

TARIQ CHHATARI

Nameplate

“WHAT WAS her name? Oh, I can’t remember at all...” Kedar Nath flung away the quilt and sat up on the bed.

“What’s come over me? Couldn’t sleep a wink the whole night. She must’ve had a name. Now if I can’t remember what can I do? ... Well, I should remember the name, shouldn’t I? After all, she was my wife, my lawfully wedded wife...” The seventy-five-year-old Kedar Nath rested his hand on his forehead. The countless wrinkles that crisscrossed his forehead began to throb under his aged thumb.

“Sarla’s mother...,” he blurted out involuntarily.

That’s fine. But she had a name too ... what was it? The first letter ... yah, I faintly remember....” He got out of bed and moved towards the light switch on the wall.

“The first letter of her name ... K ... oh no ... well, I remember now.” His toothless, wrinkled face was breaking into a smile when a coughing bout overwhelmed him and he forgot the alphabet.

The room was bathed in light now.

“It’s going on two-thirty....” His glance fell on the timepiece.

“Timepiece...? Yah ... T ... no! Piece ... S ... oh yah ... I think it was S”

“S? No, that’s Sarla’s mother....”

“Again, Sarla’s mother.... After all, she must’ve had a name....” Annoyed with himself, Kedar Nath wrapped his muffler around his neck and then picked up his stick and began tapping the floor with it. Then he grabbed the stick with both of his hands and brought it close to his head, as though he were going to crack his head with it.

“It’s strange that I’ve forgotten my wife’s name! Well, she’s been dead for forty years and we lived together for only three years....”

He stared at the room vacantly—bed, table, chair and cupboard.... The cupboard must be stuffed with books. Its doors were closed. He

approached the bed and then turned towards the cupboard and opened the door—it was empty. There were no shelves or books. He was surprised to see that it was open at the back.

He panicked and nervously put one foot inside, then the second.... Now he was standing in front of the main door. Everything was empty. His mind had lost all sense of direction and instead of opening the cupboard, he opened the main door. Mist had enveloped the road outside and the lights in the lampposts were flickering dimly like earthenware lamps. Suddenly it seemed as though a crowd had gathered there creating a racket. Trumpets were pounding in his ears. In a distant corner there was a palanquin hidden in the mist ... the girl was decked in red bridal attire, smiling....

He stumbled on a piece of rock, staggered, and hit a lamppost.... He was shoved hard by the girls of the mohalla ... and then they had closed the door....

“What’s your name...?” he had asked her even though he knew it. Embarrassed, she had hidden her face between her knees, but she had to say her name softly when he asked again.

“What did she say her name was...? Oh, I can’t remember at all....” He began to walk briskly, tapping his stick on the ground. Where was he going? He didn’t know. But he kept on walking and moved further and further away from his home.

What’s this area? Kailash Nagar? Probably. Just ahead on the right was the bungalow of his friend Sharmaji. There was his nameplate on the gate, “Satprakash Sharma.” An office colleague who had died a couple of years ago.

Suddenly Kedar Nath stopped in his tracks. “Oh yes, this is Sharmaji’s bungalow. The same one. His nameplate is fastened there....” Kedar Nath could see the plate through the mist. “Sharma...,” he read, “Ramprakash Sharma.”

Ramprakash...? No, his name was Satprakash. He looked at the nameplate closely.

“Ramprakash Sharma—Advocate.”

He now remembered what Sharmaji had told him one day, “My son Ramprakash has become an advocate.”

“So, he’s pulled down his father’s nameplate and....” Something dropped on the ground with a thud. He felt as though something within his mind had snapped and dropped at his feet. He was afraid and he low-

ered his head feeling guilty. It looked like someone's nameplate, but the letters on it had faded. He felt a strange sensation in his body. The feeble feet that were trembling a moment ago were now longing to sprint like a thirsty deer.

He was running. No, he was walking slowly. Or was he simply crawling on all fours...? He wasn't sure, but he knew that he was now near Sarla's house, which was a couple of miles away from his own.

He would ask Sarla her mother's name. Would she remember her name...? Why not? Could one ever forget the name of one's mother? Parvati Devi—that was his own mother. He could remember her name even at seventy-five.

"Parvati Devi *ki jai*..." his father had intoned while he was doing puja in his childhood.

"Baba, Mama's name is also Parvati Devi..."

"Yes son, she's been named after the goddess."

Since that day worshipping Parvati Devi had been part of his daily ritual. "A mother is the very embodiment of the goddess. How could Sarla possibly forget her name?" Kedar Nath was overjoyed at this thought. His pace slackened, but he dragged his body forward and trudged on....

"Babuji, so early in the morning...?" Sarla asked Kedar Nath, who was deep in thought as she handed him a cup of tea.

The early morning sun was peering down from the ancient sky. Kedar Nath's toes had gone numb, as though there was no flesh on them and they were hollow inside. The birds hovering over his head came and sat on Sarla's bungalow, while he grew tired standing there, outside the bungalow. "What will people think if they see me standing here? The sun's been up for quite some time. Sarla must have gotten up by now. I should go in. But ... does Sarla still remember her mother's name? Sharmaji's son has pulled down his father's nameplate and...." Something dropped with a thud. He felt as though something had snapped inside of him and fallen to the ground at his feet. The faded letters were becoming clear as his eyes clouded over.... It was a dark night ... a cold, foggy night ... countless dogs barked ... several strays chased him.... To escape ... he went into Milton Park. Milton Park? Now it was named Gandhi Park. Whatever its name, it was the same park where he had come with her two

days after their marriage. The park's *baradari*¹ had caved in giving the park the appearance of a wasteland. His mind went back forty years in time—"Come, sit here ... how beautiful these arches are!" Both of them sat down leaning against the white marble column, oblivious to the world ... and kept sitting there a long time ... for months ... years ... until his daughter startled him with her query:

"Babuji, why are you silent? What are you thinking about...?"

"Nothing, Daughter. I was thinking that it's very early.... Actually, I thought that if I could reach here before Joginder leaves for his office...."

"Babuji, it's Sunday today...."

"Oh yes, it's Sunday! What can I do Dear? Since retirement I can't keep track of days and dates." Then he said to himself, "Never mind days and dates, there are many other things I can't remember."

Meanwhile Joginder came in blinking his eyes, greeted Kedar Nath and sat down on the sofa. "Babuji, so early today? Is everything all right?"

Why are they stressing "early"? I must've disturbed them. I should leave ... right away.

Since Kedar Nath remained silent, Sarla said, "It's just that Babuji had forgotten that it's Sunday. That's why he's come so early...."

It's Sunday, and I've turned up here without letting them know beforehand. Maybe they have some other plans. Now, because of me.... They just have this one holiday in the whole week.... Well, it's not as though I come visiting every day. It's just that today I left home and kept walking ... and found myself near Sarla's house ... and came in. Can't they change their plans for me today?

Tears glistened in Kedar Nath's eyes. "These wretched tears come so easily in old age...." He was trying to conceal them as Sarla looked into his eyes.

Why is she staring like this? Has she figured out everything?

What can she know? That I've forgotten my wife's name ... that I stayed awake all night ... or that I'm crying...?

"Daughter, I've some business with Joginder...."

Joginder was taken aback. "With me, Babuji?"

"Oh yes, nothing special...." He began to look out at the yard. "It's very cold today. It's good that your lawn catches the sun early."

¹Literally a house with twelve doors, a rest house.

Sarla looked at him and said, “Yes, Babuji. The sun isn’t strong yet, and there’s so much dew. The entire lawn is wet....” She had hardly finished when Joginder butted in:

“Babuji, you were talking about some work....”

Do they want me to leave so their plans aren’t disturbed?

Kedar Nath was racked by a bout of coughing that continued for quite some time. While he was coughing he thought about what to say. Then he just blurted out:

“My son, do you remember names?”

“What sort of names, Babuji? Well actually, I’m not good at remembering names. That’s why I always got such poor marks in history.”

What can I say now? Shall I ask Sarla the same question? But it would seem so odd. If Sarla herself would say that she remembers names then I could immediately ask her to tell me her mother’s name....

Kedar Nath looked at Sarla wishfully, but she said nothing. Then she got up and walked into the kitchen.

The sun was now high in the sky and getting stronger. The dewdrops on the lawn had evaporated. Kedar Nath felt around inside his warm clothes as though he wanted to make sure his body was really there.

Lunch was ready. But he hadn’t yet found an opportunity to ask Sarla about her mother’s name. She had been busy preparing food since morning. Kedar Nath sat around in the sun and occasionally went to pace up and down on the veranda. Sometimes he chatted aimlessly with Joginder. If Sarla came out of the kitchen he would watch for an opportune moment when Joginder was out of the way to ask her about her mother’s name.

“It’s time for lunch. During lunch we’ll talk a lot and then I can ask her,” he thought and felt contented.

The food was laid out on the table. Sarla had made several dishes. They were delicious! It had been a long time since he had eaten food prepared by his daughter. He had become tired of always eating the same dull dishes cooked by his servant. He couldn’t remember the taste of food prepared by Sarla’s mother.... Well, he didn’t even remember her name. He was anxious to ask: “Daughter, what’s your mother’s name?” But could he really do that? If he did what would they think? They were sure to break into peals of laughter.

Kedar Nath tried to control himself so he wouldn't blurt out the question involuntarily. "Oh God, whom shall I ask ... I wish I could remember it myself so I wouldn't have to ask." He frowned, and wrinkles appeared on his forehead. Then he closed his eyes trying to think hard. He hadn't seen Sarla's son. He would probably be able to remember his granny's name ... I could ask him while we're talking.

"Sarla, I don't see your son...."

"Oh yes Babuji, I forgot to tell you that after his B.A. he started preparing for the competitive exams. He left for Delhi two days ago...."

"I see ... so he isn't home." Kedar Nath heaved a deep sigh and started eating again. He finished eating, but his wife's name still eluded him. After lunch there was afternoon tea and then it was almost evening. Kedar Nath got up to go without having asked the name. He was tired now. Whoever he met seemed to know his wife's name. He wanted to question each of them, but no one paid any attention to him, nor could he open his mouth to ask. He was on his way home now. Suddenly the bus ground to a halt. He looked out of the window and got up from his seat.

The room was enveloped in darkness. Kedar Nath stretched himself out on the bed without turning on the light. He felt as though the walls were closing in. As he peered into the darkness towards the wall his eyes began to smart. The whole room was filled with smoke. "I should get up and turn on the light," he thought. But he couldn't sleep with the light on. Well, he couldn't sleep even in the darkness. Now his eyes burned like embers; the body would also begin to blaze. Flames sputtered thick and fast. The pyre of Sarla's mother was burning. The light was strong and he couldn't sleep. Then why were his eyes heavy with sleep? The body had melted away in places. He turned on his side but there was no escape from the deep pain. His hands and feet were turning cold. Suddenly something seemed to slip from his brain onto the floor under the bed. Kedar Nath sat up on his bed and turned on the light. Taking the books from the cupboard, he spread them out on the floor. He pulled out all the papers from the drawers, and some files from an old box, and he began rummaging through them. Some papers he read, some he tore up, and some he folded neatly. "Hell, I can't find any of her letters!" Annoyed, Kedar Nath tore at and flung the papers, files, and books around. Both of his hands had turned cold, and he was feeling suffocated. Frightened, he tried to remove his muffler, but its grip on his neck became tighter.

Pulling on one end with all his might it finally came off and he lay there panting. “There’s no use trying to find ... or trying to remember.” And yet he did try to remember his wife’s name.

“Shanti...?”

“No.”

“Sarojini...?”

“Oh no!”

“Srishta...?”

“Not that either....”

Thousands of names crowded his mind. Then he forgot what he was trying to remember.

“What day is today?”

“Sunday ...”

“Oh, no! Yesterday was Sunday.”

“Yesterday...?”

It was Sunday when he had gone to Sarla’s house. And that was ages ago.

A yellow light poured out of his eyes and spread through the room. Books, papers, files ... he could see some fading letters.

“Sharma.... Yes, my office colleague Sharma.... What was his full name?”

Oh, I’ve forgotten that too!

“And his son’s name?”

No, I can’t remember anything.

“Park?”

“Which Park?”

The same one where she’s standing now and smiling.... But even the name of this park has been changed.

“What’s the new name?”

Why think of the new name, I can’t even remember the old one. I’m forgetting everything.

My daughter....

Oh! I can’t recall her name either.

Her husband’s name?

Oh God, what’s happening to me...? I can’t remember anything.

Was he only worried about his wife’s name?

No, there’s something else that he’s forgotten.

“What is it?”

It’s the nameplate that dropped from his mind so often. What’s written on it? Nothing can be seen on it.... Everything has faded....

Walls, roof, doors, floor ... nothing's there. Only a vast field with gaping cracks here and there. The sun's orb had spread out so much that it hid the entire sky behind it. In that blinding light nothing could be seen. Suddenly a tiny object was visible in the distance.

What is it?

A human being often turning to look around himself. There was no one near him. He was alone, absolutely alone....

Lo and behold! He's coming toward me. And now he's so close to my eyes that the sky, the field, and the sun are hidden behind him.

Who is he? □

—*Translated by M. Asaduddin*