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Ba'i's Mourners

I

FEW PEOPLE KNOW, or perhaps no one does, that for a long time in my boyhood I used to be mortally afraid of brides. My fear sprang from a story about a bride in our family many generations ago.

Before I had heard the story, I, like my peers, used to feel a certain attraction to brides. If I attended a wedding, I tried to find a spot as close to the bride as I could. I'd touch her henna-dyed hands, her dazzling red clothes, her jewels, over and over again. The varied scents emanating from her body—of flowers, attars, and those other things that remained unrecognized—would draw me to her, and the gentle tinkling of her jewelry seemed to me sweeter than the sweetest melodies. I also noticed that every woman, on becoming a bride, turned into something soft and beautiful. So I was smitten by love—albeit short-lived—for just about every bride, and after she left with her groom I'd feel crushed, at least for a time, like the lover whose love has been cruelly taken from him.

But one evening, when the rain was coming down hard, I got to hear the story of that bride in our family long ago. After the *nikah* ceremony she had been sent off in the customary way from her parental home. But as she was being helped out of the carriage at her husband's house, it was discovered that she had died en route. She had bitten her lower lip until it bled, her body had started to turn stiff, and an old centipede had sunk itself into her calf. It is said that an old centipede sets its fish-hook legs into the victim's skin, and little by little enters the flesh all the way down to the bone. Eventually the victim dies, partly from the spreading poison, but mostly from the unbearable pain. This particular bride, it would seem, had died from the pain. She could have been saved though, if only she had let someone know. But in those days speaking up in such a manner was considered forward and immodest in a bride, so she didn't open

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her mouth, endured her pain, and quietly perished.

“If the poor woman had only so much as let someone know that a centipede had dug into her calf,” the female relative who was narrating the story added, “the centipede could have been extracted with a pair of heated tongs, or, if not, someone could have tossed a fistful of sugar on it, and it would have disintegrated then and there.”

The sugar remedy was something even I could understand. In those days whenever a gigantic centipede appeared anywhere in the house we would quickly throw some sugar on it. It would thrash and writhe for a while, begin to melt, and turn into water in no time.

My heart went out to the silent bride. I even felt a certain love for her, in spite of the intervening generations. But her story did not end there. The narrator went on to say that her death caused weeping and wailing to break out in the festive houses. Both families decided to bury her as she was—fully decked out in bridal attire and jewelry. That very day the bride, her “skin a vibrant yellow-orange from the sheen of her jewelry,” as the expression goes, was lowered into her grave.

But peace escaped her even in the grave. A man stole into the cemetery that same night, opened the freshly-dug grave and descended into it. His screams brought the people in the vicinity scrambling to the scene, whereupon they saw him lying unconscious beside the bride, the marks of her jewelry embossed on his hands and face. Members of the two bereaved families also hurried to the cemetery upon hearing the news. Only then did they find out that the offending individual was none other than the groom himself. As he was being pulled from the grave, the bride’s body, stuck to his, also rose up part of the way, then came unstuck and fell back down.

Certain funeral rites were quickly repeated and the grave was closed again. Now they attended to the husband. He was raving from the instant he came to. First he said that the bride’s ornaments had grabbed him and dug into his body; then he said that the bride had herself grabbed him; and then he claimed that the bride’s entire body had stuck to his. Why had he descended into the grave in the first place? Initially he gave no answer. Later, when his senses returned somewhat, he began by saying that he opened the grave only to have one last look at his bride. But later he revealed that he had been removing the bride’s jewelry.

For several days the groom wandered around as though demented. Eventually, he was found dead at his wife’s grave site. From that day forward, despite the knowledge that the bride’s grave had a substantial treasure in it, no grave-robber dared to so much as look in its direction.

Slowly, with the passage of time, all trace of the grave was lost.

The story made me feel, for the first time in my life, that a bride was something to be dreaded. In the falling rain, I began to hear the muted jingle of jewelry. Just then one of my elder brothers spoke up: “The bride wasn’t really dead. People just took her for dead and buried her alive. Out of modesty, the poor thing couldn’t even say that she was alive.”

Some people laughed at this, and the lady narrator admonished my brother to refrain from making fun of such matters. But the thought that the bride was buried alive frightened me even more, and when I somehow convinced myself that she lay dead in the grave, she appeared more frightening still.

She haunted my thoughts for the next several days. Sometimes I imagined her to be alive, sometimes dead, each case seeming by turns scarier than the other, and her jewelry scarier still. At weddings I felt nervous going near the bride; indeed I was frightened of weddings altogether. After a while, my fear began slowly to subside, but my former attraction to brides had left me altogether.

Right about that time, in the house across from ours, a wedding took place which I was obliged to attend.

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It went by the name of “balcony house,” because a balcony, spanning the length of its two top-floor rooms, jutted out over the street. We socialized with the house’s occupants. I was friends with the two younger brothers of the girl who was getting married. She was playful and talkative. She used to tease me all the time, with or without provocation, and said things now and then that made me feel both a bit nervous and a bit shy around her. All the same, her teasing pleased me, as she did herself.

I too got busy with my friends taking care of the wedding chores inside the house and out. Several times the desire to step close to the bride and touch her surged up in me like a flame, only to subside just as quickly. After the *nikah*, when it was time for the bride’s departure from her parental home, I tried to slip away, but my friends grabbed me. There was a crush of women in the long entrance hall below. I took my place quietly by a wall. Some time later the bride was escorted down from the room upstairs. Outside in the street the carriage stood waiting. In the entrance hall, women were saying their farewells to the bride one by one. They hugged her by turns and wept loudly. It looked as though a death had occurred in the house, rather than a wedding, and the mourners were engaged in a tournament of weeping, each trying to outdo the other.

Some faces were so contorted that they made me laugh; I was busy silently mimicking their assorted weeping styles in my heart so that I might preserve and later draw on this repertoire to amuse others. Just then a male voice rang out from the entrance door, sternly ordering the womenfolk to shut up and to let the bride into the carriage immediately, or they would miss the train at the station. Silence swept over the entire hall, and the bride, surrounded by the crowd of women, began to pick her way slowly toward the outer door, leaning over the shoulders of both her younger brothers, amid the soft jingle of her jewelry. Two women gathered the lower part of the bride's costume and held it slightly off the ground. The red wedding dress and long veil allowed nothing of the bride to be seen, except a portion of the white of her calf just above her heavy ankle ornament, which seemed to be touching her embroidered slippers. As she passed in front of me I wondered why, as a bride, she looked so diminutive. I craned my neck between two women standing directly in front of me, to give her a close look. I don't know how, but she managed to glance at me from behind both her double veil and the screen of strung flowers and ornamental gold and silver streamers cascading over her face. A tremor swept over her entire body, and it seemed to me the two women in front of me quickly dissolved into a big red blur. I heard the sharp clink of jewelry and saw the bride standing at her full height straight in front of me. She bent over, hugged me, and began to cry loudly. The mingled scents of flowers, attars, and her body assaulted my senses in unison. I felt her jewel-studded bracelets dig into my shoulders, the pain obliterating the pleasurable softness of her touch. The women tore her away from me, but a link of her gold necklace became entangled with a button of my open collar. The efforts to release it managed only to tangle it further. The bride was now standing fully bent over a couple of steps from me, with the gold necklace flashing between us, as several women tried to tear the offending button off my shirt. The sound of crying got louder in the entrance hall. Just then I recalled the bride whose jewelry had grabbed a man. The selfsame bride was standing before me, I felt; why, I could even see her dust-colored face behind the veil and floral strings. I saw that she was advancing toward me, but without taking a step, and before long her body would be stuck to mine, or mine to hers. In those few moments I also felt that there wasn't a soul in the entrance hall except the two of us—indeed, it wasn't even the entrance hall, but a freshly dug grave, with the branches of a crooked tree drooping over its open mouth.

I twisted swiftly backwards and bumped into the wall, then tore

through the crowd and emerged outside. With a gold link from the bride's necklace still stuck to my shirt button, I ran across the street and into my house.

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I didn't tell my family anything, but the incident had a bad effect on me. Whenever I walked into a vacant spot of our house I was inevitably seized by the feeling that some bride was about to come at me from behind something. Vague sounds awakened me at night, and my sense of smell was flooded with a mix of pleasing odors that hovered around me for some time after I'd woken up. Behind the rain or any other continuous noise I heard the sound of crying and the soft, subdued jingle of jewelry. It was hard for me to pass by any unused room whose door was ajar, because several times I saw a white calf, a black centipede dug into the flesh, slowly receding into the room.

The family that lived in the balcony house had moved out shortly after the wedding and an elderly couple had moved in. During the time the house remained vacant, I practically staggered every time I passed in front of the entrance hall. If the door appeared open even a crack, I imagined seeing the glitter of jewelry in the darkness and believed that if I were to peer through the opening I would surely see the bride there—not the loquacious bride of the balcony house, but the one in our family some generations ago, the one who quietly died.

I knew all these were mere illusions, fancies my mind had conjured up. But imagined sights appeared truer than real sights to me, and fancies more real than facts.

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I was convinced that I would pass my life, all of it, haunted by this fear, but as I got older, the fear faded, along with many other boyhood feelings. The bride progressively lost her hold on me. Now whenever she came up in a family discussion, I would detect various inconsistencies in the story and wonder with amazement that I once could have been so frightened of her. The demise of this fear sometimes evoked a vague sadness in me. Perhaps—I fancied—the time is not far off when both the lifeless memory of the bride and the equally lifeless fear of that memory will have faded from my mind forever.

But only days ago both briefly came back to life.

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There had been a death among our relatives that day. When we arrived at the cemetery with the bier, the grave wasn't yet ready. In three separate locations, perhaps halfway into the excavation, the remnants of a previous grave had emerged. Shoveling the earth from the fourth site, the gravedigger assured us that no previous grave was likely to be found here. People who had accompanied the bier wandered off into the cemetery to while away the time. I too joined one of the groups. Now I looked around the place with growing interest and attention, for I was visiting it after quite some time, and, besides, this happened to be our family graveyard, though most of the graves belonged to other people. Actually, anybody could be buried here, but since the land had been donated by my ancestors, our permission was required for burial. This provided a sort of income, which, considering that the graveyard was quite large, amounted to very little, practically nothing. At the moment others in our party were talking about just this financial aspect, but in a legalese which entirely escaped me.

I turned my attention away from their discussion and noticed that the trees appeared far fewer than before, and even among these most looked withered and dead. In the increasing heat of the sun I felt the absence of the trees even more keenly. The branches of the misshapen tree near us looked twisted and cracked. With its bare black branches, the whole tree looked funereal, except for a single branch. Jutting out from the tree's girth this branch was surprisingly covered with bright green leaves and shaded a patch of earth.

In a few days it too will dry up—I speculated, standing under the branch looking at it. Just then one of our party remarked, "This tree has always been like that—dry as a bone; and this branch too—always lush green."

He was a poor, decrepit man. Noticing how attentively we were listening to him, he added, "Perhaps some bride is buried here. Under this very branch."

Noticing our growing attention, he offered further, "People say if a bride dies before reaching her groom's house, the branches shading her grave never wither."

For a moment my boyhood—a boyhood pervaded by that bride—returned to me. The party had meanwhile moved on ahead, chattering away, and I could not stop them. I felt sure in my bones that I was standing near the unmarked grave of that same bride. I felt the dry earth shift under my feet, and one of the cracks in the ground seemed to

widen.

Is it starting all over again? I wondered. But I wasn't frightened. Melancholy seemed to lap up from the ground in waves. When I tried to evade it, I felt the old fear return. I defiantly curbed the desire to bolt. Instead, I sat down firmly on the hot desiccated earth. The spell lasted no more than a few seconds. Then things were back to normal.

It was announced that the grave was ready and the people wandering around in the cemetery began to gather in one spot. I got up and made my way to the assemblage, pondering throughout how the whole thing had begun and ended so quickly.

Although it escaped me at the time, the thought occurs to me now that perhaps the reason it had happened was that I knew, even though at the time I didn't remember it, that Ba'i too had been laid to rest in this very cemetery.

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The old couple had moved quietly into the balcony house, growing older with the passage of time, unbeknownst to the world. I don't even recall when or how I first became aware of their presence, but at some point, through the wide-open outer door of their house, I would often notice an elderly gentleman seated on a *takht* in the entrance hall. Usually, a few rattan chairs would be placed beside the *takht*, occupied occasionally by a couple of old men from the neighborhood. Often I saw them quietly absorbed in a game of chess. To concentrate more fully on my studies, I had in those days moved into the secluded rooftop room of our house. Both the entrance hall door across the street and the two top-floor rooms could be seen easily from this vantage point. A row of flowerless potted ornamental plants ran along the front edge of the overhanging balcony, and a little girl, decked out in rustic silver jewelry, appeared every second or third day to water them with a tin-coated copper can. Our two houses were separated not just by the street but also by our garden; from that distance she really looked like a little girl. Later—exactly when I cannot tell—I came to know that she was in fact the couple's maidservant and went by the name of Khanam. All the neighbors and shopkeepers of the area were familiar enough with Khanam to joke around with her. She was a *pabaaran*—a mountain woman—and perhaps even older than the couple she served, but she was no taller than a girl eight or ten years old. Perhaps that's why people talked to her as one talks to children. She walked

as though she were propelled by a series of pushes from behind. And her speech imitated her gait: it seemed as if every word got stuck in her mouth and waited to be ejected by a kick from the word following it. The neighborhood brats, as well as some of the shopkeepers, mimicked her when they talked to her, which sometimes annoyed her and prompted her to threaten: "I'll report you to the police!" But by now everyone knew that if anything, she was more afraid of the police than they were. The mischievous boys would sneak up behind her and shout in her ear, "Police!" causing her to jump up and take off in a panic, stopping a few steps later to snap, "I'll report you to the police!" She came and went freely in the neighborhood houses—mostly to talk with the domestics—and was our chief source of information about the old couple.

She called her mistress Ba'i and her master, Sahib. It is from her that we learned that the couple was childless. Ba'i had no family. Sahib did have quite a few distant relatives, some of whom lived in this very city, but social interaction between them and Sahib had ceased a long time ago. When one of them fell ill or there was a death among them, only Sahib went to visit. Ba'i never stepped out of the house. She suffered from rheumatism in her knees, which made it difficult to move around; climbing up or down the stairs was practically impossible.

Once when Khanam mentioned to my mother Ba'i's chronic ailment, my mother gave her a fairly simple recipe for a rubbing-oil, but was a little uncertain of the exact proportion of one of the ingredients. After Khanam had left and my father had come in, Mother asked him about the proportion, which led them to talk about Ba'i and Sahib. It turned out that Father knew something about the couple. He told Mother that in her youth Ba'i was a well-known singer in the city. He also revealed the name by which Ba'i went back in those days—a name known to every music enthusiast. He also mentioned that Sahib was a scion of an old, noble family, but time had turned against him. All the same, he was the greatest admirer of Ba'i's art. He had married Ba'i in those days and the two had left the city shortly thereafter.

"And you—you didn't go to hear her sing?" Mother asked, laughing.

Father also began to laugh. "I was neither an enthusiast nor the son of a nobleman," he said. "I was a student in those days. All that frantic running around, just to scrape up enough money for the fees, left me no time. I didn't hear her sing, but it was impossible not to hear of her fame as a singer."

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Most of the time I would see Sahib sitting inside the entrance hall, which made it difficult to get a good idea of his features. Every now and then, though, I would spot him either as he emerged from the house to go out or when he returned. He held in his hands a walking stick, carved and ebony-colored, and his clothes, of an eastern cut, conformed to the garb of the city's old, venerable dignitaries. But he never failed to appear wearing an English huntsman's hat. He would walk very slowly, tapping the ground with his cane. But even on these occasions I only saw him from a distance. A few times I also spotted him some distance away in the bazaar, and recognized him only by his walking stick and hat.

As for Ba'i, I saw even less of her. The door to one of their two rooms visible from my room remained permanently closed. The door to the other room was usually opened when Khanam watered the plants, although once in a while they also opened it when it felt close and sultry or when a fine cool breeze started to blow. On those occasions Ba'i appeared seated on her bed inside the room. Several times I saw Khanam combing her hair, and once Ba'i herself was combing Khanam's. In her case too, it was not possible to observe her features clearly from such a distance; I could only tell that she was a portly woman and well along in years.

Initially I suspected that Sahib had set up his quarters permanently on the ground floor. But one day Ba'i's door was left open and I saw him sitting on her bed, bending forward every so often, while Khanam walked up to the couple, then withdrew, only to approach them yet again. I figured the two were eating together. I was to witness this scene many times over. Once I even saw him trying forcibly to feed her something; the old lady repeatedly refused, pulling her face away this way and that, but laughing heartily all the same. Just then Khanam arrived with the water. Ba'i clapped her on the back and she exited shaking her shoulders with suppressed laughter.

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Perhaps my family would know, but I cannot even guess how long Sahib and Ba'i lived in the balcony house. And this because I could not interest myself in the two. The couple was part of the colorless landscape around me, and whether I looked at them or not hardly mattered. Which perhaps explains why I failed to notice that the door to the upper-story room hadn't opened for days, nor had the door to the entrance hall below, which remained bolted from inside. Only the day Khanam showed up at

our house to borrow the hot-water bottle did we find out that Ba'i had been gravely ill for the past several days and Sahib had been out of town. When asked who was looking after the old lady, she informed us that Ba'i had sent for two of Sahib's female relatives who had arrived just that day.

In the evening I found the doors to Ba'i's two rooms fully open and a couple of new women moving about in the rooms. The next morning a fresh contingent of some half-dozen women materialized, and by the afternoon of the third day their numbers had grown further. On the fourth day, shortly after sunrise, crying was heard from the house.

I looked on for a while and then came down to inform my family. I found Khanam sitting in our courtyard crying. She had already broken the news: Ba'i had passed away a short while ago. The attending ladies had sent her out for some incense to burn near the deceased, but the shops hadn't opened yet. My mother was rummaging inside a cupboard in the verandah wall for a small packet of incense and, at the same time, asking Khanam about the details of Ba'i's illness. Khanam told everything in due form. She also mentioned that Sahib still hadn't returned, that Ba'i had been perfectly well when he left, and that he would tell no one but Ba'i where he was going.

I went back up to my room. The sound of crying at Ba'i's place had nearly died out by the time it was fully day. But carriages kept arriving at short intervals, dropping off women passengers in front of the entrance hall. Their male escorts, who didn't look like the residents of the neighborhood, would stand in the entrance hall, while loud wails erupted and quickly died down upstairs. At one point, though, the wails peaked and did not subside; they grew progressively louder and finally reached full-fledged pandemonium. I walked over to my door. Ba'i's quarters looked like a riot scene: there was no crying, only screaming, with Khanam's jolting voice rising above everyone else's. Women were jabbering and springing on each other, overcome by their grief. A terrible restlessness had gripped them, and Khanam, like a bat caught in a sudden avalanche of light, was flailing about inside the room, bumping madly into everybody. Shortly afterwards, male voices rose from the street. I peered into the space under the balcony. The contingent of men was having a heated argument in front of the entrance hall, while a couple of neighborhood people were trying to calm them down. Finally, after watching the tumult raging both upstairs and down, I saw the women file out of the entrance hall and depart with their men. They were talking loudly, as their men just as loudly tried to hush them up. I could not make out what they were saying. I looked at the balcony again. The doors to the two rooms were

closed. And it was so quiet, as if nothing had happened at all, though I did smell the incense carried over by the breeze.

I went downstairs to let the family know about the commotion. But Khanam was already there and had apparently told them the whole story, which our own women were repeating now.

According to Khanam, Ba'i had spent most of the past few days in a semiconscious state, during which, now and then, she would suddenly become alert and ask about Sahib, only to drift back into a stupor again. But a day ago she had become fully conscious and looked quite all right. She asked for something to eat, then had Khanam bring her her jewelry boxes. She put on the jewelry, every single item, and emphatically told Khanam to leave the entrance hall door open for Sahib. All night long she sat in her bed fully awake. In the morning, she inquired about Sahib again, had Khanam comb her hair, and asked for her collyrium box. As Khanam was returning with the box, life departed from Ba'i. Sahib's female relatives, a whole host of them, had arrived. The lamentation got underway. After some time, the women began to throw themselves on Ba'i's hands, feet, and face as they wept and wailed. While this was going on, when one of the women, still crying, pulled away from Ba'i's face, another noticed that one of Ba'i's earrings was missing. She asked where it had gone. "Wherever the ring did," the first woman said, pointing to a third woman in the group. A ring was also missing from Ba'i's finger. This was the beginning of the riot. Before long, everyone was accusing each other of stealing, all the while trying to establish her own close relationship to Ba'i and laying claim to her jewelry. It got to the point where they pounced on Ba'i, picking the corpse clean of every last bit of jewelry. In the words of the womenfolk, she was left "naked."

I felt Khanam's account was somewhat exaggerated. I said that I had watched the entire incident myself and didn't notice such plunder. I then went over the incident exactly as I had witnessed it from my rooftop. Khanam listened with indifference, even with faint contempt, and responded that she, at least, had been present at the scene. Then she said that the women relatives had all left in a huff, and entrusting Ba'i's body to some neighborhood women, she said, she came here specifically to ask us to somehow find Sahib and let him know. Father was called in. He had absolutely no idea where Sahib might be, but he nonetheless scribbled a few words and had the servant hand-carry them to some of the old, knowledgeable people in the city who he thought might have been acquainted with Sahib. Only now did everybody notice the little bit of blood coming from Khanam's nose and ears, and that the crude, heavy

silver jewelry which never left her was missing from her hands and feet as well as from her face. Mother let out a scream: “What?!—have they plundered your jewelry too?”

No, Khanam said. What happened was that as she grabbed at the women one by one and searched them in order to retrieve Ba’i’s jewelry, each woman fended her off. So she herself tore off every piece of her own jewelry and hurled it at them, saying, here, take this too.

“After all, they were my Ba’i’s too,” she said and started to wail as she wept.

Only after a long time and with the greatest difficulty could she be consoled. She let us apply medicine to her wounds to stop the bleeding, and then sat down to wait for the servant’s return. She was given food; she didn’t object and ate it with her head bowed low.

Meanwhile the servant returned with the responses. Nobody could tell where Sahib might have gone; they didn’t even know that he had come back to the city.

As Khanam was about to leave, the servants who took care of the outdoor chores brought fresh news: Somebody had reported to the police that Ba’i had been murdered in broad daylight and robbed of her jewelry. The police had just arrived, had taken the body into custody, and were now looking for Khanam to take her statement. How much she dreaded the police became clear to us only now. Her face, desolate enough without its jewelry, looked positively deathly now. As my people were expressing their views about the developments, she stared at them one by one with lifeless, glassy eyes. To top it all off, one of my maternal uncles, who was an expert in legal matters and had in fact arrived from Kanpur in connection with a lawsuit, scared her even more by saying that the matter would likely drag on, and that as a witness she would be repeatedly subjected to interrogation by both the police and the attorneys. When now asked to go and give her statement, she threw herself down and began to flail and writhe. She wouldn’t listen to anybody and scurried from room to room trying somehow to hide herself. Finally, we had to hand her over to the servants outside who were told that under the circumstances it was hardly appropriate to let her hide with us.

As Khanam, screaming and frantically throwing her tiny legs every which way in resistance, was being literally carried outside, I noticed that my maternal uncle had taken Father and Mother aside and was telling them something in hushed tones. He gestured for me to come over to him and announced that he was taking me to Kanpur that very minute.

“And remember,” he said emphatically, “don’t tell anybody here or in

Kanpur that you have witnessed anything, or they will drag you too into the court to testify.”

Mother quickly packed my bags for the trip. We left the house from the door that opened into the back alley, crossed over to another street, and set out for the train station.

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In less than a week I was called back from Kanpur. On my return I found out only three things: one, that Khanam had gone into hiding with one of our servant’s kinfolk and had disappeared the very next day; two, that Ba’i had been interred in our family graveyard with my father’s permission, indeed at his suggestion; and three, that there was still no news of Sahib.

I went upstairs and looked over at the house. Most of the plants on the balcony had withered, and all the doors, both upstairs and downstairs, were shut. It appeared as if they hadn’t been opened for years.

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On the afternoon of the fourth day Sahib showed up at our house, as usual wearing his huntsman’s hat and tapping his walking stick. At that moment I was preparing a flower bed in our front garden, while Father stood nearby giving instructions. Sahib came over to us. Father stepped forward to greet him, then offered his condolences. Sahib thanked him for allowing Ba’i a plot in our family graveyard. He made to leave immediately, but Father asked him to stay a while longer. They moved to the adjacent terrace and sat in the chairs under the mulberry tree and started to talk while I continued with my work. Sahib stayed longer than expected. He was given to speaking softly, so I could not hear him clearly, but I could guess that he was recounting Ba’i’s virtues, in the way the dead are praised, narrating some incidents to substantiate them.

Finally he got up. Father gestured for me to escort him to the gate which opened onto the street, and he himself accompanied Sahib to the edge of the terrace adjacent to the garden. Sahib stopped at the outer steps of the terrace, shook hands with Father, climbed down the stairs and walked a step or two, then stopped and, throwing his entire weight onto the walking stick, whirled around.

“Just tell me this, please,” he said in a loud voice; but then before asking anything, he fell silent.

Father said a few words by way of consolation and Sahib turned around and strode away, tapping his stick. At the gate, he said without looking at me, "This is far enough, son. May you live long," and walked out the gate into the street.

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The same week when I opened the street-side door of my room one day, I saw a couple of horse-drawn carriages, packed with household stuff, standing in front of Sahib's entrance hall, while some neighborhood people stood nearby talking among themselves. I also saw that the row of plants had disappeared from the balcony. I stayed where I was. After some time Sahib emerged from the entrance hall, closed the door behind him, fastened the chain, put a large copper padlock on it, and placed the key in the hand of a neighborhood elder. Then he embraced everyone by turns. It caused his hat to slip from his head, but each time he secured it before embracing the next person. The carriage in front moved on. Sahib climbed aboard the carriage and took his place next to the coachman on the front seat. The carriage lurched forward, then halted. Sahib got down and said something to the coachman, who climbed down from the other side, walked to the back seat, took out a footlocker and a clay water pot with its wooden stand, and moved them to the front seat. Sahib settled on the back seat. He looked at the people standing in front of him and raised his hand in farewell. The reins jerked a little and the carriage started off behind the one in front. At the end of the street both carriages turned toward the train station. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon