

NAIYER MASUD

Ganjefa*

“ ... Ganjefa, as I’ve already mentioned, has eight suits, of which the higher ones are *taj*, *zar-e safed*, *shamshir*, and *ghulam* and the lower ones are *chang*, *zar-e surkh*, *barat*, and *qumash*.

“The king of *zar-e surkh*, called *aftab* [sun], is the most important card in the game, followed by the king of *zar-e safed* which enjoys the title of *mahtab* [moon]. *Mahtab*, naturally, has a lower status than *aftab*, provided the latter is shining.

“ ... In the daytime he who holds the *aftab* card starts the game, with *mahtab* carrying a lesser value, or rather no value at all, before it. At night, though, the power and value of the *aftab* is transferred over to *mahtab* and *aftab* is reduced in status to that of an ordinary card.”

[*Letters of the Famous*]

I

I BEGAN TO FEEL BAD ABOUT MY LIFE the night of the riots. On my way home from the cemetery that night, I was stopped several times and interrogated. Well, not quite interrogated, I was asked just three questions: “What’s your name?” “Where do you live?” and “What do you do?” I answered the first two right away but invariably faltered at the third. While I would be thinking of an appropriate answer they would let me go with a stern order to return home immediately. Then they would stop some other passerby and subject him to the same questions. During this exercise a couple of people even got beaten up. At first the thought that the third question might well result in my getting roughed up too scared

*“*Ganjifa*” or “*ganjifa*” is a game of cards (also means a pack of cards). The story first appeared in the *AUS*, No. 12 (1997), pp. 231–64.

me quite a bit, so I became nervous trying to answer it, but as I drew closer to my home I started to feel a bit testy about the question itself. When I was asked, “What do you do?” for the last time, I answered in my heart, “I live off the earnings of my mother.”

Father had also lived off my mother’s earnings. Asthma and addiction to playing the lottery had pretty much made him a good-for-nothing. I never saw him do anything other than cough away as he lay in bed, or tear up lottery tickets and toss them away. Mother managed to pay the expenses of the household from the money she earned doing chikan embroidery work. It was Mother again who had looked after my education, during which time she somehow got it into her head that I might also catch my father’s disease so she packed me off to her foster sister in Allahabad for further studies. I’m certain that every month she also sent this sister a little something extra, over and above my expenses. My father passed away two or three years after I left for Allahabad, but I finished my education there and only then returned to my native Lucknow. And now, for the past several years, I have merely been roaming around, living off my mother’s wages like my father before me. If I have done any work at all, it hasn’t gone beyond lighting a lamp at my father’s grave every Thursday. All the same, I had felt good about my life.

The night of the riots, in trying to answer the third question, I saw this life of mine, this life about which I had felt good, play out before me over and over, each time in exactly the same way, until I began to feel anger toward myself and pity for my mother, both of which, the anger as well as the pity, grew worse, especially when I arrived at our door and found out from the neighbors that my mother, draping her burqa around her, had ventured out looking for me the minute she heard the news of the riots and hadn’t yet returned. They had done their best to stop her, but she paid no heed to anyone. It occurred to me that she must also have been subjected to the same questions, “What’s your name?” “Where do you live?” and “What do you do?” I was about to set out in search of her but the neighbors forcibly held me back. Mother had extracted an oath from them that in the event I returned before she did and attempted to go out looking for her they wouldn’t allow me to. The neighbors were asking me about the riots but I evaded them by saying that I didn’t know anything. And that was indeed true. I was worried about Mother and wasn’t about to be stopped by the neighbors, but I stopped myself thinking that if she returned while I was gone she would set out searching

for me again. So I went inside the house. In the courtyard my meal was laid out covered with a tray on a chowki and a neighbor woman sat near it waiting for me. Mother had also asked her on her oath to make me eat as soon as I got back. I asked her to leave. I had no urge to eat even though I was feeling terribly hungry, so I washed my hands and mouth and sat down near the tray. Just then Mother returned.

Outside, the neighbors had already informed her that I was back, safe and sound. Nevertheless she entered the house weeping and wailing as if she was being brought in to look at my dead body. And when she reached me she did everything a mother would do on finding her missing son. I realized then that she still thought of me as a small child accustomed to holding onto his mother's hand as he walked. I also realized that I was grown up and yet there was only one way I could answer "What do you do?"

From the time she fed me until the time she made me lie down on the bed while she patted me, she kept touching me again and again as if she wasn't certain I had come back home in one piece. I was now lying quietly and had started to feel sleepy, while Mother sat nearby scrutinizing me. After a while, she asked, "Did something happen?"

"No, nothing," I answered. "Why?"

"Nothing happened along the way?"

"Nothing at all," I said. "Why do you ask?"

"Did someone say something?"

"No."

She continued staring at me, and then said, "From now on I won't let you go out anymore."

At that point I said, "From now on, Mother, I won't live off your earnings."

That very night Mother had her first bout of coughing.

Without telling my mother I started to sneak out looking for work, but I didn't know the first thing about how to find work. I just roamed around as I used to and then came back home. After a few days when I went out I didn't even remember that it was to look for work. But I no longer enjoyed roaming around. Gradually I started going out less and less, or rather I should say more and more, because now I stepped out several times a day, only to come back shortly thereafter, go out again, return again

Around that time, one day I saw Mother holding a very fine piece of some white cloth close to her eyes and embroidering an exceedingly delicate vine on it with white thread. I sat down on a chowki close to her and said, "Mother, don't hold the cloth so close to your eyes. It'll ruin your eyesight."

"It's already quite weak, Son," she said. Then she had a mild attack of coughing.

"You've started to cough a lot too."

"It comes and goes," she said, "but it's the breathlessness at night ..."

"Isn't there any medicine ..."

"There is," she said, "and I take it. It helps too."

Obviously it wasn't helping, or perhaps she wasn't actually taking it at all. One day I brought the subject up again, "Mother, your cough isn't getting any better."

"Really it has. It only flares up during the night," she told me, and then, after a pause, she asked, "It doesn't disturb your sleep, does it?"

No, it didn't disturb my sleep. One night, though, I woke up in the middle of a dream. It was dark. I couldn't recall my dream. I tried but I couldn't. I turned over in bed and was about to go back to sleep when I heard the muffled sound of Mother's coughing. A wave of drowsiness swept over me, followed by a second wave, but the sound of coughing persisted. I opened my eyes wide and strained my ears. The sound was coming from the courtyard. I sat up in bed. The courtyard was illuminated by the faint light of the stars, but Mother couldn't be seen there.

"Mother!" I called out for her, "what are you doing in the courtyard?"

I could only hear a string of coughs in response. I got out of bed and walked out into the courtyard. She was sitting on the ground next to the well. I approached her and called to her. Then I bent down and looked closely. She was coughing away with a corner of her dupatta rolled into a ball and tucked into her mouth, while her body jerked about fitfully in silent spasms. I sat down near her.

"You've been coughing for a long time," I said. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

She was in no condition to reply. I helped her up and brought her into the dalan. Then I made her sit on her bed and tried to rub her back. It took some time before her breathing began to ease. She asked for water and after sipping it she said, "Why did you get up?"

"I had a dream," I told her. And I began to remember it, but only dimly.

"Go back to sleep," she said. "I'll sleep too."

“I dreamt that I was eating my meal and you were sitting in front of me fanning me.”

She broke into a laugh. “You call that a dream?” she said, and at the same time I said, “Mother, teach me to do chikan embroidery.”

She looked at me with some concern and said, “No, Son, you’ll ruin your eyes.”

“Then teach me some other work,” I said, “or find me a job somewhere. How long will I have to live off your wages as Father did?”

She remained silent for some time and then said, “Well go back to sleep now. I’m feeling sleepy too.”

Then she lay down and pulled her dupatta over her face.

The minute I got up in the morning I started pestering Mother, totally forgetting that I was myself behaving like a child who wanted to hold his mother’s hand while walking. She listened quietly to my repeated demands until I again said, “How long will I, like Father ...” and her face turned red. But she only patted me on the cheek and said very gently, “What’s this, boy, why have you suddenly become an enemy of your father?”

“Enemy, not at all, Mother. But haven’t you suffered on account of him?”

“What have I suffered? It’s he who suffered. What man enjoys feeding himself on his wife’s wages? In his time he earned well and provided for me. When he stopped earning ...”

“I don’t recall ever seeing him earn any money.”

“What have you seen anyway, Son,” she said, suddenly on the verge of tears. “What comfort was there that that departed soul didn’t give me!? And all that he did for you too!”

“For me?” I asked. “What did he ever do for me?”

“He was planning to send you to England.”

“England?”

“To study,” she said. “But he couldn’t. So you may say what you will now.”

She again seemed to be almost on the brink of crying and remained silent for a while.

“England ...”

“Even before you were born he had made it plain that if it was a boy he would send him to England for an education.”

“England ... Do you even know where England is?” I asked.

“Why would I know,” she said. “He used to say it was some sort of college across the seven seas.”

“Did he even have any idea how much money it would have cost?”

“Why wouldn’t he know? He did the calculations after talking to many people.”

“And how much did it come to?”

“How would I know how much it came to. It was a huge sum—that’s all I know.”

“Then?”

“Then what? That brave man of God didn’t loose heart. First off he sold the properties in Rustam Nagar and Shah Ganj.”

“He sold off two houses?”

“Houses? They were more like ruins,” she said. “Next he borrowed as much money from his office as he could. Some money came from selling my jewelry.”

“He even made you sell off your jewelry?”

“Well, he’d set his heart on it.”

“What about your heart?”

“His wish was my wish. But it did hurt me to see those preparations. Our only child and this trip across seven seas ...”

“OK, OK, where did all that money go?”

Mother remained quiet. Her prolonged silence prompted me to ask, “He blew it all on the lottery, didn’t he?”

“No. The lottery came only after he had no money left ... I used to give him money for the lottery.”

“So where did he lose all his money?”

“He never did tell me that, nor did I ask. But this much I know, he wasn’t involved in anything bad.”

After that she lapsed into a silence which made it seem inappropriate to query her further. So I too became silent. But when she got up to go to the kitchen, I stopped her. “OK, what happened next?”

“Nothing happened. His respiratory ailment completely incapacitated him. Whenever he had an attack of asthma, it seemed as if he had stopped breathing. His office retired him on a pension before the end of his term of service.”

“How much did he get from his pension?”

“God knows. I never got to see any of it.”

“So he squandered his pension too?”

At this her face again turned red.

“What’s this you’re saying, ‘He squandered it. He squandered it.’ He was not a man to squander.”

“So then the pension ...”

“He sold it off to pay back the loan he’d gotten from his office. Well, call it squandering if you must.”

“What office did Father work in?” I asked.

“It had a long English name; I never could remember it.”

“What was his position there?”

“That too had an English name.”

She again didn’t say a word for a long time. Finally I said, “OK, tell me more about Father.”

“What shall I tell you?” she said. “When he returned after selling off his pension he just stayed in the house for two days without touching food. He was dead set on ending his life. Only after I swore to him on my oath that you would die if he did that, did he come to his senses.”

“And then?”

“Then what? I picked up a needle the very next day.”

“Did you know chikan work?”

“Already from when I was little.”

“Who taught you?” I asked realizing that I also knew next to nothing about my mother.

“My *phuphi-amma*,” she replied. “She used to embroider as a hobby. I learnt it for fun. But it gave me a skill, otherwise I’d be sweeping floors or washing dishes in any and everyone’s houses.”

Then Mother told me that she had herself taught chikan embroidery to several poor girls who had later started to work for wages. When Father became indigent these very girls came to help. It was through them that Mother also started to get work from an embroidery wholesaler in Goal Darvaza. She praised the wholesaler, “The Lala is a good man. A connoisseur of fine quality work. If he likes the workmanship, he pays extra.”

Then she went off on another tangent and kept talking about this and that for a long time. I had no idea that she could talk so well. Lost in listening to what she was saying, I forgot how we had started off on this conversation. But she hadn’t—of that I’m certain.

I ventured out of the house even less now. Most of the time I sat idly and, without really paying attention, I just looked at Mother perched on a

chowki working away at her embroidery and coughing every now and then. Sometimes when she was seized by a fit of coughing, I rushed to her with some water or rubbed her back. She recovered in a short time and took hold of her needle again.

One day as I was rubbing her back gently, my eyes fell on some lengths of cloth piled up beside her and I said, "Mother, you really shouldn't work so much."

"It's coarse work," she said, "it doesn't take much time."

I looked at the colored pieces of rough material again. I also noticed that she had embroidered large flowers on them with colored threads. Up until now I'd only seen her embroider on very soft, fine material with white thread. I picked up an embroidered red ochre piece and asked, "What kind of embroidery is this? Before you used to ..."

"I can't handle delicate work anymore. My hand shakes. And my eyesight isn't what it used to be." She drew a deep breath and continued, "In the beginning my work was exported to England."

"England?"

"My work received high praise there, though not my name. The Lala says that even now specimens of my old work are sent to him asking for more of the same."

"But this ..." I said picking up another piece of faded material and examining the flowers on it.

"Just ordinary work," she said. "Whatever happens to be popular."

"Who would wear it?"

"Why, people wear it a lot, men as well as women."

"I never saw anyone wearing it."

"There's a lot you haven't seen. Next time when you go out, pay special attention."

She removed my hand from her back and picked up a piece of material and her needle. Holding the piece very close to her eyes she studied the traced pattern for some time and then started to stitch along the pattern. I watched the same pattern emerge in colored thread. I looked at her and found her looking at me, while her needle followed along the printed design. I looked at her again; she was still gazing at me.

"Mother, you embroider without looking at the pattern?"

"I've looked at it already."

"But you've looked at it only once."

"What's the need to look at it over and over," she said. Then she said again, "It's coarse work."

I sat quietly watching her work. She was really embroidering quite fast. After she had finished a piece she immediately picked up another, brought it close to her eyes and examined the pattern, and then she let her needle run along it. She kept up that way until it was late at night. She picked up the finished work, counted the pieces a few times and put them to one side after neatly folding them. Then she picked up the unfinished pieces, counted them as well, and kept looking at me for some time. Afterward she said, "Aren't you sleepy?"

"I am," I said. "You go to sleep too. It's rather late."

"There are only a few pieces left to do," she said, "I'll finish them and then go to bed."

"There are quite a few. Leave them. You can finish them tomorrow."

"They aren't that many. It won't take me long," she said, and then said again, "It's coarse work."

Her needle got going again. For a while I watched a big maroon flower with five or six petals begin to take shape on a piece of cloth. Then I lay down on my bed and, perhaps immediately, fell asleep facing the wall.

A few times my sleep was interrupted briefly by my mother's coughing, from which I concluded that she was still awake and working and it was not quite morning yet.

When my sleep broke, well into the day, I saw that Mother had fallen asleep right there on the chowki. One of her hands was lying on the unfinished pieces. I guessed that they were more or less the same number as when I went to sleep. I went close to her and looked. Her needle was stuck at the very top of the piece in the fourth petal of the maroon flower. I grabbed her shoulder and shook it gently. She always woke up at the slightest sound so I looked at her intently. I couldn't tell whether she was asleep or unconscious. When I began to shake her shoulder vigorously she started and opened her eyes.

"Are you all right, Mother?"

"I'm all right," she said. "Don't worry, I'm all right."

"Did you feel unwell during the night?"

"No ... yes, a little ..."

Just then she suffered another coughing spasm. I rushed and brought some water. As I was giving it to her I noticed that her hand was trembling badly.

“Here, let me hold it for you,” I said and helped her drink the water. Then I helped her onto the bed and sat down close to her head. After a while she started gasping for breath and sat up. I tried to lay her down again but she made a sign with her hand telling me not to. About noon her condition improved a little. Every few minutes I asked her how she was feeling, but she seemed to have lapsed into silence. She barely answered yes or no. One time I asked her, “Mother, would you like something to eat?” and she shook her head no. I hadn’t eaten anything myself since morning and was feeling hungry.

“Do eat something,” I said to her.

She shook her head no and remained silent for a long time. Then, suddenly, she said in a loud voice, “Call Husna.”

“Husna?”

“You know where she lives?”

I didn’t even know who Husna was. I was hearing this name for the first time. Meanwhile Mother had another of her coughing bouts. I started to rub her back but she moved my hand away and said haltingly in between fits of coughing, “Husna ... You don’t know her house?... the one which has the peepal tree ... the one between the firecrackers and the incense sticks ...”

She thrust her head between her knees and started to cough. I was worried about leaving her alone in this condition, but when she lifted her head and found me still there she said in a louder voice, “You didn’t go?” and I sensed such desperation in her voice that I immediately stepped out of the house.

I knew where the firecrackers shop was located in the Chowk. I had seen it there ever since my childhood. But I had no idea that beyond it there was another shop where they sold incense sticks and that a lane separated the two shops. It was a fairly wide lane that twisted and turned far into the distance, with an abundance of houses, all more or less crumbling, on either side of it. It was perhaps their crumbly state that made the lane look rather wide. Not a single tree could be seen anywhere. I proceeded along the lane’s meandering course until I saw the crown of a peepal tree behind two houses. A few moments later I found myself standing before a fairly wide wall with loose bricks. The peepal tree was growing through this wall and its widely spread roots were holding the wall together tenaciously. A little ways away from the roots was the house’s half-open door.

I knocked with the door ring a few times. A man's voice said from inside, "Coming."

The voice seemed somewhat familiar. As I was trying to place it, the thought of my mother's condition at that very moment intervened. Standing at the door I was also struck by the thought that I hadn't left her with a neighborhood woman to watch over her. I remembered her breathlessness, the hacking coughs that shook her body, her trembling hands. I was about to rush back home when, behind the half-open door, I noticed a woman standing in the dimly lit *devrhi* staring at me. I looked in her direction; she took a step forward and pushed on the open panel of the door leaving it only slightly ajar. Then I heard her say, "Who is it?"

"Is this Husna Sahib's residence?" I asked.

"Yes, it is."

"Might you be ..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Mother is unwell. She's asked for you."

She kept staring at me for a while from behind the door. I felt as though she hadn't quite understood me. So I said, "She's having immense difficulty breathing and her cough ... She's also shivering. She's asked for you to come quickly. Perhaps ..."

I stopped. She still said nothing and I wondered whether she had understood me at all. I said, "At the moment, she's all alone at home."

She said slowly, "I was just giving Father his food. Please go back, I'll be along soon."

I hastened back without waiting for her to turn around.

Mother still sat with her head tucked between her knees. She was still experiencing some difficulty breathing but her hacking had stopped. Sensing my footsteps, she lifted her head.

Sitting down near Mother I said, "Well, I've informed her. She'll be here soon."

"Poor girl, she must have been alarmed," Mother said to herself, and then she asked me, "She didn't come with you?"

"She was serving her father his meal."

"What else could she do!" Mother said. "Her father is an invalid."

"Mother, who is Husna?"

"She's a nice young woman," she said. "She does needlework. A while back she came to take lessons from me."

"From you?" I was surprised, for no reason at all. "How come I never saw her here?"

Mother wanted to say something—perhaps “Well, what have you seen anyway”—but stopped short. Then she said, “You were in Allahabad at the time.”

“And what’s wrong with her father?”

“Paralysis of the legs, poor soul,” she replied. “You used to be quite fond of buying his toothpowder.”

“What toothpowder?”

“The same, Ladlay’s Badshahi Manjan [Royal Toothpowder].”

“Ladlay?” I asked, much surprised. “Is he still in Lucknow?”

“Worse than a corpse. Both of his legs have shriveled up.”

Just then there was a sound at the door and Husna entered. Since the veil of her burqa was raised, I recognized her. I marveled at the fact that she had arrived so expeditiously. Mother blossomed the minute she saw her. “Come, Daughter, come!” she said. “I knew you’d fly over to me.”

She proceeded slowly toward the dalan and I climbed up the stairs to the rooftop.

Watching the kites soar lazily in the receding afternoon sun I was struck by the realization that it had, perhaps, been years since I had bothered to lift my head and look up. At the moment, the clear blue sky and Ladlay’s name carried me back to my childhood, to a time when, besides the acrobats, the jugglers, and the man who caught only the most bizarre animals, there was also this Ladlay who drew me to the Sunday market at Nakhkhas. He would spread out a sheet by the side of the street and stand next to it. On the sheet, some fifty or sixty herbs were neatly laid out in small open-mouthed bags, and behind them, on the closed lid of a small box, were several rows of big and small bottles containing Badshahi Manjan. Ladlay himself stood behind his wares. He was a stocky man with even white teeth. Within a short time buyers would gather around him. Then he would speak. A strange excitement and grandeur swept over him when he spoke; nonetheless the speech itself never changed. For the first few minutes he spoke in English, or in some kind of gibberish he had cooked up himself but which nonetheless sounded like English to those who didn’t know any better. Then he would tell the people that he had studied in England and that, if he wanted to, he could become a Deputy Collector of Revenues that very day, but he preferred making his toothpowder to working as a Deputy Collector. And then, tapping each of the bags in turn with his cane, he described its contents with great facility, telling the effects of the ingredients and the incredible hazards that attended the effort to collect them. Next he picked up two bottles of his Badshahi Manjan and, clinking them together, explained how his

toothpowder contained all those ingredients and how its recipe was kept well guarded in the Royal Treasure House. Seriousness was so mixed with jocularity in his speech that people had a hard time deciding where to laugh and where not to. I used to be a bit frightened of him, nevertheless I eagerly awaited the moment when, just before launching into his sale's pitch, he would press a thick copper coin between his teeth and nearly bend it over with his thumb. Then he would pass the bent coin around for everyone to see. Some customers made vain attempts to straighten it. Eventually the coin was returned to Ladlay who would press it between his teeth as before and flatten it out. Thereafter the sale of the toothpowder would begin. I bought a small bottle of the stuff every second or third Sunday, used the powder regularly, and tried to straighten bent coins.

After a while my enthusiasm for the market waned. The market also was no longer what it used to be and I had stopped paying attention to whether Ladlay still sold his toothpowder there. Then I was packed off to Allahabad. When I returned to Lucknow after finishing my education I did go out once or twice to the Sunday market, but now it had become unbearably crowded. Finally I quit going past the Nakhkhas because its bazaar got in the way of my aimless wanderings.

I had forgotten this market of my childhood and its many attractions, including Ladlay, long ago, but at this moment, when kites were calling out and circling slowly in the blue expanse of the sky, and downstairs Ladlay's daughter was talking with my mother, I could vividly see that market and Ladlay standing in it—why, I could even see the coin which he had bent between his teeth.

It was late afternoon when Mother called to me from downstairs. I went down and took a seat beside her. She was sitting on her bed and looked more or less well. The pieces of embroidered material were gone from the chowki, replaced by a tray of fresh, warm food.

“Eat,” Mother said, “I've starved my son today.”

“That ... Husna ... she's left?” I asked.

“The poor girl cooked all this and then went home.”

Going over to sit on the chowki I said, “You come too. Or shall I bring the food over to you?”

“No, she had me eat before she left.”

After a couple of morsels I realized that I was eating Mother's cooking. When I couldn't hold back any longer, I asked, “Did you also teach Husna how to cook?”

“What a perfect guess,” Mother said feeling pleased. “Yes, when she used to come for embroidery lessons ... I told her, ‘Daughter, why not learn cooking too,’” and then Mother said again, “What a perfect guess.”

“Why? I can pick out my mother’s cooking from a thousand dishes.”

Mother laughed softly, and then recalling something she said, “Tell me, what exactly did you say to Husna?”

“Just that you weren’t feeling well.”

“And?”

“And? Yes, that you’d asked for her.”

“And then you took off without telling her who you were?”

I realized my mistake.

“Yes, now that you mention it,” I said. “She didn’t ask me. And besides I was in a hurry to get back home.”

“You shouldn’t be so jittery, boy.”

“Then how did she ...”

“She figured it out herself and came over.”

I had the feeling that Mother had brought this up just to have me ask a certain question, so I put that question to her, “But how did she recognize me?”

“From your shirt,” Mother said, rather proudly.

I looked at my shirt. It was quite worn, but Mother had embroidered a very intricate floral vine on it herself, not a single stitch of which had loosened from its place even now. I ran my hand over the vine and asked, “She recognized your needlework, didn’t she? But what made her think I was ...”

But the answer dawned on me before I had even finished the question. There was only one way a man of my modest means could be wearing a shirt with such fine embroidery and that was if he was the son of the one who had done that embroidery. It was a matter anyone could figure out and so Husna had too.

Mother looked at me intently and started to say something but stopped. When I was done eating, she said, “Put the dirty dishes by the well. I’ll wash them.”

“No, let me,” I said, standing up. “Where are your dishes?”

“She did them and put them away,” Mother told me. “And listen ...”

I stopped on my way to the well.

“Yes, what is it?”

“She’ll come again tomorrow at noon. Try to be here.”

“Why?”

“She has some business with you.”

“With me?”

“Yes. She wants you to read something for her.”

The next day Husna came to Mother a little after noon. I got up and went toward the well. The two talked by themselves for quite a while and then Mother called me.

She was lying on the bed. Husna was sitting near her on the edge of the bed. She looked my age, or maybe a little younger. She had regular features and her face bore a faint resemblance to her father’s. Observing all this in one glance, I pushed aside the piece of embroidery on the chowki and sat down. I also noticed that at some point Mother had embroidered all the pieces left over from yesterday and that some fresh pieces to be embroidered had been added. Just then Mother said, “Here,” and she held out a sealed envelope toward me. Sitting on the chowki, I also extended my hand and took hold of the envelope, flipping it back and forth to look at it.

“It’s sealed,” I told Mother.

Mother looked at Husna. She made some sign, and Mother said, “You may open it. Her father has given it to her.”

I opened the envelope. On the cream-colored paper inside the following was written with a broad-tipped pen:

This document is on behalf of Ali Muhammad, alias Ladlay, son of Ali Husain, alias Dulare Navab, resident of Peepal Tree House, Chowk, City of Lucknow. Though of sound health, I have grown old, an age when a man begins to feel closer to death. I am, therefore, leaving this testament.

Let it be known that I earned my living in weekly markets. I sold Badshahi Manjan in three separate markets; Pahari Oil for pain, injury and impotence in two; and performed magic acts in one. On the seventh day I rested.

I have only one daughter, Musammat Husna, who will become 30 this winter. She was going on 15 when my legs became useless and now, for the past 15 years, she has been supporting me through her earnings from chikan embroidery. Inasmuch as she is my only child, whatever I own legally belongs to her. However, the purpose of this document is not to reiterate this fact, but to declare that nothing from my belongings kept in the wooden chest are to be given to my daughter. Nonetheless, every single one of those belongings must be shown to her so that she will know what she has not received.

Signed, Ali Muhammad, alias Ladlay, written in his own hand.

After I finished reading the document I looked at Husna. "This is his will."

"Will?" she asked, a little taken aback. Then she thought of something, looking perplexed.

"It's about his belongings."

"His belongings?" she asked looking at Mother, and became even more perplexed.

"Read it aloud," Mother told me.

I started to read out loud. Coming to the Pahari Oil I hesitated a little, then, skipping it, I continued to read on. After I'd finished, I folded the sheet and put it back in the envelope. I gave the envelope to Mother and then walked over to the well in the courtyard. I was marveling at the fact that this piece of writing belonged to the man who used to sell Badshahi Manjan at Nakhkhas and who used to frighten me a little. I also felt a desire to see the contents of the wooden chest which Husna was not to receive, and to see Ladlay writing something.

I saw Husna leaving. I stood up, but just as I was going over to Mother a couple of neighbor women came in, so I again sat down at the well. The neighborhood women had started to call on Mother more frequently the past several days. They helped her with the household chores. Mother seemed well now but her hand trembled quite a bit. Even so, when I came over to her after the women had left, I saw her sitting in bed embroidering. She glanced up at me once and continued with her work. I thought she would want to talk about Ladlay's will, but she didn't open her mouth at all. After watching her pass her needle through the piece for some time, I said, "Mother, your hand is trembling badly."

She didn't respond. I sat down near her on the chowki. For a long time I looked at the embroidered pieces, flipping through them until sunset arrived. Mother bundled the pieces and, after putting them aside, she looked at me. "Today is Thursday," she told me.

"I know," I said. "Where are the matches and the lamp?"

On my way back from the cemetery I roamed around for a while before going home. When I did get back I saw that Mother had already gone to sleep and that my meal was laid out on the chowki. Shortly after eating, I also went to sleep.

Mother had already finished all the pieces well before noon the next day. She cooked food, gave it to me to eat, and then said, "Son, will you do something for me?"

"What?"

She bundled up the pieces, gave the bundle to me, and said, "Take this to Husna. She'll take it over to the Lala's."

"I know where the Lala's shop is. I can take it over," I said.

"No, no," Mother interjected hurriedly. "You take it to Husna. She has to also get some fresh work for me."

"I can bring that too."

"The account also has to be settled," she said, and then she again said, "Listen ..."

I listened to her. Once again I went to the Peepal Tree House and tapped on the door with the knocker. Again the same male voice said, "Coming."

But it was a very old woman who answered the door. She peered at me as though trying to recognize me. Without trying to recognize her I said, "I've brought this stuff over."

"What stuff?"

"Chikan embroidery," I said. "It's to be taken to the Lala's shop."

"All right, wait here," she said, and went inside. Returning shortly she said, "Come in, he's calling you."

The small *devrhi* led into an unpaved courtyard. There was a thatched roof on one side, a *dalan* on the other, and a scraggly hedge of henna on the third. Behind the hedge were two small, rusted tin roofs with curtains of sackcloth hanging from them. The woman led me into the *dalan*. There, after so many years, I saw Ladlay.

He was half-lying and half-sitting on a bamboo-framed bed. I didn't notice any significant change in him except that his hair, entirely black before, now had the reddish gloss of dye. I glanced at his legs but they were covered with an old blanket.

"Sit down, Mian," he said after acknowledging my greetings. "Put that thing over there."

The old woman took the bundle from my hands and put it on the wooden chest in the corner of the *dalan*. Then, pointing at a *chowki*, she said, "Make yourself comfortable, Brother."

I sat down on the *chowki* and looked at Ladlay.

“Bitya has gone to the hospital,” he informed me. “She said that you would be coming. Do you want to leave a message for her?”

“Just that she should bring back fresh work,” I said, “and that the account ...”

“I’ll tell her. Everything will be taken care of,” he said, and then he told the old woman, “His mother taught our Bitya chikan embroidery.”

“Don’t I know that?” the woman said. “I took her there myself several times.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Ladlay said.

He chatted with me for a while, mostly about the art of chikan embroidery and my education. He spoke softly and calmly, and his conversation was very refined. I realized that I couldn’t converse with such polish. Finally I got up to leave.

“Bitya’s been gone for quite a while,” he said. “You can wait a while longer if you like. She should be back any minute now.”

“No,” I said. “I have a lot of work to do.”

Before he could ask, “Mian, what do you do?” I said salaam and walked out of the dalan, his voice trailing after me, “Please do give Sister my regards.”

I was feeling pleased with myself for having evaded Ladlay’s question. But by the time I reached the Chowk it occurred to me that he should have asked me that question when he was inquiring about my education. A few more strides down the road I became convinced that he already knew the answer to that question. Husna must have told him. “But who would have told Husna?” I asked myself, and then answered myself, “Mother, obviously.”

Sorry for myself, I felt angry toward Mother. By the time I reached home, I had made up my mind to have it out with Mother. I’d even decided how to proceed: “Mother, what’s this? First, you don’t let me do anything, then you go about complaining to the whole world that I don’t work.”

But I didn’t get a chance to carry out my plan. Mother had died shortly before I reached home. Perhaps she’d been struck by paralysis, or maybe it was a heart attack. Before dying she was only able to tell a neighbor woman where she kept the money.

Everything that followed from that point on seems like a dream. I vaguely remember that women gathered inside the house and men outside, and

that I was doing whatever I was being told to do. I had taken the money from the place Mother had indicated and, without counting it, had given it to one of the men. Accompanying the bier to the cemetery, the fog lifted briefly from my mind and I complained that Mother was not being buried next to Father. I was told no empty space could be found around his grave.

Starting the next day, women began to visit my house to offer their condolences. Most of them were burqa-clad women who did chikan embroidery. I didn't know any of them so I just sat quietly on the chowki while the neighbor women talked with them. I had no interest in their conversation, but it did surprise me a little that so many women knew Mother and that the news of her passing had reached them so quickly.

The neighbors sent me food for the next three days. Husna also showed up on the fourth day with several women in tow. After talking with the neighbor women for a while, she came and stood near me. I kept sitting with my head down for some time and then I lifted it up to look at her.

"Please go over to the Lala's shop," she said. "He's asked for you."

"He's asked for me?"

"He said it was something important. Besides, some money matters need to be settled."

"When is he at the shop?"

"All the time," she said, and after a pause, "I tried to come that day, but ..."

Without caring to finish the sentence, and pulling her veil back over her face, she left along with the other women.

That night food was sent over from someone's house but I sent it back. I recalled that on the day of Mother's death I had taken out her money and handed it over to somebody and he had returned the remainder when we got back from the cemetery. He had also accounted for the expenses, but I hadn't paid attention. I took that money out from under the pillow and I had just started counting it when a neighbor woman came in with the food I'd returned. I had played in her lap as a child and called her Khala [Aunt]. It was she Mother had asked to swear on her oath the night of the riots to make sure that I ate my food. Now the same Khala was asking me to eat on my oath. I said I would eat in the bazaar, but she considered all bazaar food poison. We kept going back and forth for quite a while. At long last I pulled the money out from under my pillow, gave it to her and somehow made her agree that she would arrange for my meals with that money in the future. She left, but only after I'd

eaten. For the first time since Mother's death I felt a sense of ease and, because of it, I felt my loss of her more fully.

The next day I went to see the Lala.

It was a big shop with two doors. The Lala's two sons were minding the business. There was a constant flow of workers, male as well as female. The Lala sat a short distance away from these people on a low takht, with a bolster behind him. He was a very immaculate old man. His eyebrows had started to turn grey. In front of him he had a small box with a bundle of papers on it which he was rummaging through. I went and stood in front of him. After a while he raised his head and gave me a look. I greeted him and said, "You sent for me."

The Lala glanced at me a few times sizing me up, then with great courtesy he said, "Come, Brother, come. Come over here."

I took a seat near him on a corner of the takht. He told me that he had heard of Mother's death from Husna, adding, "What can I say, Brother, it's like my hands have been chopped off."

He talked about Mother for quite a while and praised her work. He also asked me about the details of Mother's illness and her burial. And then he turned his attention to the papers. After some time he raised his head and said, "Yes, I did send for you. For one thing, I wanted to settle the account." He removed the papers from on top of the box, opened it, took out some cash and putting it in front of me said, "These are her earnings from the last few days before she died. Put it aside, but count it first Brother."

It was not a large sum by any means. I picked it up and counted it. The Lala signaled for me not to leave, meanwhile taking from the box another sum wrapped inside a handkerchief. He held it out to me.

"No, Lala," I said, getting up. "I have money."

"This too is your money, Brother. I'm not giving you anything extra," the Lala said. "She saved some money with me now and then in your name. It was not possible to save any at home so she asked me to put something aside from her wages."

I looked at the handkerchief, then at him. "But Lala, this seems like too much."

"Small sums add up to a lot eventually," the Lala remarked. Now listen carefully to what I'm going to say." He pointed at the handkerchief, "Take some time to get over your grief. When the money begins to run low, come back to me. I'll give you work."

“Lala, I don’t know embroidery,” I said, “Mother didn’t teach me.”

“We’ll have somebody teach you,” he said, “or we’ll find you some other work. You have to do something or other now. And we also need somebody we can trust.”

Then he became lost in thought. I was unable to decide whether to stay or leave. Meanwhile the Lala started again, “It was just like a game. Sometimes I would say, ‘Sister, put your son to some work. How long will he roam around idly?’ Sometimes she herself would ask, ‘Lala, find some kind of work for my son. How much longer will he have to stay idle?’ But whatever work I suggested she considered demeaning. I would respond by saying, ‘It’s just this kind of humble work that makes one rise. How long did I myself have to comb through the lanes lugging a huge bundle on my shoulder and a yardstick in my hand? And didn’t my throat become hoarse from hawking?’ She would say, ‘You’re absolutely right, Lala. But the boy’s father was planning to send him to England. Now if he were to go peddling in the streets would that give comfort to a departed soul in his grave?’”

The Lala kept repeating such things for a long time. Perhaps he had gotten into the habit of talking a lot. Finally he tired and I got up. He picked up the handkerchief and handed it to me. Asking me to come closer, he patted me on the head and then ran his hand over the embroidery on my shirt. “We won’t get to see such fine work anymore,” he said, his head bowing in respect and remaining bowed for quite a while. As I turned around to leave, he lifted his head and said, “All right, Brother, go now and get over your grief.”

After my visit to the Lala’s, I started to light a lamp on Mother’s grave every Thursday along with Father’s. The rest of the time I just wandered around. At that time it was the only way that I knew of getting over my grief.

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Without even opening the Lala’s handkerchief, I handed it over to Khala next door. I told her emphatically not to forget to let me know when the money was about to run out. I asked her about the money every few days and each time she said that there was still plenty. She would also give some account of the expenses for food, never failing to round it all off with, “An amount the size of an ant’s egg, that’s how much you eat. What expenses could there be.”

This prompted me to laugh, and then I'd go out to wander around some more.

One Thursday I was returning home via the Chowk. Thursday was the day the bazaar remained closed and there was nothing for me to see there. But as I passed by the firecrackers shop my feet began to slow down. On the wooden board at the front of the closed shop sat Ladlay, all alone, his feet dangling. I thought he wouldn't be able to recognize me so I kept walking, but when he saw me he shook his head in such a way that I had to stop. I greeted him and asked, "How are you?"

"Just so," he replied, then he pointed at his legs.

Above the board he looked like a fairly stout man, but below his waist his emaciated legs hung down from the board like a pair of dried up sticks. Although Mother had told me about his condition, it was still painful to look at him now. I was at a loss for what to say to him, so I just stood quietly gazing at him while he stared at his sturdy staff which was leaning against the board.

"I learnt about Sister," he spoke after some time. "I wanted to be part of the funeral procession, to be present at her burial."

"No, how could you have gone in your condition?"

"We are indebted to her for her many favors," he said and then, out of the blue, he popped *that* question, "Mian, what do you do now?"

So you're asking me this *now* Ladlay? I said in my heart, and simply lied to him, "I'm working at the Lala's."

I had even thought of what I would tell him if he asked me about the kind of work I did. Instead, he asked, "What do you do at home?"

"I fret," I answered. "That's why I wander around all day long."

"Yes, walking around must distract you a little," he said. He didn't ask when, precisely, I worked at the Lala's if I spent my entire day wandering around.

"How are you?" I asked again.

"I'm the same as before, but Bitya has left us," he said and hung his head.

I couldn't grasp his words right away. Before I could ask him, he volunteered himself, "She had come down with jaundice."

I sat down beside him on the board.

"When did this happen?" I asked. "No one told me."

"Who could have gone to tell you," he said and became silent.

There was so much I wanted to ask him but didn't know quite where to begin. So I thought it best to stay with him a while longer and then take my leave.

When he saw that I was about to leave, he started to say something, but stopped. He tried again and stopped again. I, too, stopped in my tracks.

“What is it?” I asked.

He kept scratching the head of his staff with his fingernail, then proceeded hesitantly, “Mian, will you help me a little?”

This was bound to happen, Ladlay—I said in my heart. But I had no money on me at the moment, so I said hesitantly, “Yes, what is it?”

“I’ve got some stuff. Will you keep it at your place? Just a small box. It won’t take up much room.”

Saying this he slid down from the top of the board. I leapt to help him but by then he had already planted his elbows on the board. With his elbows still in that position he grabbed his staff and, lowering himself ever so slowly onto the ground, sat down on his haunches. His henna-dyed head rose slightly above his dried up legs as he started to move forward in that position. I was standing behind him, watching how his head and shoulders swayed by turns to the right and to the left, like someone inebriated. To see him move this way was even more painful than seeing him sitting on the board. Perhaps he knew that too, for when he reached the opening of the lane he stopped, twisted his neck and said, “You go on ahead; I’ll be there shortly.”

I felt relieved and started to walk fast until I reached the Peepal Tree House and stopped at the door. After quite a while I saw him coming. He was very out of breath by the time he reached me. He sat on the door’s ledge for a while and then said, “I’ve put you through a lot of trouble, Mian.”

The door was closed. He pushed on one of the panels with his shoulder. The door creaked faintly and opened. He put his staff to one side and picked up his withered legs with both of his hands, placing them on the door ledge as though they belonged to someone else. For a moment I actually thought that he would stand up, leaving the legs and the staff lying on the ledge. Instead, he grabbed the staff and, still moving along on his haunches, entered the *devrhi*. He turned back to look at me and said, “Come on in, Mian, I won’t keep you long.”

I had not seen Husna in this house, but nonetheless I felt her absence. The chowki in the dalan resembled the one on which Mother used to sit and do her embroidery. Ladlay was sitting on the floor, one of his hands resting on the chowki.

“I’m giving you a lot of trouble, Mian,” he said, starting to inch his way toward a big wooden chest sitting in a corner of the dalan. When he

had come near it, he put his hand on the lid and looked at me. The lid came to slightly above his shoulder. I asked, "You want it opened?"

"Yes. I'll try."

It wasn't possible to lift that heavy lid unless one stood at one's full height. So I moved forward and opened it.

"Look inside. Do you see bottles on the right hand side?"

"Yes, they're there," I said. "Shall I take them out?"

"May you live long."

The chest contained plenty of other stuff as well. There was a large enamel bowl filled with such unsightly-looking creatures as snakes, scorpions and chameleons, carved out of some dark-colored wood. Long-bladed knives, chains, cooking pots and the like lay on another side. I had seen this kind of paraphernalia with those who put on magic shows at the Nakhkhas. These things also reminded me that somebody used to sell Magic Oil in the same bazaar. That man also kept the same types of scorpions and snakes in an enameled vessel, all drenched in the Magic Oil. But I, like many other people, took these creatures to be alive and thought that the Magic Oil was actually squeezed out of them. The seller also made this claim.

I took out all the bottles of Badshahi Manjan and set them in front of Ladlay. The bags of herbs could also be seen inside one open bundle. I took the bundle out carefully and set it beside the bottles. Ladlay gave me a surprised look, and then, saying "May you live long," he undid the bundle fully, removed a few bags and looked at the mildew that had formed on the herbs. He shook his head in disappointment. Then he put the bags back into the bundle and tied it securely. When I was returning the bundle to the chest, I spotted the copper coins, some of which were still bent. I took the coins out and gave them to Ladlay. Placing one bent and one unbent coin on his palm he thought for a while, then extended his palm toward me and said, "Put these back too, Mian, I don't need them either."

After closing the chest I turned toward him. He quickly counted the bottles and then said to me, "I've really put you through a lot of trouble today."

"No, it's all right," I said, and then asked, "So you want me to keep these bottles for you, is that all? And their case?"

"The case is up there. I'll have somebody bring it down for me," he said, pointing at the wall in back of the chest.

As quickly as I had recognized the bottles of Badshahi Manjan, I also recognized the small case that lay on a shelf several arm's lengths above the chest.

"I'll take it down," I said.

Since the chest stood in the way, I found it difficult to reach the case with both hands, so I pulled on the case with one hand while supporting it from below with the other and managed to bring it down. I put it in front of Ladlay. He wiped it with his hand and removed the lid. It was filled with what looked like snippets of cloth. He stared at them in silence for a while and then took them out, putting them on top of the chest's lid until the case was empty. He was now putting the bottles in the case, one by one. I gave a fleeting glance at the bits of cloth. Nearly every one of them had some chikan embroidery on it. I picked one up and examined it. A delicate floral design, neatly embroidered with white thread, appeared at the very top, with some half a dozen copies of it embroidered by a novice's hand below. One after another, I picked up pieces of cloth and gave them a look. They all had specimens of different chikan embroidery. Each with a sample by a master hand at the top, followed by its crude and not-so-crude copies. I stared at them in silence and then I became aware of Ladlay's presence. By then he had already placed the bottles in the case and had put the lid back on, and he had been gazing at me for God knows how long. When I looked at him, he lifted up one hand and reached for the cloth cuttings. Then he tapped the lid of the chest and said, "Maybe we should return them to the chest now."

Sitting the way he was, he struggled with one hand and managed to lift the lid just a little while he attempted to sweep up the cuttings with his other hand.

"Here, let me do it," I said, lifting the lid some more and putting the cuttings into the corner of the chest vacated by the bottles. Then I turned towards Ladlay. Resting his elbows on the floor behind his dried up legs which were stretched out in front of him, he was half-sitting and half-lying and seemed to be dozing. I asked him, "Is that all?"

"Nakhkhas is closer to where you live. Every Sunday I'll come and pick this up from your place and bring it back in the evening. But if it would inconvenience you too much ..."

"No trouble at all."

"So then, I'll bring the case over to you by this evening."

"You don't have to," I said. "I'll take it along."

"No, Mian, it doesn't look nice that you should carry my burden."

"It's not that heavy," I said, picking up the case. "I can hardly feel it."

“I’m really very embarrassed, Mian.”

“What’s there to be embarrassed about?” I said. “All right, you’re sure there isn’t anything more you’d like me to do?”

“How much I’ve troubled you today,” he said, gathering his outstretched legs with his hands, and then he sat down supporting himself with his staff.

“Well then,” I said, turning toward the courtyard. “I’ll be at home on Sunday.”

“Hang on, Mian. I’m coming too.”

I stopped and asked, “Where do you want to go?”

“Just as far as the door, to see you off.”

“No need to. You stay here. I’ll see myself out.”

It occurred to me after I came out that I hadn’t offered him my sympathies over his daughter’s death, but at the same time it also occurred to me that he himself hadn’t given me a chance to. So I didn’t turn back.

After depositing the case under Mother’s chowki at home, I headed straight for the Lala’s shop, but, it being a Thursday, it was closed. I returned home. After that I only went out to go to the cemetery.

The next day I went to the Lala and told him that I was pretty much over my grief. The Lala took me into his employ the same day. When I inquired about my work, he said he’d let me know later.

Ladlay didn’t show up on Sunday. He didn’t show up the next Sunday either. I waited for him the whole day. In the evening I went over to his house. The lower latch of the door had a padlock on it. When I asked his neighbors, I was told that he was seen going out last Sunday morning and that he had not come back since. They had made inquiries about him here and there, but nobody had the foggiest idea where to look for him.

No one tried very hard to look for him either. By and large his neighbors were almost certain that he had gone to some other city and must be begging there. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon