street. At a shop she stopped and bought a big padlock. She placed the lock and one key that went with it in her bag, and dangled the other key

casually between her thumb and forefinger as she discussed the merits of a certain type of lock with the locksmith. Then, in an absent-minded way she handed me the key she had in her hand and we walked on.

She wants everything the way it used to be, I thought to myself, and once again it seemed to me that Time was speeding up in that bazaar.

“How much farther?” I asked her.

“We’re almost there,” she said, and turned into a broad side street.

Presently we found ourselves standing in front of an ancient wooden door that had just been given a fresh coat of paint. She removed the padlock that hung on this door, put it in her bag and went inside. I stayed where I was. Then a smaller side door adjacent to the main door opened and she stepped out. She now had the new lock in her hand.

“You haven’t forgotten, have you?” she asked me and flashed a bold smile at me.

“I remember,” I said.

I took the lock from her and she went back into the house through the small side door. I bolted the main door and locked it with my key and went into the house through the small side door, bolting it behind me. Now I found myself in a large room which contained many niches and alcoves but nothing in the way of furniture. I stepped out of the room into a spacious courtyard which had been enclosed by a wall. I noticed that a tall window made of weathered wood had been built into this wall. I started walking toward it when I heard a voice to my right:

“No, not there. Over here.”

I turned and saw that adjacent to one corner of the wall and behind several small trees there was a verandah. The woman stood there under an arch. I went and sat down on a divan which had been placed there. Behind me there was a door. She opened the door and we went into a room. The room contained a bed and other domestic odds and ends which had been arranged neatly. She fell on the bed heavily as though she were very tired and I took a chair.

“So do you live here alone?” I asked her.

“Alone ... well, you could think of it as living alone. Actually, I live here with an old acquaintance—an elderly woman.”

“Where is she now?”

“I really don’t know. A few days ago she burst into tears abruptly and cried quietly all night long. In the morning she said, with the greatest reluctance, that she missed a certain home. All of a sudden, she longed to be in the house where she’d spent her childhood. Soon afterwards she packed up all her things and went away. I’ll introduce you to her when

she returns.”

“Why should I want to meet a melancholy old crone?”

“No, no. You don’t understand. She can be very amusing. One minute she’ll be telling you what a marvelous man her husband was. And the very next, she launches into a story about how he used to beat her up. She can be murderously funny.”

“I have no desire to be murdered by the anecdotes of some old hag,” I said and left the room.

She came after me.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“I’d like to see the house,” I responded and went down into the courtyard.

“There isn’t much to see,” she said. “There is this verandah and this room, and that outer chamber. The rest of the structure has collapsed.”

We were standing some distance away from the window which had been built into the courtyard wall. I examined the wall carefully. It was apparent that the house had been one large structure and the wall had been put up to divide it into two halves.

“Who lives on the other side?” I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Perhaps no one.”

Now we were standing near the window. The window had been poorly constructed out of rough planks. A board had been nailed diagonally across the two panels in order to seal it permanently. I was drumming softly on this board when I felt the ground under my feet shift. I placed my hands around the woman’s waist and pulled her close to me. She looked a little surprised. I was also amazed at myself. I took a few steps back and then let her go. So the domain of desire is right here, I said to myself and then stepping close to the window I turned toward the woman again. She looked up at me and smiled.

“You’ve become rather aggressive,” she said.

Once more the ground shifted under my feet and I shuddered.

And the domain of fear also, I thought with a causeless melancholy.

The woman stood in front of me, smiling. Somehow, she had succeeded in simulating a look of arousal. I lingered near the window for quite a while. It was a strip of ground barely two feet wide adjoining the window. The rest of the domain lay on the other side of that window.

“Who lives on the other side?” I asked.

“I told you, Mr. Impatient, no one.”

“Come on, let’s go,” I said, moving close to her. We proceeded toward the verandah. Now she had begun really to feel aroused and she



put her arms around my shoulders.

“It’s very close and oppressive in there,” she said in a whisper and we stopped where we were. I recollected our old encounters when passion used to sweep her off her feet like a wind storm, and now, here in this house, she was either being overwhelmed by a storm of desire once again or leading me to believe that she was. In this house, or at least in this particular part of the house, Time moved at a higher rate of speed than it did in the bazaar. A kind of affection began to stir in me for this woman who happened to be the only person I knew in this strange city.

“You haven’t changed at all,” she said softly.

“Well, along with Time ...” I began and then suddenly, glancing upwards at the window, I saw something shiny in the crack between the frame and the upper edge of the panels. At exactly this time, the woman started to slip away from my grasp. She had closed her eyes, the way she used to. I took her in my arms and looked at the window once again. A pair of dark eyes was looking at us through the crack at the top. As I bent over the woman in my arms, I caught a fleeting glimpse of a red dress through the chinks between the boards. Slyly I looked up once again. The bright black eyes were locked on us. They were not looking into my eyes. They were focusing on our bodies. The idea that we were being watched by an unknown woman who was under the impression that I was unaware of her presence excited me and I averted my face.

At this point we were standing very near the window. Slowly, very slowly I bent over this strip of ground until my head reached the bottom of the window. I had only the vaguest sensation that there was a woman with me, and that I was holding onto her with both my hands. I fixed my eyes on the lowest chink in the window. Looking down through the aperture, I saw a bare foot. Had the toe of this bare foot not twitched again and again, I would have thought that it had been molded in pure white wax. Behind the foot, at a distance which I could not determine, I saw an ancient arch of dark wood and the lower portion of a column. The foot took on a red glow from the shade of the dress, and I sensed the fragrance of a body in which another, more ancient odor was also implicated.

The toe rose from the ground and I saw that a long black string had been tied around it. I couldn’t tell where the string led. If I’d wanted to, I could have reached in and grabbed the string, and perhaps I had decided to do just that. But the woman with me gripped my hands. Then she opened her eyes briefly and closed them tight again. She may have suspected that I wasn’t focusing on her. So I became attentive to her. After a while, she rearranged her hair and said, “You haven’t changed at all.”

I looked at the window once again. There was no one on the other side. It was then that a question welled up inside me. Had this woman wanted to stage a show for a girlfriend? I kept on staring at the window for the longest time and then suddenly I turned toward the woman again and examined her face intently.

But a vacant look of satiation had settled over her expressionless face.

“You haven’t changed either,” I said to her and went onto the verandah.

## 6

I went to see this woman nearly every day.

“Until the old lady returns,” she told me the very first day, “this house is yours.”

And, frankly, I did begin to think of it as my own house, and went there whenever I felt the urge. If the main door happened to be closed from the inside, I would knock and she would come and open it. I would sit and talk with her for a little while and then I’d go away. If the main door had a lock on it, I would produce my key, open the lock and enter the house. Then I’d come back out through the side door, put the lock on the main door, re-enter the house through the side door and bolt it behind me. She would meet me either on the verandah or in the room and I would end up returning late that day. But lately it seemed that almost every time I went to see her, I found the main door locked from the inside. I’d have to knock to be let in. She’d open the door and we would spend some time laughing and joking and then I would leave her.

One day I knocked on the door for a long time before realizing that it was locked from outside. It dawned on me that I had become used to knocking. I unlocked the door and went in. Then I came back out from the side door, put the lock on the main door, re-entered the house through the side door, bolted it behind me and walked toward the verandah. The woman was not on the verandah and the door to her room was closed from outside. A couple of times in the past, she’d come home some time after my arrival. I opened the door to her room and lay down on her bed. I must have stayed there for a long time, in between sleeping and waking. Eventually, I left the room and went out onto the verandah. The afternoon was fading into evening. I was somewhat surprised at myself for having waited so long for her. Anyway, I waited a little longer and then went out through the side door, unlocked the main door and went into

the house again. I bolted the side door from the inside and was about to go out the main door when I stopped suddenly and turned back toward the verandah. I walked across the verandah into her room and changed the position of the bed.

She should know, I thought, and came back out onto the courtyard. I was going toward the main door when something made me stop in my tracks. I turned around slowly and looked at the window in the wall. A pair of dark eyes was looking straight into mine through the chink between the top of the window and the frame. I turned back toward the main door.

I should have known, I thought with groundless melancholy, and slowly turned and walked back toward the verandah. I went into the woman's room once again and pushed the bed back to its original position. Then I came out into the courtyard and crept along the wall that ran at an angle to the verandah. Staying close to the wall, I slowly inched forward in the direction of the window. When I got close to it, I bent down so far that my head almost touched the ground. Through the aperture at the bottom I could see the waxen foot with the black string still attached to the big toe. At first it remained perfectly still, but then it looked as though it had started to pull back. I reached under the crack suddenly, grabbed the black string and gave it several quick turns around two of my fingers. The foot struggled to retreat, but I pulled it back with equal force. Now, between my eyes and this foot, there was my intervening hand with the black string wrapped around the fingers. The string, apparently of silk, was very strong and clearly my fingers were about to be sliced off. I gave it several more turns around my fingers and then suddenly my hand came into contact with the toe.

The pull of the string was making it impossible for me to think clearly. When I had moved from the verandah toward the window, I had made up my mind to make a play for her but now I couldn't figure out what to do and my fingers were just about ready to drop off. The evening gloom fell over my eyes like a heavy blanket of darkness. I felt a cutting pain, but at the same time it became possible for me to think. The very first thing that occurred to me was that I was not the only one in pain. In contrast to my tough and masculine hand, the delicate feminine foot was very soft and the thread that was cutting into my fingers was also tied to that foot. I pressed the toe gently and caressed the foot with two fingers that were free. It felt even softer than I had imagined it to be, but it was also cold as ice. Yet I could feel the warm current of blood surging under the delicate skin.

By now the blackness of night had spread everywhere and I could barely see the silhouettes of the small trees. I am hurting her, I thought. Suddenly it occurred to me that up till now I had only pulled the string toward me once. I loosened the string around my fingers by a few turns and groped about the window with the other hand. I grasped the board which had been nailed obliquely across the window and tried to get up. But the board came loose and, precisely at that moment, the string unwound from my fingers. I placed both hands on the window to keep my balance, but the window fell open since there was nothing to keep it closed now. Suddenly, I found myself on the other side of the window. In the darkness, I could barely see the dim outline of the dark wooden arch and a shadow moving slowly toward it.

I followed the shadow into a region of dense gloom beneath the arch and soon lost sight of myself.

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This was my first experience with total darkness. I passed through the arch and went forward for a short distance. But then I found myself stopping. I tried to move north, east, south, west—in all four directions—but the darkness made it impossible for me to advance. I lost all sense of my whereabouts. Nor could I determine the position of the arch anymore. All I knew was that I was with an unknown woman in an unknown house and that—I was sure of this—we were alone. My long association with women and houses had given me the keen instincts of an animal. And now as I stood in the darkness, I peered about keenly like an animal. I took a deep breath. I was certain that the characteristic perfume emitted by ancient houses, which I'd begun to smell outside the door, would soon assail my nostrils. But this did not happen. And even though I knew it to be futile, I squinted into the darkness with such intensity that my features must have surely looked frightening. In spite of this, I could not cut through the darkness. As far as the sounds of voices were concerned, I had ceased to be conscious of them the moment I gave the very first turn of the black string around my fingers. Still, I made an unsuccessful effort to listen. It felt as though I had been standing there straining my senses for a very long time. Then it seemed as though I had just passed under the arch. Soon afterwards I felt two soft hands brush up against mine. I grasped them firmly and pulled them toward me.

After a long interval, I relaxed my grip, and my hands, exploring the elbows, arms, and shoulders, began to move toward the face. I tried to get a sense of individual features. But apart from a hint of long, thick eye-

lashes, I could not get an idea of how anything else looked. My hands wandered across her body, along her legs and down to her feet until my head touched the ground. I tugged at the string gently and then stood up. Now, once again, I felt soft hands clutching my own. Her palms pressed against my palms. And then in the darkness, my hands became aware of color for the first time. Two white palms, upon which a pattern had been traced with red henna, moved from my palms to my wrists, then to my elbows, and from there to my shoulders and then further up until they cupped my face. Her fingers, which had red rings around them, passed over my cheeks and came to a stop at my neck. She tapped my neck three times and then her palms came to rest on my shoulders and stayed there for a long time. Then, groping slowly across my clothes, they reached down to my feet; they then vanished from that darkened scene for a few seconds and came to rest on my shoulders again. I remembered that ancient scent which had wafted toward me once, mingled with the odor of femininity. This odor is among those smells that are as old as the earth and were around long before flowers came into existence. It was an odor that brought to mind half-forgotten memories. However, at this moment it did not remind me of anything. In fact, I was fast forgetting what little I did remember.

The pressure of hands on my shoulders increased and then relaxed. And now, all at once, I became aware of the fulsome, palpable presence of a female body. It occurred to me that I was with a woman who had seen me with another woman—at least once—in broad daylight. I also realized that it was useless to try and see in the dark. I closed my eyes. I knew that closing them would not make any difference. And, truthfully, there was no difference, not for a while at least. But just when I'd forgotten the physical limitations of my eyes, I saw that I was slowly sinking into a lake of clear water. At the bottom of this lake I could see the ruins of ancient temples. I opened my eyes and was relieved to see only darkness all around. I recalled that there was a woman with me in this gloom. My breath felt the heat that was rising from her body. She is being swept along by a storm, I thought. Once more my eyes began to close and I could not keep them open no matter how hard I tried. Once again I saw the same clear-water lake. The ruins of ancient temples drifted up toward me until they hit my feet. But I couldn't feel them. Then, even as I was watching, the clear water of the lake became very dark and the ruins disappeared.

I don't know how long it was before I woke up. It was still pitch dark all around me. But on one side I saw the outline of the arch and beyond it the beginnings of dawn. I turned to the body lying motionless in the dark and let my hands wander all over it, touching everything. I placed my palms on hers, waiting for a long while for them to become moist with warmth. But they remained cold and dry. However, my hands did feel once again the bright red pattern on one of the palms. The shape of this pattern represented something unfamiliar. I stared hard at this shape and it became clear to me that the same shape resembled at once the domain of fear in a certain house, the domain of desire in a certain house, and the invisible part of yet a certain room. I tried to remember all the places where I had seen this shape and then it occurred to me that even though the shape was unfamiliar, it was, nevertheless, quite complete. For this reason, I had to struggle to convince myself that I had never seen this shape anywhere before. I made a futile attempt to pick up this shape from the palm of her hand. Then I touched it with my forehead and walked through the wooden arch and went outside. The window resembled a dark stain. I went through it and emerged on the other side.

When I crossed the courtyard and made my way toward the main door, the morning birds were chirping in the small trees directly across from the verandah and some old woman there was coughing away.

## 7

I did not suddenly stop speaking. First of all, it never even dawned on me that I had given up speech. This because I never have been very talkative in the first place. The fact is, I just started devoting more time to thinking. After I came away from that house, I slept for two days straight. I caught myself thinking even in my dreams and I continued to think after I woke up. The first thing that occurred to me was that I had gotten through that night with only the sense of touch to guide me. I had experienced everything by touch alone; rather, all that I had experienced was merely a transformed reflection of my sense of touch. Even so, I had missed nothing and, except for the first few minutes, I imagined that all five sense of mine were being fully satisfied.

I never felt any curiosity about that woman. This reaction surprised me and I tried to force myself to think about her. But my mind rejected every image of her I conjured up. I struggled with myself for many days but I was eventually forced to accept defeat. In the entire fierce encounter

with my mind, I came to a realization: I wouldn't be able to recognize her even if I saw her from very close by. But she would recognize me instantly, whenever and wherever she saw me. This thought did not disturb me that much, but then neither did it make me feel greatly at ease. I accepted it like some worn-out and exhausted truth and gave up thinking about it. At about this time I realized that I had, more or less, also given up talking.

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I have not sworn an oath of silence. It's just that I do not need to speak. This has been made possible for me by the kind people who live in this house. They spotted me somewhere, recognized me, and told me that for many generations our families had been very close. They brought me to this spacious house and graciously urged me to pick out whatever place I liked for my living quarters. I looked over the whole house and chose for myself—who knows, this might have pleased them—a section which had been unoccupied for a long time.

My bed is positioned exactly on top of the domain of fear. I have not been able to discover the domain of desire in this house. But that cannot be. So I have now become convinced that fear and desire converge here in exactly the same spot and that I have dominion over it.

Once I was walking about my room in the middle of the night, when I happened to see this spot. It had assumed a black shape. This shape had an unfamiliar but complete outline. I kept on staring at this image for a long time. Then I examined the entire room carefully, peeking into each and every crevice, every window, every skylight. I stained the room white with my eyes, but the black shape remained untouched by this whiteness.

The shape of the invisible part—I thought ... At exactly this moment, I began to hear the chirping of the morning birds outside. I felt very strongly that if I tried even a little, I would remember where I had seen this shape before. But I made something of a pact with myself never to make this effort. From that moment on, I gave up talking.

The same day that I was introduced to my nurse, I moved a part of my bed a little distance away from the domain of fear and desire. She sits on this part of my bed and I just look at her. I believe that in this way I'm protecting her and also protecting myself. □

—Translated by Javaid Qazi and Muhammad Umar Memon