

NAIYER MASUD

## Remains of the Ray Family

I

**I**T WAS MY FIFTH DAY in Azimabad. I had gone there for a brief visit at the invitation of a friend of mine, but my real objective was to get used to staying away from my ancestral home. Perhaps my friend had the same objective in inviting me.

After living for more than half a century in my ancestral house, I had decided to move to a smaller one. All I had to do to make myself agree to this decision was to stroll around at night, thinking deeply. But before I could leave, I had to empty the house of its accumulated possessions. Three smaller houses would not have held all the decrepit beds, the cradles, the tables and chairs in it. I had to put aside all the extra things and destroy those that were totally useless.

I tackled the heavier furniture first and somehow managed the perplexing task. But when I reached the smaller pieces the task began to confound me. Whenever I decided that something was useless, it immediately acquired a new weight and meaning. Even though I could not find a use for it, I could not throw it away. Confused, I would set it aside and move on.

In this state of confusion, I stepped into the small attic and opened the wall-cupboard there in which the remains of my childhood days were stored. The wooden doors of the cupboard were decaying, and in places the contents were visible from outside. The wooden planks which made up the shelves sagged. The plaster on the back wall had disintegrated, forming little heaps of dust on the planks. There was a layer of dust on everything. One glance was enough to tell me there was nothing useful here. Nevertheless I scraped the dust off the shelves and picked up every item, inspected it carefully, and put it down on the floor. My elder brother, who now lived abroad, had his things on the middle shelf. These

included incomplete stories written by him, notebooks of favorite verses, and pictures cut out of magazines.

There was also one complete story without a title, written out in another hand, with many mistakes of grammar and expression. It was authored by someone called Naubahar Gulrez, or some such romantic pen name. I glanced through it casually. It was the unfortunate story of a poor young man in love, suffering pangs of separation, and was written in the form of letters to his rich and cruel beloved. Much recourse had been made to the first lines of film songs popular in my youth. The last letter contained best wishes and congratulations for the beloved's marriage, followed by a film song in its entirety and the letter-writer's announcement of his intention to commit suicide.

My own effects were stored on the top and bottom shelves. There were the remains of my temporary occupations: cracked pens, rusty knives, some crumbling equipment for a magic show, torn children's magazines, and so on. In one corner there were two empty bottles that had once held a famous foreign perfume. The perfume had been so popular in its time that it was often referred to in fiction. The bottles were dark blue and flat in shape, and their stoppers were missing. I sniffed the bottles in turn, but there was no fragrance.

As with the story, no memory stirred at the sight of the bottles. But when I wrapped them up in the pages of the story and swung my arm to throw them out into the courtyard, I felt that these, too, could be of some use. My hand faltered and I just put them down on the floor. Everything else in the cupboard made me remember something from the past. I began to think that I could never throw out anything. When I made a weak effort to get rid of something, I found that my resolve to leave the house was faltering too. I was not even prepared to leave the splattered drops of whitewash on the dirty walls, called "tears" in the vocabulary of masons. Looking at those drops, I caught myself thinking thoughts which, if written down, would not have shamed Naubahar Gulrez. The realization came late, just like the feeling that I had wasted my time in opening the cupboard. I gathered up everything from the floor, including the blue bottles wrapped in the pages of the story, and stuffed them back into the cupboard. Leaving the cupboard open, I walked out of the attic.

I packed a few things for my trip, picked up a book to read on the way, and left for Azimabad that day.

My friend welcomed me warmly. He was the head of the Department of Posts there, and had been allotted a grand government mansion. At my request, he took me on a tour of the house. I praised its wide-open spaces, and he responded by pointing out its many defects. The biggest shortcoming, according to him, was that it took a long time to go from one level to another.

“The age of such large mansions has passed,” he said finally, “especially ...” Then he stopped and began to talk of other things. Despite his preoccupations at work, he introduced me to all his local friends over the next few days. He even took me to his office, where some member of his department would come in every few minutes for his orders. Between the interruptions, he would find time to talk to me, although I spent most of my time reading the books I had taken with me from the library in my friend’s house.

One day, before the people from his office began to come in, we got some time to talk. He mentioned the complications of his official life. His biggest regret was that workers from his department were spread out all over town, making it impossible for him to roam about freely and aimlessly in the streets.

“Wherever I go,” he said wearily, “somebody always recognizes me and begins to think, What is the Sahib doing here?”

“Let him,” I said.

“Then he makes a guess.”

“So what?”

“So then he starts believing his guess. Then he communicates his belief to others, and soon something about me which I hadn’t even dreamt of becomes the talk of the town.”

“Yes,” I said, “that’s the price you pay for fame.”

“The price of fame,” he repeated humbly, and grew even wearier.

“At least in your department.”

“In my department—” he stopped suddenly and his weariness vanished. “Perhaps you are unaware, sir, that at this moment your fame is resounding through my department.”

“Mine?” I asked. “What have I done?”

“Everybody’s desperate to discover the identity of this mysterious individual who is as close to the Sahib as his shadow.”

“Or the individual who keeps as close to the Sahib as his shadow?”

“Or the individual whom the Sahib keeps as close to him as his

shadow,” he laughed.

“So, why don’t you tell these desperate people who I am and give them some peace?”

“If I tell them, they won’t be desperate any more, but you won’t have any peace.”

Then he told me that people were always on the watch for close friends of his so that they could ask them to petition him on their behalf. And now they were convinced that no one was as close to him as this mysterious friend, especially when it came to passing on petitions. If they could find out my name and address, according to him, they would bother me constantly.

“But I’m leaving in a few days.”

“Wherever you go,” he said, “it’s not difficult for the Postal Service to track you down.”

“Then let me remain anonymous.”

“Yes, I’ve been very cautious, and I’d advise you to be cautious as well.”

Then he busied himself in the work of his office, and kept calling in his subordinates to give them instructions. I read inattentively the book I had brought with me. I had hardly read eight or ten pages when I heard my friend’s voice.

“What are you reading?”

“Nothing much,” I said, giving him the book. “Just something I picked up to read when I left home. I didn’t get a chance to read it on the way to Azimabad.”

He read the title out in a loud voice.

“This used to be one of my favorite books,” I said.

“I was crazy about it myself. I still remember parts of it by heart.”

“Me too.”

“Do you know that the author of this book is alive and living here, in this town?”

“I know.”

“I think we should meet him someday,” he said, and began to flip through the pages idly. Then he bent and picked up something from the floor, inspected it carefully, and extended it to me, saying, “And the lady’s name...?”

It was a picture of a young girl. The paper had yellowed but the image was still clear. With hair cascading onto her shoulders, a suggestion of a mysterious glint in her eyes and a sad smile on her lips, she appeared to be looking directly at me. I looked at the picture for some time, then

said, "You tell me."

"You tell me," he said, "since the lady has been found in your charge."

He showed me the open book. The paper was graying, but on the right and left pages there were white rectangles shaped like the picture. I put the picture in the palm of my hand and inspected it carefully. The face looking at me with neck slightly bent seemed familiar. For a moment I thought it was a picture of a famous film actress. But soon I realized I was wrong. I turned the picture over. On its back was written, in a fading hand, "I am no illusion; I am reality."

I was familiar with the line. It had been spoken by this same actress, perhaps in her first film, and had instantly become popular. I put the picture in my friend's hand with its back side up. He read the inscription and laughed loudly, then began to declaim the line in various dramatic voices. I felt as if my mind were being pulled backwards, far away. The picture was in my hand and I could see different scenes forming and fading on it. Then I heard my friend's voice again.

"I am no illusion," he intoned as if unveiling a deep mystery. "I am reality."

He made a face like the one in the picture, and looked at me.

"She was a friend of my elder sister's, an Anglo-Indian," I said.

"And why are you carrying her picture around with you?"

"This book belongs to my sister," I replied, "and has been opened again today after about forty years. I last saw this picture when it was fresh and new."

He took the picture from me, considered it gravely for a few moments, then said, "Anglo-Indian? How did you meet her?"

"She used to study with my sister in the Christian school. A group of girls would prepare for their exams together in our house. It was always very lively at our place in those days."

My friend turned the picture over again. "I am no illusion; I am reality," he read out. "Was she interested in literature?"

"No, it's a line from a film," I said. "But her brother used to write stories, under the pen name of Naubahar Gulrez."

"Naubahar Gulrez?" he grimaced. He too regarded such poetic effusions with distaste. "Never heard of him."

"He used to come to my brother for help with his stories," I explained. "But they were never worth printing."

"Even after your brother's corrections?"

"Well, his stories had more film songs in them than story."

“Naubahar Gulrez.” He made another face. “And what was the lady’s name?”

“That’s what I’m trying to recall. I can remember the fragrance she used to wear. She used to give me her empty perfume bottles.”

“Empty bottles?”

“I liked their dark blue color.”

“Oh, speaking of the color blue,” he said, “have you heard the great physician Galen’s latest idea? I got a letter from him recently in which he said that he had been successful in treating a paralyzed woman with the color blue. Haven’t you heard from him?”

“Yes, but he just gave me a list of colors which I should avoid.”

“And what were those dangerous colors?”

“All the colors whose names I can remember, and then some more, and of these, two are likely to be fatal for a man of my temperament.”

We spent the rest of our time in the office exchanging jokes about this physician. Old age had affected his mind. He would write long letters to my friend and me, telling us of the amazing cures he had accomplished. It was his belief that we were the only two individuals in the world who appreciated his worth. He did not know that we called him “the physician Galen.”

3

The time for my return was approaching. My friend had three days’ vacation, after which I was going to leave. One day before the holidays, I was sitting in his office. He was giving instructions to his driver. When the driver was about to leave, my friend stopped him and turned to me.

“If you’d like to meet someone here, the car is available.”

“My friends here are your friends too. I’ve met them all. The only one left to meet is you.”

He laughed, then grew serious and complained about his heavy workload at the office. “From tomorrow we’ll sit down and really talk,” he promised and motioned to the driver to leave.

“You know, that picture we found in the book the other day?”

“The one who was no illusion, but reality?”

“Yes, she who wasn’t and isn’t,” I said, “I’ve just remembered that she may live here.”

“Do you remember her name?”

“Only that her family name was Ray.”

“And she lives here in Azimabad?”

“Years ago I heard, and I don’t recall how, that they moved to Azimabad. I don’t know whether they’re still here.”

“We can find out.”

“It’s difficult.”

“Not for my department. Just watch.”

He rang the bell for the peon and ordered, “Send Frank in.”

Frank was a middle-aged, well-dressed man. I had seen him before in the office. He came in and greeted us both, then stood in front of my friend.

“Frank,” my friend said, gesturing towards me. “He has to meet a Christian lady who lives here. Her family name is Ray. We don’t know her first name or address.”

“Her name is Angela,” I suddenly remembered. “Angela Ray.”

“We have to discover her whereabouts soon, since he’s leaving in three days.”

“We’ll be able to find her, sir,” Frank said readily. “Tomorrow, or at the latest, the day after. I’ll let you know.”

“All right, we’ll be at home waiting.”

Frank took his leave and retraced his steps. At the door, he stopped and asked me, “Sir, if we find her, what should I say to her?”

My friend replied, “Tell her that an old friend—” he paused.

“The brother of an old friend,” I said.

“The brother of an old friend of hers is on a visit here, and would like to meet her.”

“Sir, if she asks for his name?”

“All in due time,” my friend said. “First find out where she is.”

4

Frank returned two days later, in the afternoon. He seemed tired, and a little shame-faced, and said immediately, “Sir, I couldn’t find any trace of the Ray family.”

My friend looked at me.

“Forget about it,” I said. “They must have moved to another town.”

“Yes,” my friend said. “He found out a long time ago that ...”

“No, sir,” Frank said. “If the Ray family had ever lived here, we would have discovered them. It’s a very small community, and everyone knows everyone else.” Then he turned to address me: “Sir, excuse me, but

do you remember their name correctly?"

"Yes, I'm positive," I said. "Her name was Angela Ray. Her brother was ..."

"Ah, Gulshan-e Hamesha Bahar?" my friend whispered, and smiled.

"Naubahar Gulrez," I whispered back, then spoke to Frank. "Her brother's name was Julian Ray. One sister was called Madeleine. There was a sister older than all of them ..." I recalled the sister. "And yes," I remembered something else, "their mother died in Lucknow. She had cancer."

And I trembled.

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I had never seen Angela's mother, but there had been talk of her illness in our house, and I had heard that there was no hope of saving her. We went to see her during her last days. That was the first and last occasion on which I saw Angela's house, and Angela at home in it. It was a small, clean-looking house, with a patch of grass in front which could be called a garden because of two or three beds of flowers and an evergreen bush. At the back of the house there were eucalyptus trees visible at a distance, swaying in the wind. We arrived there when the sun was setting. Angela was waiting for us at the garden gate, dressed in ordinary clothes. She embraced my sister and the other girls in turn, then saw me and said, "Oh, you came too?"

Then she led us to a room in the front part of the house, seated us there, and left. She came back almost immediately and began to talk to her friends in a subdued voice. The furniture in the room was ordinary, but arranged with great care. It looked as if everything had just been dusted clean. In a few moments Madeleine came into the room and Angela stood up.

"Come," she said to the group of girls. When we were leaving the room she spoke to me. "If you want, you can stay here."

But I followed. There was a door on the right side of the narrow verandah, and another door farther down. We entered the last door. It opened into a small room. I could smell medicines, a smell which used to frighten me. Apart from a medicine table, the room contained a child's cot and a large bed. On the white sheet of the small cot lay a crumpled brown cotton blanket.

A heavy-set woman sat on the large bed next to the child's cot. She seemed to find it difficult to keep her eyes open. All the girls were staring at her. She did not look ill to me; at least not in proportion to all the



depressing talk about her disease, I thought. She, however, sounded despondent. When somebody spoke to her she said she had not slept all night, that her mind did not work any more. She told us that they had wired Julian, asking him to come see his mother. She was upset because he had not yet come. She asked Angela about it and Angela said something, covering her eyes with her handkerchief.

I stood looking at the woman, resting my knees against the wooden frame of the smaller cot. Suddenly, I felt the cot tremble. My sister was trying to reassure the woman on the large bed. The woman's response was tinged with despair as she pointed to the cot. The cot shook again and the brown blanket moved. I did not see the body under the blanket but stared at the uncovered face. Turned towards me was the shriveled, brown visage of an old woman. Her eyes were closed and sunk deep in her skull. Pain was apparent on her face, but the old woman was grinning widely. The two white rows of her teeth were visible to the last molars. In the silence of the room I heard Angela's loud sob and then her agitated voice: "Don't look."

But I saw that the old woman's dried out lips were clenched tight, yet the two rows of teeth were still visible. Then I realized that she was not laughing. The flesh of her right cheek had rotted away from the corner of her lips to her ear.

Try as I might, I could not tear my eyes away from her grinning teeth. My knees stuck to the cot's wooden frame. It was like a frightening dream. But I could not open my eyes to end it. I was already awake. I saw no other way out except to shut my eyes. I tried, but my eyes refused to close. I tried to move back, but the cot's wooden frame gripped my knees in a vise. In this confusion I felt Angela's hand on my shoulder. Slowly she pulled me towards herself and, taking my hand, led me out of the room. She took me into the middle room along the narrow verandah. Here I could see through blurred eyes a dining table set with things to eat, glasses, and paper napkins. There was the smell of fresh fruit and pastry in the room, but they didn't tempt me. Angela put several things on a plate and offered them to me, but I refused to eat. I asked in a strangled voice, "Who was that lady who was sitting on the large bed?"

Angela explained that she was their eldest sister who had come to take care of her mother during her illness. Then she began to console me, to assure me over and over again that her mother was not always like this. She wiped my face with her handkerchief. I could feel the dampness from her tears and smelled the faint fragrance of the scent from the dark blue bottles. Angela left the room quickly and came back with an album in her

hand. She showed me the old pictures of her mother. Her face resembled Angela's, and her smile revealed a dimple that looked exactly like her daughter's. Angela told us about the occasions on which each picture had been taken. In many pictures I mistook her mother for her, although Angela was often present in her mother's lap or holding on to her hand. I glanced at the pictures half-heartedly until Madeleine came into the room with my sister and the other girls.

\*

Frank and my friend laughed at something and I felt as if Angela had just taken her hand off my shoulder. They were talking about the different Post Offices in the town, and their staff. Frank apologized again and addressed me, "Sir, did the lady ever marry?"

"I don't know," I replied. "She must have, I suppose. She wasn't married forty years ago."

"I mean, her name might not be Ray any longer if she's married."

"Yes, we never thought of that," my friend said with a start. "If she had been married, for instance, to our Frank here ..."

"Sir ..." Frank wanted to say something, but instead laughed shyly.

"... Then she would be Angela Frank now, or Just Mrs. Frank." He turned to Frank. "Well, may I ask Mrs. Frank her name this Christmas?"

Frank said "Sir" again, and lapsed into a shy silence.

"We put you to all this trouble for nothing," I said.

"Yes, I think we can forget about the lady now," my friend said. "Frank is the kind of man who'd have found her out just from the name Angela. If *he* has failed ..."

"No, sir, I was paying more attention to the Ray part of the name rather than the Angela."

"Even so," my friend said. "I don't suppose she ever lived in Azimabad."

"Yes," I said. "Perhaps my memory fails me."

My friend thanked Frank and I apologized to him. Frank got up saying, "It doesn't matter, sir." He looked at me intently for a moment, as if about to ask me something, then *salaamed* and left.

"And so," my friend intoned dramatically, "Lady Angela Ray, or Angela X! We have failed in our search for you."

"We weren't really searching for her," I said. "So, failure or success ..."

"And so Lady Angela Ray, or Angela X," my friend continued in the same exaggerated tone, "you have proved to be an illusion, not reality."

“But forty years ago ...”

“Forty years ago, toady Angela, you were reality, not illusion.”

“If you go on speaking in this tone,” I said, “the curse of Lady Angela will afflict you, so that you will go on not only to speak but also write in this same way.”

“Lady Angela, if I am accursed, I swear I’ll commit suicide with one of our Physician Galen’s fatal colors!” he concluded with great resolve.

The same night, we were composing a joint letter to the physician Galen when the phone rang. My friend picked up the receiver. He listened for a while, then said, “One minute,” and turned to me. Putting a hand over the mouthpiece, he said, “I think the great short-story writer, Gulzar-e Purbahar has been discovered!”

“Julian Ray?” I asked.

“Here,” he held the receiver out to me. “Talk to him.”

I stood up. “Is it Julian himself?”

“No, it’s Frank.”

“Then you talk to him,” I said, and sat down.

“Yes, Frank ...” my friend said, and listened silently to the voice on the other side.

After a while he said, “Where? ... And when did that happen? ... It’s obvious ... No, I know Daniel, he’s gone mad, every year he adds or subtracts five or ten years from his age ... Yes, it may mean nothing ... Well, have a look.”

He put the receiver down and said, “Frank has found somebody who used to give guitar lessons to a young man from the Ray family. He can’t remember the young man’s first name; maybe Frank didn’t ask him.”

“Who is he?”

“Daniel Barr. He used to travel from one town to the other, giving guitar lessons. He would set up temporary schools, and he sold guitars as well. His customers, obviously, were mostly his own students.”

“And Julian? Where did Daniel meet the young man from the Ray family?”

“That’s just the problem. He’s even older than our Physician Galen—time and space have assumed a different meaning for him. He says he met Ray twenty years ago, but twenty years for him could just as easily be two years, or two hundred.”

“And where did he meet him?” I asked again.

My friend imitated a toothless old man and replied in a shaky, trembling voice, “In a town to the north, or was it the south...?” He gri-

maced. "He's an absolutely infuriating man, but he was a master at his art."

"So we've found out nothing?"

"Nothing. But there's a slight possibility that this Daniel's Ray is your Julian." And he smiled in a strange way, "Frank is praying that he is the same man."

"And what will be gained from that?"

"Gained? Now listen. Daniel could remember the young Ray only because he committed suicide a few days after the guitar lessons began. Doctors had told him that he had cancer."

We both sat in silence for some time.

"So what? How does this help either?" I asked at last.

"Well, if Daniel's student was our Naubahar, I mean, our Julian Ray, then Frank thinks we should be able to find a clue to Angela's whereabouts through him." He smiled his strange smile again. "Rather than tracing an obscure Anglo-Indian woman, it is easier to trace an Anglo-Indian woman whose brother committed suicide."

5

My officer friend had some problems of his own. So we stayed up late that night talking about them and I slept late the next day. I awoke to the clatter of the breakfast dishes. Then I heard my friend's raised voice at my bedside.

"How long will the mysterious ringleader of a terrible conspiracy slumber?"

"If you are addressing me," I said, "I'm awake."

"I am addressing you and you alone." Then he threw a tabloid, badly printed on dirty paper, into my lap. "Read that."

It was one of those newspapers which open and close publication every second or third day, and contains more sensational headlines than news. On the front page, among the many headlines, was news of the election speech of a political hopeful who condemned communal riots as an obstacle to the nation's progress. I was looking for more news among the headlines when my friend said, "Leave that. Look at the third page. That's where the real stuff is."

On the third page the headlines declared that for the last three or four days some unknown men, pretending to belong to the Department of Posts, on the pretext of finding out an imaginary woman's address, had

been making confidential inquiries about the town's Christian community. This seemed like a very deep conspiracy against a peace-loving minority, and the newspaper's reporters were hot on the trail of the conspiracy's ringleader. The minority community was also assured that the plot would be nipped in the bud.

I folded the newspaper, put it on the bed, and asked, "Who publishes this rag?"

My friend put a finger on the name of the political hopeful on the first page and said, "His electoral area includes some Christian households."

"This news isn't going to create a riot, is it?"

"No. The fact that it's printed in this paper proves any news false."

"Still, Frank should have been more discreet. And you should stop him."

"I stopped him a long time ago, but—" he paused. "Imaginary woman!" He made a face. "But now Frank has a lead to the young man from the Ray family, and a witness to the young man's existence, even if it is Daniel."

"Daniel is more of a witness to his non-existence," I said. "Anyway, please stop Frank from going any further."

"He won't stop."

"Tell him that I'm leaving today."

"He knows. But you don't know Frank. Before you leave town, he'll bring you some news."

I had not slept very well that night, and was not hopeful of sleeping on the train, so I took a nap in the afternoon. When I woke up, it was almost evening. My friend was waiting for me for afternoon tea. When I awoke, he called out to the servant to bring in the tea.

We drank our tea in silence, and the servant picked up the dishes and took them away.

"Mrs. Moore," my friend said after careful reflection. "She's Mrs. Moore now."

I looked at him.

"Frank came over," he said. "You were sleeping so soundly it didn't seem like a good idea to wake you up."

I kept looking at him silently.

"Daniel's lead about the young man was useful," he told me. "His name was Sebastian."

"Sebastian?"

“He wasn’t Angela’s brother but her brother’s son. Angela adopted him since he was orphaned at an early age.”

I remembered Julian Ray. My friend waited for a while for me to say something, then spoke:

“Angela is here, but ...” he paused. I felt as if he were arranging the information in his mind. “She is a widow now. She has sold her own house. She lives with some distant relatives of her husband’s. She is childless and ...” Again he arranged the information in his mind. “...She is the only remaining member of the Ray family.”

I remembered Madeleine and the sister who was older than all of them.

My friend paused again, waiting for me to speak.

I said, “You mentioned that she is here.”

“Yes, Frank found that out.”

“Did Frank meet her?”

“What’s the use of meeting her?”

I looked at my friend.

“She is paralyzed, and has been for many years. None of her senses function any more. She has not been responding to anything for the last few days. They think she has gone into a coma.”

“Is she at home? Or...?”

“She is still at home,” said my friend. “Would you like to meet ... see her? Frank can arrange it.”

“No,” I said. “It’s too late now. I have to prepare for the journey.”

After I boarded the train, my friend sat with me for a while, till the train’s whistle sounded. Then he got up.

“Frank has got all the information. With details,” he said. “I’ll write to you, if you like.”

“No, you have already told me everything. You may write to me, though, if Frank tells you something new.”

“I’ll do that.”

The train started moving. He shook hands with me. “Write your new address to me,” he said.

“I’ll do that.”

My friend released my hand and stepped down onto the platform. □

—Translated by Aditya Behl