

NAIYER MASUD

## Allam and Son\*

I KNOW NOW—well, I knew even before—that a man, after reaching a certain age, begins to forget several thousand, indeed several hundred thousand things each day, but the realization that some of his memory is being lost takes several years to sink in. Because the store of memories is so large, even the continual disappearance of thousands and hundreds of thousands of objects from it scarcely inclines him to suspect, at least not for a while, any appreciable loss. And so, well before the term of my employment ended, I had already accepted that, although I wasn't conscious of it, I was forgetting quite a number of things every day. Then, in a fit of something resembling stupidity, I wasted a great deal of time launching fruitless efforts to remember everything I was forgetting. Then I made a concerted effort and managed to pull myself out of that fit. Not long afterward, I was seized by another, even greater, fit of stupidity during which I wasted my time calling to mind all the things that were still intact in my memory. This wasn't a fruitless enterprise, yet it didn't yield anything other than confusion.

While engaged in this activity my employment finally reached its end, leaving me plenty of time to waste. After I had frittered away an inordinate amount of time in this pursuit it dawned on me that the amount I still retained in my memory was impossible to determine. I remembered a lot of things, hardly any of which were extraordinary. And even those few extraordinary things began to appear quite ordinary during an episode of weariness which took hold of me. Finally I gave up this pastime altogether.

Later my memory became even weaker. I no longer felt a need to remember what I was forgetting. Things that I recalled remembering

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\*“Allām aur Bēṭā,” from quarterly *Āj*, No. 33 (2001), pp. 61–73.

quite well—people’s names, their faces, details of past events, and many other big and little things—none of these could be recollected despite straining my mind. Right about that time, or maybe shortly thereafter—I can’t say for sure—my memory even started to goof. I’d call one friend by the name of some other friend, or take an acquaintance that I was meeting after some lapse of time for another acquaintance, or mix the details of certain events in with the details of others. Often this created difficulties, but that didn’t bother me too much. I was already expecting that to happen and was quite prepared to accept it.

But even in those days numerous memories of my childhood and adolescence remained fresh in my mind. The children in my household would eagerly listen to me recount the stories of those times in my life and marvel at how well I remembered things from so long ago. I knew that even in the waning years of life, when one tended to forget things that only happened a couple of days ago, the mind still retained memories of childhood intact.

At about this time I once fell ill when the seasons were changing. I ran a high fever for several days and the children were stopped from coming to see me. When I recovered I was told how I had rambled on non-stop in the delirium brought on by the fever. I was also told that, with my eyes closed, I mostly recounted the same stories of my childhood that the children insisted on hearing from me, except that I told those stories in much greater detail than ever before.

At that point I discovered that I also no longer remembered anything from my childhood.

That, I was not prepared to accept. So, I went through a third fit of stupidity: I would have the children tell me the very same stories I myself used to tell them. When this didn’t help, I worked my mind harder, trying to remember my childhood. When even that didn’t help, I thought up another trick. Before I was taken ill some scene or other would occasionally flash through my mind, and it wouldn’t take me long to remember which memory of my childhood it corresponded to. So now I would lie down at night well before sleeping time and close my eyes, emptying my mind, as well as I could, of all thoughts. Then I would try to see something in the darkness of my closed eyes. Usually this didn’t work and I fell asleep during the exercise. But sometimes a faint blur of light appeared somewhere in that darkness and revealed some static image just for a moment. I was certain that these images were part of my childhood memories. Beyond this conviction, I wasn’t able to get much else out of this pastime since, no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t relate any

image to its corresponding memory. Then again, the images were strangely vague: sometimes it might be a bullock-cart parked under the dense foliage of a tree, its image rippling over a puddle of rainwater; sometimes a fakir with a small kettledrum in his hand; and sometimes large, copper-plated metal cooking pots on brick hearths in an unpaved courtyard half lying in sunshine and surrounded by canvas tents. There used to be many images of clothing, both men's and women's and of various styles, but the faces of the people wearing the clothing couldn't be seen, or maybe they became dim and faded away completely by the time my eyes reached them. This old-fashioned clothing was of an elegant style and shape, and usually of bright, loud colors, with pink, turquoise, yellow, and purple predominating, but they were never black.

However, one night, I saw a scrap of black cloth form and quickly disappear on top of slowly fading colorful clothing. This image returned to me several times that night and again the following night, though on the latter occasion the scrap of black cloth remained visible a little longer and I recognized it. This was also an item of clothing made by ripping about a hand-and-a-half long slit in a length of unstitched cloth. It was worn by putting one's head through the slit and letting one end of the cloth hang in front and the other in back. Sleeveless and open on either side, this attire was usually white and was reminiscent of the *kafan*, the shroud draped around a dead body. It was called *kafni*—even though those who wore it were very much alive—and it was only rarely seen.

The black *kafni* disappeared and then reappeared. This time I could see, unlike with the other clothing, a slight movement in it, as if the body of the one wearing it was quaking. Then, even before it had become dim, the image vanished altogether, and my body began to shake at about the same time. I waited a long while for the *kafni* to reappear, but it didn't, nor did any other kind of clothing.

After this the images ceased to appear. Now when I closed my eyes I couldn't even see a blank spot. And so, the game of watching images, which I had played over the course of several nights, ended and I once again resorted to going to bed only after sleep had completely overwhelmed my eyes.

I had no way left to kill time at home now, so I started going out again to stroll around or visit with friends and talk with them about this and that. This used to be my daily, or almost daily, routine, but ever since the start of the grievously erratic behavior of my memory—which often displeased

my friends, and just as often led to my own embarrassment before my acquaintances and sometimes even exposed me to their ridicule—I had terminated it. However now, after my illness, when I started socializing with them again they would tell me stories of their own lapses of memory.

One day I was sitting with my friends. We were talking about errors that we had made in identifying people. Now and then we laughed heartily. Just then one of the friends said, “Well, it doesn’t bother me as much when I mistake an acquaintance for a stranger. I usually get away by apologizing. But when I mistake a stranger for an acquaintance ...”

So then we started talking about that. Just about everyone related a story of his own involving this experience. Some stories were pretty long and really interesting.

“Yes, something like that has also started happening to me quite often these days,” a friend, who had been quiet for a while, said, “but this past week I had a very strange experience.” He stopped, resuming a little later, “I saw this fine fellow off in the distance in the Old Market,” he pointed at one of the friends, “only to find out when I got near that it was somebody else. ...”

“Let me tell you what happened next,” the friend who had been pointed at said. “This other man also mistook you for one of his friends, and for a very long time both of you ...”

“At least let me finish,” the first friend said. “Anyway, on coming closer I realized that it wasn’t you, but after I had walked just a few steps I saw that you really were approaching—in the flesh, with this same exact miserable face of yours.”

Suddenly I recalled that similar coincidences had happened to me many times, so many times that they couldn’t be called coincidences; in fact, it never happened that I mistook a stranger for an acquaintance and then didn’t see that very same acquaintance shortly afterward. If he took a while to appear I would begin to feel restless, but in the end I would definitely see him. This was the most extraordinary thing in my life, although I never did remember it during the time when I used to count the things that still survived in my memory.

My friends were still talking. Just about everyone had had such an experience, though not more than once.

“Yes,” I said after hearing their stories, “something like that has also happened to me.”

But I didn't recount any of my experiences. In a way, I sort of regretted that they had experienced something similar, even though it was only once.

Then our conversation meandered off to other topics.

A week later, I was roaming around an old market, which used to be called the Big Market, with a friend I had played with in childhood. Following a few days of close, stuffy rainy weather, bright sunshine had appeared, and the sky was absolutely clear. Just as we were talking about this change in the weather, or rather about the weather before the change, the sunshine began to fade and the atmosphere became even more dreary than it had been during the preceding days. Looking glum, my friend said, "Can't understand the way these clouds just wander in all of a sudden."

"Nor where they suddenly disappear," I said.

Just then I saw a bearded man clothed in black off in the distance coming toward us. Something snapped in my mind and the word, "Allam" escaped from my lips.

I broke out laughing.

"Allam?" my friend asked.

"What—you've forgotten Allam?" I asked, although the fact was that I had only remembered him just then.

"Who can forget Allam?" my friend said. "Anyway, what makes you suddenly think of that poor soul?"

The man was drawing closer to us. When he was only a few steps away, I examined him more carefully. He didn't look at all like Allam. With the sleeves of his long loose black shirt rolled up almost to his shoulders and his big collyrium-smeared eyes, he looked a bit like the caretaker of a shrine. He swept past us. My friend was saying something and I turned my attention to him. He said the same thing over again, "Who can forget Allam?"

"I had forgotten him," I said.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten his little brat too."

"His son? Oh, that wolf? Yes, I remember him. He bit you."

"He practically took a snip out of my flesh—the miserable wretch! Here, look," he showed me the mark from the wound on his right wrist.

We began to talk about Allam. I remembered quite a few things about him myself, and about others my friend jogged my memory. But one thing which I made him remember was that Allam was always seen wearing a *kafni* made of some black fabric.

He used to visit my father now and then. If he found me playing near the gate of our house, he would call out to me from the distance, “Young Master, please inform the Deputy Sahib that Allam, the rascal, is here to pay his respects.”

My father wasn't any kind of “Deputy” at all. He used to teach at the biggest school in the city. He maintained himself in the manner of high government officials in keeping with the grandeur of the school, and he always went out in his own carriage. That's why the residents of our neighborhood—mostly people of modest means with little education—called him “Deputy Sahib.” When I would inform him about Allam's arrival, he would come out on the veranda and he would talk to him for a long time, either standing out there or after ushering him into the outer reception room. He would also mention Allam to our family and tell us that Allam was his boyhood friend and also his classmate at school for a while. I found out from my father that Allam was the scion of a prominent and well-respected religious family in the city and that he was very clever in his studies but had fallen in with bad company. His continual disobedience and intransigence eventually drove his father to throw him out of the house and later to disown him publicly. After that his hooliganism got out of hand and he could usually be seen hanging out with a gang of crooks notorious throughout the city. These lawbreakers specialized in kidnapping women; and Allam, mixed up in their antics as he was, was sometimes dragged off to the police lockup because of his association with them. He would let this be known to us somehow or other and my father would get him released on his own recognizance. He would come straight to our place after being released and, seeing me playing at the gate of our house, he would always say the exact same thing: “Young Master, please inform the Deputy Sahib that Allam, the rascal, is here to pay his respects.”

The odd thing about him was that he really didn't look like a rascal at all. He only looked like somebody mysterious, at least to me. His black *kafni*, his black sarong, and his thick round black beard made it difficult to form an accurate opinion about him. The way he looked, he could easily be taken for a harmless man, except that he always carried a small hatchet with him, its edge covered in a sheath of some black cloth. While no one may have ever seen the blade unsheathed, just about everyone knew that Allam carried the hatchet in order to defend himself against jungle animals, and this was precisely how it became known to me that there were jungles around my city.

He caught all kinds of animals in these jungles and brought them to the market. Perhaps this was what he did for a living. I would often see him standing in a certain spot in the market, holding a rope tied around the neck or waist of a dozing animal while people crowded around him. I would join the crowd and gawk in amazement at each animal he brought there. One day I saw him there with a *bijju*—an animal, which it is said, digs into fresh graves and feeds on dead bodies and so is also called *qabar bijju*. In the same way, I saw my first hedgehog, which I found to be much smaller than I had imagined. Up until then I had only seen hedgehog quills, which are used for magic and for charms, in roadside displays set up by medicine men. I also saw many other animals, some of whose names I had heard and others whose names I had never heard, and still others whose names even Allam himself didn't know.

One day I saw him standing in his usual place with a length of rope coiled around his neck and its two ends dangling over his chest. I saw long scratch marks on his arms and his *kafni* was also torn in several places. He appeared very animated as he related to the people gathered around him how he had heard the slight sound of movement inside of a dark jungle cavern and plunged into it fearlessly. As he was trying to see in the darkness, some animal had suddenly pounced on him and, after mauling him, had disappeared behind one of the curves inside the cavern.

"So I headed back home too," he said, stroking his hatchet gently, "but on my way out I did tell him, 'Well, Mister, you got me today, but watch out, I'm coming after you one of these days and then I'll let you have it. For now, enjoy your cozy hideout.'"

And sure enough, the very next week a much bigger crowd than ever before could be seen gathered around him. From what the people in the crowd were saying, I gathered that he had actually captured *that* animal and brought it along. People were trying to figure out what kind of animal it was. When I tried to get through the crowd, I was stopped, and so was every other child who tried to get through that day. I went to one side and tried to get some idea what the animal looked like from the conversations that were going on. I was able to gather just this: that it had strange-looking claws, that it was dozing just like every other animal brought here by Allam, and that it was a female. Suddenly I heard screams. People began to fall over one another, and Allam's voice rose above the stampede, "Hatchet ... my hatchet!"

The stampede, and even more so those beastly screams, scared me so much that I immediately took off.

That was probably the last time that Allam brought an animal from the wild to the market. Later I saw him four or five times after long intervals wandering around all alone. Toward the end of this period his beard had begun to look scraggly and rather unsightly, and he had also started to totter a bit. He had also dropped his visits to us. New and more interesting people absorbed my attention in the Big Market. Now I was reminded of Allam only when I sometimes spotted his son along my way. He had grown up into a strapping youth and closely resembled his father.

He was my age, and now and then he joined in with the boys I used to play with in my childhood. However, our group tried to keep our distance from him because he was quick to lose his temper, and when he did he would bite his adversary. God knows how the rumor had spread among us children that wolves carried him away shortly after he was born and that Allam had searched for him in the jungle for several years until finally he retrieved him. Some of the older boys in our group even went so far as to say, or rather, they actually claimed to have witnessed with their own eyes, that even after returning home Allam's son walked on all fours for quite a while and only ate raw meat. Another boy said that around this time imprints of a wolf's claws were discovered near Allam's house and Allam had started to keep a hatchet with him at all times ever since. We decided that the boys were telling the truth and so we started to fear Allam's son. However, I never had any fights with him. He himself avoided tangling with me, perhaps because he sometimes tagged along with his father to our house. Sometimes he also came alone and told my father in tears, "Father has been locked up."

A few years into his youth his beard had become quite thick and round and now and then he also wore a black *kafni*. Seeing him, one felt that old Allam had become young all over again. But he scarcely ever greeted me then; perhaps he went by me without even recognizing me.

After this a passing thought came to me a couple of times that I hadn't even seen Allam's son anywhere for quite a while.

I was feeling a sense of satisfaction that some parts of my memory had returned. I tried to remember other things from that period and, I must say, I did succeed nominally in my effort. Just then I suddenly realized that my friend had left me at some turning point in the road. I had been out for quite a while. I immediately headed back, partly because of the thought that my over long absence would be causing everyone at home to worry and partly because the increasing darkness made it difficult for me to see distant things clearly. Just after I had gone past the intersection nearest to my house, I again saw the fellow who looked like



the caretaker of a shrine—or should I say, I saw his outfit—standing on the other side of the road. Again I thought it was Allam and again I laughed involuntarily. Then I remembered Allam’s son and my laugh quickly faded.

The next day again I saw him standing in the same place. Although I was on the opposite side of the road, I tried to look him over a bit more closely in the light of the sun. He wasn’t the same man who was clad in black and had eyes smeared with collyrium that I had seen in the Big Market the day before. During the next few days I saw him several times. He would be standing quietly, in the exact same spot, and glancing at the passersby. I also noticed that he was wearing a *kafni*. But when I passed by him closely a couple of times, he looked at me indifferently, just as he did at others.

Right about that time one of the children in our family told me that I talked to myself when I walked down the road. This was bad news and my family had, perhaps knowingly, kept it from me. I considered people who talked to themselves eccentric, and even beyond eccentric, irrational. I stopped going out so often, and when I did go out I kept wondering the whole way whether I was talking to myself. In doing so, I often lost track of my surroundings.

One day, as I was returning home, I had the sneaky feeling, after I had walked a little ways past the intersection, that I had just said something to myself. I stopped rather suddenly and started to think of what I had said. Right then I heard a voice coming from behind my back, “May you remain safe! May you remain safe!”

Then I heard the sound of something wooden drop. I turned around to look. The man in the *kafni* was coming toward me holding out both of his hands to greet me. But after taking just a couple of steps he staggered and it appeared as if he was trying to go in several directions all at the same time. Then he fell to the ground. Quite a few passersby rushed toward him and so did I. We managed to stand him on his feet but his entire body was trembling, and in that state he mumbled, as if to himself, “Can’t walk. I just stand.” It seemed that he was beginning to drift into unconsciousness.

None of the passersby knew him, and none seemed to know what to do with him. Finally I said, “I know him. Please take him to my place.”

Those people knew me. Several of them practically carried him to my house, and I had them seat him in a chair.

After the people were gone I was thinking of something to say to him when, still sitting in the chair, he began slumping to one side in such a

way that two legs of the chair lifted up off the floor. I lunged forward and caught him before he fell over. He also made some effort to steady himself and said, "I can't sit either. I can only stand or lie down."

There was nothing in the room which he could lie down on. I was thinking that I would have somebody bring over a cot from inside the house or spread some bedding right there on the floor. Meanwhile, he stood up, supporting himself on me. He straightened up and said, "Now let go."

His body quivered slightly, and I asked, "You won't fall down?"

"No. I'll just stand."

"If you'd like to lie down, I could have a bed ..."

"No. I'll stand."

Slowly I let go of him. He did indeed stand in place without wobbling. Then, with a trace of pride in his voice, he said, "I can stand all day long. Just like this."

My problem, on the other hand, was that walking didn't tire me as much as standing, but I suppressed the desire to sit down in a chair and asked him, "How long have you had this ailment?"

"Oh, many years," he said indifferently.

After that he kept squinting his eyes and looking at the room over and over for some time. Finally he said, "It's changed."

"So have times," I said, and then asked, "How's your father?"

"My father—oh, he's been dead a long time."

"What did he die of?"

"Old age—what else?" he answered, again with the same indifference. He ran a sweeping glance over the room once more and said, "It's changed quite a bit. When I used to come here ..."

He changed the subject and informed me, "I don't see well either."

Has this man already resigned himself to everything? I asked myself feeling rather envious of him. Then I asked, "Who had you come to the intersection with?"

"Oh, yes," he said with a start, as if suddenly remembering something, "she must have come to get me. She's probably feeling terribly worried."

"Shall I send someone to look for her?"

Just then footsteps were heard on the veranda and a boy from the neighborhood peeked in through the door and said to someone, "He's here all right. There, standing."

A woman wrapped up in a burqa was right behind the boy. The boy left. The woman stepped inside the room hesitantly. The moment she

spotted my guest she said in a sharp tone of voice, "I was sick with worry. You'd better stay home from now on."

"What's the problem?" he said unfazed. "This too is our home." Then he pointed at me; "I'm indebted to him for many, many favors. When I was locked up in this business with you, he was the one who bailed me out." At that point the woman greeted me.

The sound of footsteps on the veranda was heard once again. The same boy entered, holding a hatchet, its edge sheathed in its cover. "It had fallen there," he said, handing the hatchet over to the woman. Then he left the room.

I stood silently for quite some time. He too was standing perfectly erect and silent, but his head was bowed and his eyes were closed. I looked at him closely and then I heard the woman say, "Please wake him. He falls asleep standing up, just like that."

I wasn't surprised. A *pahari* watchman in my neighborhood also used to doze off for a bit standing on his feet. He used to say that, for him, just a few snatches of sleep like that made up for an entire night. I looked at the woman. She seemed to be in a hurry to leave; still, I asked her, "Where's his son these days?"

"That's the source of all the trouble," the woman said. "He slept at home in his bed one night and in the morning the bed was found empty. Since then he goes out looking for him every single day. He can't walk, so I hold him and take him out. He stands for hours on end, sometimes on this street and sometimes on that. He even insists on going to the jungle. Now tell me, please, where can I find a jungle for him. A long time ago he used to go to the jungle and catch animals. Once some animal ..."

He was still dozing, but now he woke up with a start and snapped at the woman, "What are you telling him? Doesn't he know already?"

The woman fell silent. I asked, "Where does he live?"

She told me that his house was in a lane behind my house and that more than half of it had already collapsed. It was reached by going through a number of narrow lanes. The woman described its location in detail, but I forgot it before I could memorize it. In back of my house there was a veritable network of narrow, dimly lit lanes, some of which were even covered by roofs. I had only heard the names of some of these lanes, covered or uncovered, and hadn't even heard the names of some others. I remembered what my father used to say: the lanes of our neighborhood are as twisted as the human brain is inside the skull, and a stranger, caught in this maze can hardly hope to get out of it on his own. I was already feeling caught in this maze; or rather, my efforts to get out

were proving unsuccessful. Just then the woman said to him, “OK, will you come along now? Don’t you see, he’s been standing so long on your account?”

“Thank you very kindly, very kindly,” he said, making a parting gesture to me with both of his hands, and then, holding onto the woman, he started to hobble out of the room. Suddenly he stopped, felt around his body with his hand and said anxiously, “Hatchet ... my hatchet.”

“Here, I have it,” the woman said handing the hatchet over to him.

I accompanied the two of them as far as the gate of my house. He was saying something as he was leaving but his voice sounded muffled. Perhaps he was blessing me too. All I remember are the words he spoke when he reached the gate: “I didn’t see the Young Master. He must have grown quite a bit by now, God be praised.” □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*