

NAIYER MASUD

Afflictions*

THERE WAS something burning outside my room. Then came the sound of boys' voices.

“Look, look, it’s making an elephant.”

“Not one, two. There are two.”

After that came the sound of striking matches and the aroma of burning gunpowder—at the time I thought it was a pleasant odor. It was quiet a while and then the boys' voices erupted again.

“What’s it making?”

“Keep watching.”

“It looks like a flower.”

“No, it’s not a flower.”

“So then ... *ufb*, it ...”

There was a burst of laughter. They were all boys my same age. I felt restless listening to their voices all the time, but I couldn't go out of my room. I didn't even have the strength to get out of bed. I'd been sick with typhoid fever for a month. The boys couldn't start a fire inside my room, or rather, they didn't dare to even *come* inside my room, but I could hear their voices all day long and from those I would try to guess what games were being played outside.

This was at the time of my eldest sister's wedding. The house was crowded with guests. All day long, women sang and played instruments. And the gang of boys created a separate hullabaloo. Because of my fever, I had no desire to run around playing—I didn't even have that much breath—but I did enjoy fireworks. And, at that time, fireworks were being set off around the house all day long, sometimes near my room, sometimes farther away, in the courtyard.

When I first became ill, only my sister looked after me. She took

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responsibility herself for everything pertaining to my care—giving me medicine, washing my hands and face, changing my clothes, and, most of all, restraining my temper, which used to get the best of me even before. She would sleep in my room and, during the night, she would get up repeatedly to check on me. But when it got near her wedding day, she had to be cooped up in a small room where she was always surrounded by a bevy of other girls. I didn't see her for several days. Meanwhile, her wedding day arrived. That day, my condition got even worse. I kept lapsing into semi-consciousness, and when I was awake, I would get very restless. Eventually I was given something to make me sleep. The arrival of the bridegroom's party, the signing of the marriage contract, the departure of the bride—all of this happened and I went on sleeping. Before going, she came to see me with her bridegroom and she held on to the frame of my bed for a while, crying.

After that my condition deteriorated even more. They changed the doctor several times, but it didn't help. I had been ill well over forty days. From the very beginning my parents had lost all hope of my recovery. Now, even I became convinced that I was dying. Lying there, I would imagine my own death and be consumed by fear at the thought of being buried in the ground. Sometimes I would start making very strange bequests, which I don't remember exactly now.

During that same period, I saw the doctor who was my last physician. He was a friend of one of my uncles, in fact, they were very informal with each other. My uncle had a keen interest in horse racing and he had already squandered much of his wealth on it. Apparently the doctor was interested in horse racing and some horse of his was running in a race too. My uncle urged my father to have this doctor examine me and when my father made known his intention of doing so, my mother said with some trepidation, "I've heard he's something of a clown. He hardly looks at the patient and mostly just babbles."

"It's all gossip. What's the harm in his having a look. Let's try out his medicine too—along with whatever you're already doing."

Having given up hope on the doctors, my mother had resorted to charms and amulets, and it was her opinion that I was even getting some benefit from them. In any case, the decision was made to have the doctor take a look at me, so my uncle went and fetched him.

The doctor's voice could already be heard while he was still outside. When he came into the house with my uncle, they were discussing some political issue. Everyone in the household had congregated in my room and the doctor was brought there. The political discussion stopped and

he took a look around at all the people. I was lying on my bed covered by a sheet and he glanced at me too. Then he took a good look at all the people one more time and asked, "So then, where's the patient?"

My uncle pointed at me. Looking at me closely the doctor said, "Brother, why are you lying down? These are the days for eating and playing. Go fly a kite. When I was your age ..."

He went on talking like this for some time, then he became serious and examined me. He checked my tongue and then, when he lifted my kamiz so he could have a look at my chest, his glance fell on the amulets. My father said apologetically, "His mother has great faith in these things."

"My mother did too. Look at this." He stuck his hand inside the collar of his shirt and pulled out an amulet in a green sheath and kissed it. "But please tell your wife she shouldn't abandon medicine." My father began describing my condition to him, but he didn't listen very well. He continued writing a prescription and giving directions about how to administer the treatment. Then he stood up and started talking to me, "Now, if you remember any verses of poetry, recite something."

I had a childish interest in poetry. I recited some topsy-turvy verse to him and he went away praising it.

After that I didn't see the doctor again, but his medicines helped me and I got well. Among those medicines, I still remember a red-colored mixture and the way it tasted because I thought it was because of that very mixture that I was restored to health.

To this day I remember my sister's wedding because right after her departure such discord developed between our household and her in-laws' over some matters that both families swore an oath not to have anything to do with each other, and that position remained so firmly entrenched that even on the deaths of my mother and father no one from there came. Even my sister wasn't allowed to come. And, although she lived in the same city as me, I didn't see her after the time of my illness. Now, there isn't even an image of her face in my mind, but occasionally I remember the time of her wedding and, along with it, my illness, and the doctor, and also his mixture.

I still get together with my horse-racing uncle. After the death of my father, until I was standing on my own two feet, in a way he was my guardian. I remained on very friendly terms with him. He had gotten a bit senile and had started talking to me as though I was a friend his same age. I talked to him freely about everything too. He started having trouble

seeing and he was wasting away just sitting around at home, so I would go there at least once a week and take him out for a stroll. He would hold on to my hand and walk, and the whole way he would talk jovially. But he no longer remembered the names of people. If he mentioned someone during a conversation, he would make do with “he” or “him,” so it was difficult to understand who he was talking about. After bringing him home, I would promise to come again and take my leave. Then he would shower me with blessings and I enjoyed that.

It was the beginning of winter and the cold was taking its toll on my uncle. Nevertheless, when I arrived at his home he was waiting for me with his hat on and his walking stick in hand. That day I took him toward the bazaar where pots and pans were sold. It was located down a long alleyway. This was the largest bazaar for utensils in the city and it went on quite a long distance parallel to a wide street. Every so often, some narrow alley would branch off from that bazaar and join up with the wide street. Even at that time, large wide-mouthed pots and cauldrons and other vessels were being manufactured here and the sounds of hammering and pounding could be heard. The pots that were finished were being tin-plated, so everywhere you looked the grates of the tin-workers were ablaze and heat was spilling out of them into this shadowy alley.

As he was walking along, my uncle stopped suddenly and asked, “Hey, where have you taken me?”

I told him the name of the bazaar and said, “On the street it’s very cold.”

He held on to my hand and continued walking in silence for some time, then he started chattering. He kept going on about actresses and their famous films from when he was a young man and he told stories about some big sports figures. In the midst of all the hammering, his voice was nearly drowned out, but he’d already told me all of these stories before, several times, so I just kept guiding him along quietly. Then he started a story I hadn’t heard yet. He was telling it with a lot of enthusiasm, perhaps because several of that person’s horses had run in races. As he was telling the story, he again stopped suddenly and began looking around with his weak eyes. Then he said, “*Yar*, he lives right around here too. Turn into the alleyway on the left.”

“There is no alleyway on the left here.”

“Yes there is. Look carefully.”

“There are alleys on the right, but on the left ...”

“What are you saying?” he objected. “Just recently, when I came looking for pots for her dowry, I also ... No, I came here many times after

that too, and then, when I was on my way back, I stopped at his clinic. It was the alley next to the largest pots-and-pans shop.

I realized what the problem was and said, "Uncle, your brain is getting weak too, right along with your eyes. At the moment we aren't on our way back and the big shop is behind us. There is an alley near it too, but it's not on the left, it's on the right."

My uncle realized his mistake, but still he disagreed a little and said, "My mind is fine."

"Is it fine?" I said laughing. "You don't even know whether we're coming or going."

"Okay, okay, let's go. Let's go back."

We turned back and after walking some distance I said, "Here we are at your big shop."

"Good, now turn right."

"Not right, Uncle, left," I said and turned into the alley.

"Look around for the doctor's signboard."

I asked, "On the right or left?"

"Come on *yar*, why are you teasing me?"

Near the end of the alleyway, where the wide street could be seen clearly, a sign with the doctor's name on it was attached to a two-storey house. Adjacent to the house there was a spotless, new clinic facing the street. I'd seen it often when I was in the area. My uncle also saw the clinic and said gleefully, "This is it."

We went around to the front. I peered inside the clinic and quietly told my uncle, "The doctor is some youngish man."

"It must be his son," my uncle also said softly. "Come on, let's find out," and, pulling his hand loose from mine, he went and stood at the door.

The doctor looked up from the circle of patients and noticed my uncle. He hesitated a little, then looked closely and exclaimed cheerfully, "My goodness, Uncle, come in, come in."

"Are you well, son?" my uncle said going near him. "Doesn't my friend keep hours here anymore?"

The doctor pointed behind the clinic, "He's there, in the reception room. How are you?"

"How is he?"

"He's fine. He's been thinking of you these last few days. And tell me, how are you?"

"I'm okay. He crossed my mind and I thought, I should go visit him. You sit."

Uncle stopped the doctor from getting up. He turned around and took my hand and we went over to the door of the two-storey house. I put out my hand toward the door to knock, but he stopped me and knocked on the door himself—first once, then three times and, after pausing briefly, again, first once, then three times.

In response there was only silence for some time, then a voice could be heard, “My heavens, who’s lost his way today!” The voice stopped for a few moments and then it was heard again, “Come on, come on. Come in, *yar*.”

Uncle looked at me with a hint of smugness and we went into a room just off the *devrhī* (vestibule). The doctor was just getting up from an easy chair. After so long, how could I possibly have recognized him, and now he had a beard too. He spread his arms out toward my uncle. Freeing his hand from mine, my uncle rushed forward and practically fell on the doctor. For a while, the two of them stood holding on to each other silently. I sat down on a chair that was off to one side and looked around the room. Next to the easy chair there was also a takht, but even so the room looked like a clinic. There was a long, narrow table for examining patients, and a rather large, colored chart showing the inside anatomy of the human body was hanging on the wall. The colors had already faded. There was also a cabinet from which the mingled odors of English medicines were drifting. I immediately recognized the odor of the mixture that had come from the doctor’s office in my boyhood. I even started to taste it in my mouth—the taste was a bit different than the smell. Then I turned and looked at the two of them. They had separated and my uncle was sitting on the takht. The doctor was seated on the easy chair leaning over toward him and they were talking quietly.

It didn’t take me long to realize that they weren’t talking openly because I was there. I stood up and they both looked at me. The doctor said, “Bhai, let us visit a little while.”

My uncle said, “Yes, and why not.”

“I’m not going,” I said. “I thought I might just take a look around the bazaar. You visit as long as you like.”

After going out, I went and sat in a little teashop that was nearby. I noticed some patients were still coming to see the doctor, mostly old men, but there were a few burqa-clad women too. One woman came with a twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy. They were inside the clinic a long time and I kept waiting for them to come out. Finally I glanced at my watch. Uncle had been out quite a while. It was time to take him back, or rather, it was already past the time and now it was time for him to sleep.

The woman and the boy hadn't come out yet, but I got up and paid the proprietor of the restaurant for the tea. I went into the *devrhi* and then sat down quietly on my chair in the clinic. Uncle was lying on the takht facing the wall and he was probably asleep. The woman in the burqa was sitting on the examining table with her feet hanging down and the boy was standing right next to her. The doctor was now sitting up straight in the easy chair writing something on a piece of paper attached to a wooden clipboard in his hand—he really did look like a doctor. The woman said, “Doctor Sahib, please make the prescription for a whole month; coming again and again is very difficult.

I was startled. Her voice sounded exactly the same as my mother's. I tried to look at her closely, but she had concealed her face with the veil.

“Could this be my sister?” I wondered. When I looked at the boy again, I had the impression that he looked like me when I was a boy. My mind was abuzz. Just then, the doctor pulled the sheet of paper from the board, held it out toward the woman and said, “It's for fifteen days. After that send a report on your condition with him.” He pointed to the boy.

I went over near my uncle and started shaking his shoulder. He was sleeping soundly and it was difficult waking him.

“Hey, you woke me.” He was still dozing. “I'd gone to visit my doctor.”

The doctor laughed so hard that he started coughing, and after coughing quite a while he said, “You still dream the same way.”

Uncle's sleep vanished and he started laughing too. The doctor said to me, “He would fall asleep while he was sitting with us and then in his dream he would see himself sitting with us. One time he went too far. We were sitting on the bank of the river ...”

“Let it go, *yar*, don't hurt my feelings,” Uncle interrupted him and started getting off the takht.

I turned and looked toward the table. The woman and the boy had already left the clinic. Uncle stood up. He said something quietly to the doctor and then became glum.

Sitting in the easy chair, the doctor shook hands with him and then me. Uncle took my hand and, walking very slowly, we went out. It had become more crowded in the alleyway, and the wide street was even more crowded than that, but for going back I chose the street. We stopped briefly in order to cross. Uncle said, perhaps to himself, “Patients still come to see him.”

I told him that the last woman who came may have been my sister. Uncle didn't respond and I again said, “Uncle, that woman may have

been my sister.”

“She was your sister?” Uncle said. “Have you started dreaming too now?”

After that he was absolutely quiet and we crossed the street. □

—*Translated by Jane Shum and Muhammad Umar Memon*