

NAIYER MASUD

The Color of Nothingness

My dreame thou brok'st not, but continued'st it
Thou art so truth, that thoughts of thee suffice,
To make dreames truth; and fables histories.

—John Donne

Savār-e daulat-e javid bar guzār āmad

'Inān-e ū na giriftand, az guzār bi-raft

The rider bearing the eternal treasure appeared on the path
No one bade him halt. He traveled on.

—Anonymous (found in the
papers of Faḡl Allāh Ḥurūfī)

I DO NOT REMEMBER the story of the bad woman now, but back in those days I took a keen interest in it. I remember I was overjoyed at learning that her case would be heard at our house, and that she would herself come to see it settled. Prior to this, the case of another notoriously bad woman had also been heard at our house, and my elders had brought it to a neat conclusion. But that happened when I was still in my nonage. I had only heard others speak of her, and they continued discussing her case amongst themselves until the case of this second bad woman came along and absorbed their attention.

On the day she was due to arrive, the outer room of our house was given a thorough clean-up and then furnished with additional seats. Several curios, some of them centuries old, were added to enhance the room's decor. The elders also called on me to help tidy up the place, and I did what was required of me with considerable enthusiasm. As I was moving a chair, I guessed from the conversation of my elders that that was the chair the bad woman would sit in. My heart began to pound. I could almost

see her sitting right there. In fact, what aroused my interest in the matter was the opportunity it offered of looking squarely at a bad woman.

The elders alone were not going to try her; a number of outsiders were also expected to take part in the proceedings. These were honorable men to whom we had played host in the past as well. All the sumptuous reception arrangements were, as a matter of fact, intended primarily for their sake. My instructions, trickling in from the elders now and then, focused chiefly on ensuring that the honorable guests were properly looked after. But that wasn't where my interest lay.

A flurry of nervous activity swept over the elders as the time when everybody was set to arrive drew near. This obliged me to scurry back and forth several times from the side door of the house to the far outer room which formed a part of the house's façade. In the space between the side door and the outer room was a courtyard, the better part of which was overshadowed by a sprawling ancient tree bearing unusually tiny leaves. As the barrage of commands showed no sign of letting up, I too was infected by the same nervous tension and became breathless from my repeated rushed trips to the outer room. And yet I never failed, each time I passed under the tree, to raise my hand and give its branches a shake—it was an urge I could never resist, even now, when I was beside myself in all the excitement—and lift my eyes to look at the portico with the run-down roof which stood in a corner of the courtyard. The old surgeon lived in that portico. Every time I laid my hand on the branches he would call out:

“Why do you meddle with that tree for no reason at all?”

But today he did not utter those words even once. He just sat there amid God knows what kind of medicines and ointments. He was so pre-occupied with the paraphernalia before him that he forgot to defend the tree against my assaults. That day I saw him, for the first time ever, with the full array of his armamentarium; the fact is that he had given up the practice of surgery when I was still very young. He was an accomplished surgeon in his time, but I had only heard about his great expertise. To me he was merely an old man who pestered us with question after annoying question about everything and anything that transpired in the house. Old age had enhanced his nosiness. But most of his inquiries brought him no satisfaction: the elders rebuffed him, and I, for my part, gave him only incomplete and wrong answers which confused and befuddled him even more. As soon as the case of the bad woman surfaced, the old man was stung with curiosity. Every day he dragged himself out of the portico several times, only to walk back in, mumbling angrily. Today, however,

when he should have been more excited than ever before, he was just quietly engrossed in his work, as if nothing else mattered.

For this I would certainly have teased him a bit. But by now I was feeling worked up—mainly because it was well past the time the invitees should have arrived, and in fact none had done so. The elders began to feel increasingly jittery; once more I found myself scrambling out the side door on my way to the outer room, giving the branches of the tree a tug as I made my way along. The tree, just as it had each time before, showered me with tiny yellow leaves. Brushing them off my hair and shoulders as I reached the outer room . . . I saw there was nobody there.

I remained in the outer room for quite some time. Eventually the hushed stillness of the extravagantly decorated room began to bother me. Bored with the delay of the guests, I felt I no longer wanted to think about the bad woman, or the honorable guests either. It was then that I remembered Nusrat.

Hurrying by on my errands I had seen her, indeed every single time, sitting under the tree, leaning against it, staring straight ahead at the old surgeon or looking sideways at the ground, as her fingers traced lines in the dirt. And now I even seemed to recall that the first time I passed under the tree—or was it the second time?—she had turned to look at me. Perhaps she had also greeted me. But at the time I was too flustered to have returned her greeting, or even to have realized that she had actually raised her hand to me.

She had a sweet voice and she moved about nimbly. From time to time she came to our house to look after some sick relative of hers. Often I would notice how upon being called by someone she would pick her way from one part of the house to another with extreme caution, as if afraid she might step on something fragile and crush it. When she was present in the house, her name was heard quite often. But I rarely spoke to her: For one thing she talked in an exceedingly low voice, and for another, she kept her eyes lowered when she spoke. Yet she never failed to greet me.

At any rate, I started from the outer room, came to the tree, stopped and stood near it. I tugged at the branches lightly. The tree was in the throes of autumn and most of the leaves had turned pale and fallen. Here and there the branches were covered with spider webs, which caught many of the leaves as they came spiraling down. I looked at Nusrat. She sat leaning forward now, her head resting on her knees, her fingers still busily tracing lines. But then I saw her hand slacken and become motionless. Tiny yellow leaves covered her hair and shoulders, and she was

dressed in white. It was bright and sunny under the tree, but too warm to sit outside.

“It isn’t chilly out,” I said.

She raised her head to look at me, and I asked, “Are you feeling cold, Nusrat?”

She sat up, her eyes still glued to the old surgeon.

“Are you feeling cold, Nusrat?”

“Not really,” she said with a faint smile.

“Then why are you sitting here, in the sun?”

She didn’t answer.

“Why don’t you go in?” I said, pointing to the side door. “It’s very hot here in the sun.”

“Baba asked me to be here,” she said looking at the old surgeon.

“Come on then. We’ll go and sit with him,” I said.

And although she seemed to be willing to follow my suggestion, she made no attempt to get up. I repeated my words and waited for a while for her to rise.

“I am not able to walk,” she said softly and with a slight nod of her head pointed at her feet.

Only then did I notice: Her feet were badly crushed, blackish-green and so swollen it was difficult to attribute them to a human body. The skin had been split open in several places, and a light red showed between the cracks. The right foot had been totally twisted out of shape and the left toes, bloated and curling round, were buried to half their length in the right sole. It looked as though they were being sucked into the right foot with a tremendous force and before long would break off and completely vanish into it. All of this looked like a murderous struggle, the sheer tension of which had caused a mesh of protruding blue veins to erupt ominously all across her calves.

“What happened, Nusrat?” I asked her again and again.

“Everybody says both feet will just have to be amputated,” she said.

“But Baba wants me to let him ...” Here her voice became so faint I could not hear the words that followed. I looked at the old surgeon. He was busy picking up some iron instruments one by one and peering at them, drawing them close to his eyes. Something was coming to a boil in a clay pot nearby and the portico was filled with smoke.

“Baba said I’m not to let anyone know,” I heard Nusrat say. “He said he would do it today, because everyone would be busy elsewhere.”

“But, Nusrat, how did this happen?”

Thereupon she told me the whole story. I’ve forgotten some of the

details by now, others I couldn't make out as her voice, every now and then, dropped to a whisper. Perhaps she was in too much pain. She mentioned some men who were in a vehicle and wanted to get to a certain destination in a hurry. Perhaps there had been an accident. But something was blocking the vehicle and had to be removed. Nusrat promptly pushed whatever it was aside. But before she could get out of the way the vehicle lurched forward and crushed both her feet. It rolled on without bothering to stop and Nusrat lay there unattended for a long time.

"What kind of people were they?" I exclaimed after hearing her out. "Didn't they even notice they'd run you over?"

"As a matter of fact, they did," she said. "That's why only the front wheel passed over my feet. They quickly swerved the vehicle to one side, maneuvering the rear wheel away from my feet."

"But they didn't stop?"

"They were in a hurry."

"You didn't stop them either?"

"They were in a hurry. Still I managed to say ..." her voice faded out.

"What did you say, Nusrat?"

"But maybe they could not hear me."

"What did you say, Nusrat?"

"I said: You see how helpless I am."

I couldn't help laughing at this.

"What a pointless thing to say!" I said. "What good could it possibly do? It wouldn't have made a bit of difference even if they had heard it."

"But what else could I have said?"

I had no answer to that. All the same I said, "Men like them are not likely to be affected by such a remark. 'You see how helpless I am,' " I said, mimicking the way she'd said it. "Didn't you realize the sort of people they were?"

"That's what people are like," she said, and once again put her face back on her knees.

Sensing she was not going to cry, I continued. "So what happened then? How did you get out of there?"

Just as she started to tell me about it I heard a few sharp sounds. I turned around and looked at the old surgeon. He was getting up clutching his waist with his hands. Obviously, he was not the source of the sounds. I looked back at Nusrat. Her lips were moving but the racket drowned out her soft voice. Finally I did manage to guess where the sounds were coming from. I moved a few steps back to get a better view. I saw vehicles pulling up in front of the outer room. The bad woman had

arrived.

I sprinted off.

Most of the seats in the outer room had been taken. Nearly all the honorable guests had also arrived. Their faces looked unusually serious, almost grim. My elders, being the hosts as well, were in something of a fix as to whether to look more hospitable or more grim. A number of women were also present. The bad woman was there too, as part of the audience. Contrary to my expectations, she didn't look significantly different from the others. She had draped herself in several mantles, one on top of the other, and the only thing her face betrayed was exhaustion. Although she was practically buried under her clothing, a part of her belly with prominent blue veins could still be seen clearly. Her lips parted a little as she breathed, fully exposing two of her front teeth, which remained visible as she kept breathing fast. I was disappointed when I saw her. A girl was sitting right next to her, and every now and then the bad woman leaned toward her to say something. Following one of her remarks the girl began to look around and her eyes fell on me. She got up and walked over to me. Then she said, "Would it be possible to get a drink of water?"

I hurried off at once. As I passed under the tree on my way to the side door I saw the old surgeon sitting in front of Nusrat and examining her feet very closely. Hearing my footsteps he raised his head and squinted at me in an effort to make out who I might be. Had I tugged at the branches, he would have recognized me at once. As I hastened to the outer room after fetching the glass of water from the house, I saw the old man still studying Nusrat's feet.

The bad woman drained the glass in a single draught and then handed it back to the girl, who then returned it to me. I had to bring her water three times over. There was time for all this only because some honorable guests still hadn't turned up. Time and again a sudden silence would descend on the room, prompting one or another of the elders to dispel it by clearing his throat and uttering some stuffy pleasantry to the guests seated near him.

The fourth time I brought the water it was the girl who took the glass from my hand and began to drink from it in small, unhurried sips. Two of her teeth, refracted and distorted by the glass and the water, appeared enormous. When she handed the glass back to me I casually put it down on the floor near the door, and the girl returned to the bad woman.

By now the atmosphere in the room had become so intolerably thick that I thought I might as well withdraw for a little while.

As I was passing under the tree I heard the voice of the old surgeon.

“Come here,” he called to me. I turned to walk over to him.

“Come closer.”

I drew nearer. He put his hand on my shoulder, pulling me down toward him.

“Her feet are stuck together,” he whispered. “The first thing is to separate them. That is usually extremely painful. She may writhe and thrash about. Perhaps I won’t be able to hold her still by myself. I may no longer have the strength.”

I looked at Nusrat. There was panic in her eyes; still, she was trying to smile.

“Maybe if you talked to her and somehow kept her occupied ...” the old man whispered again. “Said things that would take her mind off me, completely off me. For if she suddenly jerked her feet, things would go badly for her. I mean her left toes would snap off. Don’t let that happen. When I gesture to you, keep her mind off what I’m doing. Make sure she remains absolutely still, and I mean absolutely still.”

Next he said something funny but couldn’t make her laugh, so I began telling her some anecdotes from earlier in the old man’s life. I spoke of his achievements in the field of surgery about which I’d heard; in the meantime the old man went on examining her feet from various angles and placing them on the ground in different ways.

I talked for a long time. I told her interesting tidbits about our family. Then I began to talk about her. But it could not have amounted to much, or been very coherent. What did I really know about her? All the same, I tried not to let her sense that thought. I now had the distinct impression that she no longer was thinking about the old surgeon. Throughout, I would glance at him intermittently. I saw him indicate that I should be ready.

“And do you know, Nusrat, what came to my mind the very first time I saw you?” I couldn’t even remember when that had been. Nonetheless I continued: “Do you know what crossed my mind that day? It seemed to me that you were walking on flowers.” I realized at once what an awful mistake this was and hastily proceeded to say, “Should I tell you something about your hands, Nusrat—something I believe nobody else could ever tell you?”

Right then I saw the old man make that unmistakable sign. I quickly took hold of both her hands and pressed them hard.

“Should I tell you?” I whispered. Almost at once I heard harsh voices

rise from the direction of the outer room and then melt away. Precisely then her hands trembled in my grasp. I saw her face turn blue, then red, and then ashen white. She bit her lips and her eyes expressed terrible agony.

“It’s all right,” I heard the old man say. “It’s absolutely fine. Well done! I will be able to heal her now. Just wait and see.”

I turned toward the old man. He had spread his hands over Nusrat’s feet, hiding them completely. I wanted to see what exactly he had done, but he sharply refused.

“Don’t look at her feet,” he said, “and don’t let her look at them either.”

I turned my face away and looked up at the spider webs stuck to the branches of the tree. It was absolutely quiet all around, except for the occasional soft clink of the surgical instruments. In anxious anticipation I waited for the old man to say something. And he did, finally:

“You may go now, if you like, and attend to your own business. I can handle the rest myself.”

Only then did I realize I was still holding her hands. She had put her face back down on her knees and her hands were damp with sweat. I let go of them, got up and, even though aware that I was already too late, began to walk toward the outer room.

A deathly hush had now swept over the room. The chairs were in total disarray, and some hastily scribbled scraps of paper lay near some of them. I collected the scraps. The scrawled writing marked the consultations which had taken place among the elders and honorable guests. I put the chairs back in order. I had a hard time deciphering the writing on the scraps, but once I had mastered it I tried to ascertain the events that had taken place during my absence. I arranged and rearranged the scraps in many different ways but failed completely to make any sense of them; as soon as I changed their order the events they were supposed to represent also underwent a complete change. I wasted a considerable amount of time juggling those scraps and was none the wiser for my effort. My interest, tremendously aroused by the sight of them, began to dampen and then vanish altogether. The room, lined with antiques, began to suffocate me. I felt I couldn’t stay there any longer. As I was leaving the room I noticed that the glass lay undisturbed near the door where I had set it. I didn’t bother to pick it up; instead I headed straight for the tree.

But there was only the carpet of yellow leaves beneath it. I furtively looked at the portico of the old surgeon. It was empty, although still filled with smoke.

Soon afterwards my house began to empty out. My people, all of them, began to expire, one by one in quick succession; the elders died off even more swiftly: as though they were a heap of rice pressed by a damp hand against a surface, lifting them clear off. I looked on at all this, thinking that I must be in a dream and hoping I'd wake up from it. Occasionally I felt frightened. Anyway, in the end I found myself all alone in a rambling mansion, trying to get used to my loneliness somehow. I would visit each part of the house, anxious, always anxious, not to let even the smallest space remain unoccupied by me for too long. Anyone watching me in those days would surely have thought I was looking for something I had lost.

But one day it occurred to me that I had somehow completely neglected the outer room. So I went there. The main door stood open as usual and the heavy curtain across it stirred slowly. The light inside the room was dim, which made the farthest chairs appear hazy. In spite of the poor light I could still see the heavy layer of dust which had settled on the precious curios. The walls too had become coated with dust, and the portraits of the elders looked faded and dull. I touched the curios one at a time, leaving my fingerprints on them. I wiped the dust off the portraits of my elders with my hand. They became so vivid that I felt like talking to them. And when I spoke I could hear my voice resonate inside the room. I talked for a long time. Coming to one portrait I broke my stride and stopped. The kind face peered at me with apprehension. A sense of loss overwhelmed me and I gently touched the portrait with my forehead.

"I remember everything," I said. "Everything."

Those anxious eyes just kept gazing at me.

"But nothing can be done now. I had no idea until right now how the same house could look so completely deserted, and yet so full of people. This very room..." I swept the room with my glance, "this very room, once upon a time..." my eyes caught the glass on the floor near the door, "why, even the bad woman..." Just then I heard the rustle of a dress, forcing me to turn around and look.

Someone had just gotten up from a chair in the distant gloom and was walking toward me. It was a woman. Is she the bad woman?—I wondered. But then I heard her voice.

"You wouldn't have recognized me," she said softly. She had drawn nearer now. I bent down and touched her feet to see if they were completely healed.

"This is wonderful!" I said. "I am so happy, Nusrat, that your feet are

better now.”

A long silence ensued during which neither of us said a word. Then I said, “I hope there are no scars.”

One after the other she put her feet forward in the light filtering through the bottom of the heavy curtain.

“Even the scars have disappeared,” she said.

Another long silence followed which I felt compelled to break. “After a few days,” I began, “you won’t even remember the terrible pain you had to endure. The scars would have been a reminder.”

“But I *shall*.”

“That’s what everyone imagines in the beginning. Without scars, though, one couldn’t remember—neither the pain, nor even the old surgeon.”

That seemed to disturb her and when she spoke again she did so hesitantly, as if trying to explain a mistake of hers.

“The scars would certainly have been there, but Baba himself ... He said there should be no scars.” Then after a while she added, repeating her words two or three times, “I didn’t say anything to him.”

“You don’t have to explain anything,” I said, raising my hand. “I’m not blaming you at all. But the fact is that there are no scars now.”

The stiffness in my speech was all too obvious to me. It was not right of me, I conceded to myself. But I couldn’t help it. The loss of so many had left me saddened.

“You must be wondering, Nusrat, why I’m talking this way,” I said. “You must be thinking it isn’t the way I spoke to you that day under the tree.”

“That was another day,” Nusrat said, looking intently at her feet. Her voice grew softer as she added, “I was in a pitiable state that day.”

She lifted her head to look at me. After a brief silence she said in a voice that was softer still, “That was a day of commiseration.”

“And today?” I asked, my voice growing louder. “Is it not a day of commiseration also? Weren’t you really looking forward to it?” I took a few quick steps forward and moved close to her. “But, Nusrat, let me tell you, my state is not pitiable.”

“When did I ever say that?” There was sheer torment in her eyes and her voice was tremulous. “I couldn’t even imagine it would turn out like this.”

Suddenly her voice choked. She seemed ready to collapse. I quickly caught her arm to support her. After I had steadied her, I released her and moved back. Her face lost all its color and she stood there so perfectly

still, so lost, for such a long time that she herself looked like one of the antiques in the room. My dusty fingers had left marks on her arm.

I now began to feel contrite. “I am sorry, Nusrat,” I said. “The room is full of dust and you are so fond of white clothes. And white does look lovely on you. I’ve heard many people admire you in white. As for me, I like black more. Do you know why?”

She raised her head to look at me. I repeated a line I had read somewhere—one I had never forgotten: “Because black is the color of nothingness.”

A sense of loss overwhelmed me once again. I have no idea how much longer Nusrat stood there, waiting for me to say something more. But finally I saw her turn around slowly and walk toward the door. I heard the muted sound of the glass breaking and saw Nusrat hesitate for a moment near the door. Then she lifted the heavy curtain. Outside light invaded the room and, just as suddenly, vanished.

She was a soft-footed girl. I couldn’t hear the sound of her receding footsteps.

I remembered that my prolonged stay in the room had caused me to neglect other parts of the house, and this prompted me to leave at once. Coming to the door my eyes caught the glass. It was broken now. I swept the pieces aside with my foot. The edges of some of the jagged pieces, I noticed, were stained with something—fresh blood, I recognized at once, even in the faint light.

Afterwards I had opportunity to pass under the tree many times. It had again filled out with dense foliage. The branches, unable to cope with the heavy burden of the leaves, had drooped so low over the ground that I had to crawl under them to get across. And if on occasion I walked totally absorbed in my thoughts, the soft leaves invariably struck me across the face. Which prompted me to think: Why not prune these branches which always get in my way?

One day I was going toward the side door. As I approached the tree I automatically bent down a little. But the leaves struck me in the face all the same and I noticed that the branches had drooped lower still. I was irritated. I thrust out my hand and pushed them away right and left, only to have them bounce back and strike me more forcefully than before. I began to feel terribly itchy on my face and neck and snapped off several branches, yanking them vigorously. I had to bend low to free myself from the tangle. As I straightened up and brushed the twigs and leaves off my body, I noticed someone sitting huddled against the trunk. It was not

possible to make out the face of the figure because of the gloom cast by the thick foliage, but I recognized her all the same.

“Nusrat!” I called out, picking my way toward her. As I drew near I saw that she was dressed in black.

“Nusrat!” I called her softly and my eyes fell on her. Her features were not visible. I couldn’t understand why this was so. I leaned forward and took a closer look. Dry yellow leaves covered her face like a veil. I wanted to remove the leaves from her face but saw that they were held together by cobwebs and my hand stopped halfway.

“Nusrat!” I called again, my voice growing fainter. I saw that the black mantle covered her from her shoulders to her feet. One of her hands was free of the cape and seemed to be resting on the ground. Her fingers were coated with dust and there was a maze of lines drawn in the dirt.

“Nusrat!” I said, but as a man talking only to himself. I shook her in an effort to wake her up. I tried to move her feet slowly. It was then that I saw: her feet under the black mantle formed an odd protuberance. I didn’t touch her. Somehow I knew that beneath the mantle her feet were again misshapen.

I looked around. My sweeping eyes came to rest on the portico of the old surgeon. The floor was covered with the debris of the caved-in roof. There was no voice to be heard anywhere. Not a thing seemed to move. The chill under the tree increased suddenly and a severe trembling seized my body.

I stood up and ran in through the side door. I had taken only a few steps inside when I turned back to close it. I firmly grabbed both panels of the door and brought them together. As the door was about to close I peered through the slit that remained to see whether Nusrat was still sitting there as before. She was.

I shut the door and was never able to open it again. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon