HASAN MANZAR

Night of Torment

We waited the whole day for mother's return, but she neither came back, nor sent us word that she was safe.

Nowadays none of us really has the guts to step out of the house. The stores close early in the evening, and it no longer surprises anyone to hear an occasional gunshot ringing out during the night. On bad nights, the old woman in the neighboring house leans out of her balcony and screams in Persian, "Madam! Madam! What's going on?" But upon hearing mother's assuring, "Nothing, nothing at all," she goes back into her room, leaving the street once again enveloped in silence.

The sky above is the same as ever, and at night the breeze still rushes through the alleys and lanes, as it has always done, but the smell of burning gas from the oil refinery is no longer in the air. In other words, the air has become pure. But nobody is happy with this purity. Some even claimed that the earlier, fume-filled, gas-smelling air was actually better than this deceptively clean air. Our lungs refuse to accept it even though we know that it's healthier for us, just as sometimes a sick man cannot persuade himself to swallow food even though he is hungry; he sends it back saying, "I don't seem to be able to keep it down." People say the real reason the air is clean is that the oil refinery has been shut down, and everybody is staying indoors. This peace, this quiet cleanliness—call it what you will—is only a passing phenomenon.

That day everybody in our family went without food. We had surmised that something unusual had happened to mother. None of her usual friends or visitors—including the rich sellers of antique carpets, the police officers, and the servicemen—had come by our house to inquire

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"Biptā kī Rāt," from his collection *Rihā'ī* (Hyderabad: Āgahī Publications, 1981), pp. 20–40.

after her, even though we were sure they must have known she was in trouble.

Here everybody is for himself these days; some are surreptitiously transferring their money out to Switzerland, and some whose families have already gone abroad are busy making their own plans to go across the border. But our family has neither gold to smuggle out of the country nor money to pay for our journey abroad. Boats, dhows—all means of escape are beyond us. And, in any case, where can we go? Or, as mother puts it, who's going to take us in?

Actually, a number of changes have taken place in our household during the past couple of years. Sailors and aircraft mechanics no longer come by our house, and even the visits of the army men and businessmen have become scarce. The rent for the place we live in has gone up so high that mother often wishes there were some other person around to share it with.

There are four of us children in the family: two brothers and two sisters, but, unfortunately, both the sisters are younger than the brothers. If that hadn't been so, the numbers of visitors to our house wouldn't have declined as quickly as it has lately.

Nowadays we live in a two-room house. The visitors sit in the room which is more fully furnished and has on its walls large, gilt-framed pictures of the Caspian Sea and of female bathers on its beaches. These pictures have been there for years and have begun to look dull and common now. But to our new visitors they might still seem exciting.

This room, which may be called the salon, is used by us, the children, during the day. We jump over or lie down on the sofas. When the air is filled with the fragrance of flowers, or with the smell of perfumes, we open the windows. The curtains flap gently in the breeze and make tiny waves.

The other room is the living area for us brothers and sisters. There are beds in it and a table and a chair. On the wall hangs a poster-sized picture of Caliph Ali, as big as the largest picture in the adjoining room, though printed on inexpensive paper.

This back room is airless, and even the furniture in it is of the ordinary kind. It is painful for us to recall that all the expensive pieces of furniture have gradually been sold during the last few years.

Until recently, at night this whole neighborhood used to glitter with bright lights. As soon as it was dusk, the lights came on everywhere, and women began to appear in their windows. Cupping their chins in their hands and resting their elbows on the windowsills, they sat as if merely

watching the world below go by. Some women or girls sat casually astride their doorsteps, their backs leaning against the door frames.

At times, a sailor passing through the lane below would stop and with his new Japanese camera take a photograph of one of the girls. The light of the flash bulb would light up the window, as lightning suddenly brightens the sky. The photographed girl often smiled and waved her hand, and sometimes said a word like "Ciao." A long time ago we saw an illustration in a book—three children with their older sister, sporting a red scarf around her neck, peering out of a rough-hewn window frame. That illustration must have looked like some of those occasional photographs taken by the sailors. But none of those passing sailors who took mother's picture from the street below and who later on, upon being invited, came upstairs, ever sent us a copy of any of those pictures. But such incidents do not bother mother. She has always smiled for everybody's picture, just as little girls do.

The day passed and then it was evening. Then slowly the night began to fall. It was quiet all around, and the silence began to gnaw at us. We had no money at all, not even for a Pepsi and a mutton-kebab sandwich—mutton because that is the cheapest of all meats; a small piece of mutton is strung on a skewer, and then a piece of onion or a wedge of tomato is added, then another piece of mutton and some more pieces of onions or wedges of tomatoes are added, and so on. In all, the whole skewer holds only three or four mutton chunks. And although mutton has an unpleasant odor to it—unlike the kebabs from good restaurants, which have an appetizing aroma—when we were hungry, we would eat it without quibbling or fussing over the smell. Mother has always admired our good manners in this regard. Whenever a guest sat—actually, used to sit would be a more accurate expression—in the adjoining room (the room with the pictures of the Caspian) to drink his whiskey and sent for some chilo kebabs and pilaf for himself and mother, she would, on some pretext, often bring her plate to our room and leave more than half her share for us to enjoy, whispering as she left it, "Don't fight over it."

That night we didn't get even a wink of sleep. Our toes began to hurt from standing as we peered out of the window. The back lane, where once women wearing full make-up had often sauntered about in the darkness till late at night, or where they had stood in half-lit doors lifting their blouses and blowing on their breasts, was now like a graveyard. On the main road a military vehicle would hurry by every hour or two.

Mercifully, there were no sounds of gunfire that night. Our stomachs were empty. Our hearts were going pit-pat, and we were worried sick over

what mother might be going through. Our eyes smarted from the lack of sleep and our legs were in constant pain.

But somehow that night passed. At dawn we saw mother staggering into our alley after turning the corner in front. Seeing her in such an utterly pitiable state, the two older children just stood there, dumbfounded. The older girl let loose a loud scream, and the younger one fainted.

We don't know how mother had the strength to walk to the door of the building. She was like a toy operating on a nearly dead battery or on a nearly wound-down spring. She fell down in a heap as soon as she reached the door.

We ran down the stairs. A few women also came out of their apartments. They revived mother by splashing water on her face, and when she groaned, they tried to help her stand up. But when she couldn't, they just lifted her and carried her upstairs. We, the children, followed them quietly, as if walking behind a hearse. They put mother down on the big sofa in the salon.

One woman asked, "Is there any brandy or whiskey in the house ?"

"How could there be?" the other answered bitterly. "It's futile even to look for it. Whatever was left with anybody, those cloak-and-rosary men took it away in the raid the day before yesterday."

The old woman from the neighboring flat who sat there rubbing a wet handkerchief gently and sympathetically on mother's lips pulled herself up with difficulty. To stand up she had to push her knees with her hands, as she was known to suffer from arthritis. Everybody made way for her to pass. A while later when she returned from her flat, she was holding in her hand a small perfume bottle wrapped in a handkerchief. Knowing smiles appeared on the women's faces. Perhaps taking her to be an old hag, no one had bothered to raid her flat.

The old woman sat down once again near mother, on the carpet. She mixed a few spoonfuls of brandy in the glass of water which had stood untouched on a table near mother and asked her to drink it. Mother came out of her stupor as soon as she had the brandy. She tried to get up and walk towards us but only staggered and fell back down heavily. We ran to her and hugged her. She held us close and began crying and sobbing. Tears came to the eyes of many who heard her lament. The women gradually began to retire and go home.

Mother didn't seem much concerned about the lash marks on her back. Her skin had split in many places where the whip had struck her and in some places her shirt was clinging to her skin because of the dried

blood. The women were trying to loosen it with water. Some lash marks had even come up to her breasts, as though the whip were a serpent that had coiled around her and reached in front after having struck her repeatedly on the back.

Whispering to each other the women finally departed. They had been so concerned about mother's lamentation that none of them had even bothered to inquire if we had had anything to eat all day yesterday or last night.

Yesterday when the "cloak-and-rosary men"—the members of the Government's new morals patrol—had raided our house and taken away, in their police van, mother and her visitor, a man who was from out of town, the women who lived in the building had shut the doors and windows of their houses. Every door and window in the building, except the window of our house, had remained shut, and terror had reigned over the city.

Now, with mother's return, everybody—for the moment—breathed freely again, at least until such time as another woman would be taken in the police van to some unknown place, to return home twenty-four hours later, in a similar condition, staggering and half dead.

II

Most of the questions asked me were beyond my ability to understand or answer—for example the questions about the Shariat laws. I wanted to tell my questioners that I had never been taught about the Shariat, nor were there any schools, or academies, or even libraries where I grew up. Learned and religious men did come to our area, but only for brief visits, never to stay there for long. Some who came from foreign lands and were ignorant of our language often inquired about "the way up" in words which even illiterates like me knew had been learned and memorized by those people in their childhood in religious schools.

But in these troubled times, how ridiculous must our plight now seem to the same foreigners who would be sitting comfortably and peacefully in their homes, laughing at us. But there was one thing quite curious about the district I lived in: no matter when it was built up, it was meant for those who, of necessity, had to be temporary residents. Strangely enough, its population had never decreased, but only become bigger and bigger. So then where did those girls come from who were there day after day? Had they fallen from the sky?

But I didn't open my mouth to say anything, for women like me do not have any practice in the art of oratory.

This place where I was—whether a police station, a military barrack, a big hall in a former palace—whatever it was, was steeped in silence. It was the kind of silence which made every sound resonate—like the thud of the heavy army boots, or the whiz of an automobile passing by in the distance. It was a silence that made each sound carry an impression of its own, separate and distinct from other sounds, not as part of a group of sounds. In front of me hung the new slogans of the revolution, painted on white broadcloth which had been nailed to the wall. Red dust which had fallen from the wall due to the crude handling and nailing of the slogans had streaked the white cloth. It looked as if the nails had been driven in very clumsily. Here and there one could see small NO SMOKING signs written on pieces of cardboard which rested on wooden stands. The typist sitting facing the members of the tribunal was preparing a copy of the proceedings of the previous case. He had no interest whatsoever in my case, nor in the victims of the judgment rendered in the case he was busy typing up. The revolution seemed to have dehumanized him, transforming him into a machine. Nonetheless, earlier, when a bearded military officer had asked me my name and I had answered "Fatima," the typist cast a quizzical look at me, but then again become busy with his thumping on the typewriter.

My mind, when I faced the tribunal, began to wander. I didn't feel the least bit concerned about my erstwhile visitor who stood in one corner of the courtroom—or whatever that place was—terror-stricken, as though he had just come upon a ghost. Nor did I think about my four children I had been forced to leave behind, unfed at breakfast time.

Dozens of times I had asked myself the question: Do I have a will of my own, or did God, while He was shaping and forming me, forget to give me an individual will?

Apparently, neither I nor my children—that horde descended from the sky—had any claim to any place under the sun; also, it seemed that nobody, not even God, was willing to take on the responsibility of feeding us. "Not even God"—that nagging phrase would raise its head again and again in my mind, while I tried to push it back down each time. I had guessed what the verdict of the court was going to be in my case, having overheard the whispers of the functionaries who brought me in there. My mind had already gone half numb, and that phrase, "Not even God," despite my effort to suppress it, had begun to echo again and again somewhere in my mind. It acquired an identity of its own, like the

identity silence gives to sounds, as I have said above.

In the district where I live, the faces of girls and women look exactly alike at night.

Girls clad in colorful garments, their silky brown hair cascading down their necks and bare shoulders, their faces yet unmarked by lines of age or care, would doll themselves up every evening and take their places in the windows, looking very much like the pictures in the books our foreign visitors who stayed overnight with us often brought with them to while away the time. I know a smattering of German and French, as well as some English, and I've often seen my young visitors laughingly wave those pictures in front of our faces and say, "Like you, eh?" meaning that the girl in the picture looked like me or one of the other girls there. Once when a young man waved a page from a book printed simultaneously in four languages before my eyes and said, "Omar Kheyam?" his companion cut him short and said partly to him and partly to me: "All girls here are like Omar Kheyam. See! Even you look like Omar Kheyam to him!"

At that time, as I stood facing the tribunal, I remembered those pictures in the books, pictures of young girls with their curly hair, their eyebrows raised at the edges, looking like birds about to take wing, lending the girls' faces a certain dignity and haughtiness, their breasts sculpted from the whitest marble and visible through their see-through garments. The pictures also showed faces of bearded men, both young and old, holding goblets of wine in their hands, looking beseechingly at the girls, as if asking for something—life? escape from life? deliverance? Who knows. The girls in those pictures all looked alike.

The same bearded faces of the men in the pictures were also there in front of me at that time; some of the men were religiously picking their teeth after lunch, while others, oblivious to us, were whispering into each other's ears.

For me, though, that hour of the day was the hour when every woman in my district had slipped back into her own face, strained and tired, her fading penciled eyebrows revealing the stubble growing underneath on the wrinkled skin. At that hour of the day even the passersby were different from those who strolled down our street in the evening. There were no wealthy businessmen, no dealers in gold or opium or rich carpets. These noblemen were replaced by the riff-raff, the laundry men, the vegetable vendors and others whose job was to look after others' material needs.

For some time now even these lowly types had become scarce in our lanes. A number of women from our neighborhood had disappeared,

forcibly abducted, never to reappear. To begin with, these women very seldom had any men in their houses, men who could ask the authorities about their whereabouts. And if there were any, they wouldn't step out of their houses for fear of being shot.

The first question they would probably be asked: "Do you share in the profits made by that 'fairy' of yours?" And even if they could come up with an exonerating argument, an irrefutable alibi (such as, "No, that was the way things have always been"), since the government didn't have any other plans for such people, nor yet another world-view, these men would be taken away even while they were speaking in their defense and lined up against a wall (perhaps somewhere in the courtyard of the same building where I was); they would hear the heavy thud of army boots, the sound of American rifles being loaded, and some meaningless words (of the policemen, of the officers commanding them, pleas for mercy, a recitation of Gods' names), and then a loud report, followed by a long silence.

My older son has a Christian friend whose father drives a taxi in town. A picture of Mary, mother of Christ, holding the infant Jesus in her lap adorns the dashboard of the taxi. I've noticed that picture the few times I've traveled in that taxi. I've seen the driver make the sign of the cross when he narrowly escapes an accident. My son told me the other day that within the last few weeks his friend had become a totally changed person. He told my son that his family had become completely disenchanted with the country and that they were planning to emigrate to some other country because, in his father's view, their fellow citizens, the non-Christians, had suddenly become unrecognizable as human beings. They were no longer the people they used to be. As a result, he had been assailed by all kinds of fears—the fear of being publicly flogged, of one day being pushed up against a wall and shot. His greatest fear was that his own children might come to be colored by the world around them. For centuries these people had lived in this land, never fearing that their children would give up Christianity and convert. For them there was nothing to fear from the religion of the majority until now. But now he was scared of the outward form that that religion had taken, the form which threatened to teach his offspring not religion but a creed of violence and tyranny.

III

Come you spirits

…unsex me here,
And fill me from the
crown to the toe top full
Of direst cruelty.
—William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

By evening my erstwhile guest was in pitiful shape, while I sat on a bench empty-handed. We hadn't been given anything to eat or drink since morning.

The people who made up the tribunal kept changing during the day. Most of them had beards. These were the people known these days as "the men of the cloak and the rosary." The bench I sat on was at the back of the hall. From there I could observe everything, see everyone who came in or went out. Sometimes a person would rush in, hurry by the dais on which the members of the tribunal sat, and bow down respectfully with a hand on his chest before rushing out the opposite door. Once or twice during the day we heard shots being fired. The sound made my guest shudder. He and I sat quite far from each other, or I might have spent that day of hunger and thirst talking to him.

Many times I tried to catch the attention of anyone among those who passed by me, but it seemed they were not human beings but rather mechanical appliances devoid of all feeling. One could even have called them religious robots.

At last, at the time when the darkness of the evening had begun to show through the windows, and I had just about fainted with hunger, someone shook me and asked me to come forward. It was now our turn before the tribunal.

My companion cried, "No, no! For God's sake …," but the soldiers once again commanded him to move forward.

I was surprised to notice that in that room where only men had come and gone the whole day, a woman had quietly entered—I don't know when—and now stood respectfully on the left side of the dais.

I was in a sort of stupor, all my earlier fears having been drained out of me during the passage of the day.

A cloak-and-rosary man asked me the same questions I had been asked in the morning.

"Do you know the punishment for this crime of yours?"

I kept quiet.

He asked my companion the same question. He couldn't remain silent but began uttering, without really any reason or hope, desperate

appeals for mercy.

The cloak-and-rosary men present there in the evening were perhaps not the same ones who had questioned me in the morning, or perhaps they were the same, but having gone through a whole day of issuing and handing down punishments, they had lost count of who and how many they had punished and had, thus, become oblivious of our very existence in that hall.

The woman standing in front of me was about my own age, but she had donned a special type of uniform. I wondered if she had any children, and if she did, whether she had, like me, left them at home that morning, untended, to come there. More than in my erstwhile guest, I felt interested in her at that moment; in fact, I felt as if I were being drawn towards her by a certain kinship. Maybe, I thought, her husband was home looking after the children.

I was asked: "What is your means of livelihood?"

Respectfully I answered, "You know it already."

One member of the tribunal looked at me with glaring eyes and warned: "Don't forget that you are standing before a court, and anything you say might go in your favor or against you."

I nodded.

Another member of the tribunal asked: "Who fends for you?"

"I do it for myself."

"Does anyone else help you in this? I mean, who is your supposed husband?"

I kept quiet for a while and then answered, "I have four children."

"We know about all that," one of them barked at me.

Suddenly I was gripped by the fear that they might have been to my house in my absence. Greatly disturbed, I asked them that question.

My question pleased the members of the tribunal. They all smiled.

Then one of them looked me in the eye and asked: "Who is their father?"

Another one rephrased the question, as if correcting an error: "Who are their fathers?"

For a moment I was tempted to name the real fathers of all my children. But would that have served any purpose? The fathers of my children were still tied to me by an invisible string and it was within my capability to drag them into that court at that time. But I did not want anyone else to go through the agony I was going through.

"They have all fallen from the sky," I finally said.

The members of the tribunal admonished me harshly to mind my

words. In their view, I was already past any moral good, having reached the lowest depth of degradation. I had not just lost my virtue but had even become crude and unfeminine.

Within a couple of minutes of the last comment they read out their verdict. Citing chapter and verse and referring to religious decrees, they awarded me forty lashes and my erstwhile guest fifty. And the money that was found on my person was confiscated as "wages of sin."

Hearing the judgment, I swallowed with difficulty the thick spittle that remained in my mouth, but my companion fell to the floor in a swoon.

The two soldiers walked to the back of the hall where I had spent most of the day, picked up the bench and brought it to where I stood at that moment. They did the same with the bench on which my companion had spent a tearful day.

Then, upon a command from a cloak-and-rosary man, the woman approached me and asked me to lie down on my stomach on the bench.

Her job seemed peculiar for a woman. I looked her in the eye and asked, "So, it's you who'll …?"

"Yes," she answered.

I wanted to talk to her, to ask her if she had any children, but by that time my hands and feet had been tied with a rope and secured to the legs of the bench. The woman, devoid of human feelings, a cog in that huge religious machine, was standing over me, on my left side, holding a whip in her hand.

My punishment over, I was untied. My companion too had gone through his punishment and lay unconscious on his bench.

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A few hours later when I could see the early morning light spreading through the windows, I was let go with some advice on leading a chaste and pious life.

"Did you realize the nature of your crime?"

"No," I said.

Annoyed and angry, the cloak-and-rosary man said: "The proper punishment for the likes of you is death. You have lost all sense of guilt or shame."

I said, "My lord, a lot more besides the sense of guilt died in me today. But if you really want to know, I never had any sense of guilt."

He raised his hand to slap me, but I addressed him with courage—the kind of courage that wells up in those who are at the brink

of extinction. I said, "I feel sorry for you."

He held back his raised hand and asked: "For me? Why?"

"For what you are doing," I told him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that just as men have changed the course of my life, never allowing me to become what I could have, or what any woman could have, in the same way you have brutalized this other woman as well. She should have been rocking a cradle and singing lullabies, but just as you purchased me, you have purchased her as well, and put a leather whip in her hands."

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If you have the leisure
Consider it a blessing,
That you enjoy the company
Of a cup-bearer or singer,
Or of song or wine;
Forsake those forever who cheat
Their God with prostrations
And their Prophet with praises.
—Asadullah Khan Ghalib

—Translated by Faruq Hassan