HASAN MANZAR

The Poor Dears

A COLD, WET WIND was blowing outside as my plane landed at Heathrow Airport. In the terminal building I spotted Cathy among the crowd coming to receive their relatives and felt reassured. I was no longer worried about how I would get to my flat.

I dumped my baggage in the boot of Cathy's white Ford and flopped down beside her on the seat. After she pulled the car out of the airport traffic into a calmer street, I lit a cigar and said, "Open the window a bit, or you'll wind up dead behind the wheel in your quiet, cozy world."

"You may keep smoking," she said, without taking her eyes off the road.

I closed my eyes and dozed off. I awakened only when I felt Cathy's hand trying to remove the cigar butt from between my lips.

"How did you know I was asleep?" I asked.

"How? You snore."

We had reached my flat. Standing on the dark, cobbled street, I thanked Cathy, promising to tell her about my travels in the morning, and said good-bye to her. Then I looked around impassively. Empty milk bottles stood outside doors in the dim, grey light. Except for one, all the other flats were dark behind curtains that had been drawn shut.

The same old place. I was home for certain! It is a rare virtue in Cathy that she never asks questions unless I am in a mood to talk.

In the morning I went through my mail. There were bills, bank statements—the usual stuff.

"Bēčārē," from his collection *Nadīdī* (Hyderabad: Āgahī Publications, 1982), pp. 1–22. Reprinted from Muhammad Umar Memon, ed., *The Tale of the Old Fisherman: Contemporary Urdu Short Stories* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1991), pp. 125–37.

The cleaning lady came and started work. At one point she asked, "How did your trip go, Mr. Hasan?"

"It went quite well, thank you," I said, offering her the red box of Benson & Hedges.

She thanked me and took out a cigarette. As she put it carefully away in her apron pocket, she said, "I mustn't waste such an expensive cigarette. I'll smoke it after I'm finished with the cleaning."

I gave her the whole box and said, "Come on, old girl, have a smoke with me first. You can always work later."

"So you felt quite at home there, Mr. Hasan?" she asked producing a cloud of smoke.

I told her that if by "there" she meant India and Pakistan, then she was mistaken. I hardly even knew the names of my relatives in those places. Or if she meant some other countries, then, until a few months ago, I knew no more about them than did any ordinary Londoner.

I scarcely remember when the cleaning lady left and when Cathy walked in. She had come to take down my travel notes, which she would then type and return to me properly arranged, so that I could start work on my new book. A number of trifling chores which, like any ordinary traveler, I had foisted upon myself, kept getting in the way, however. I wanted to get them out of the way. For instance, the decrepit old man I had run into at the Angkor Wat ruins—the grand temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu—had asked me through a bout of nasty coughing, "I hear that in England they have come up with a brand new drug for curing bronchial asthma."

Nearly exhausted from my strolls through the myriad pathways and balconies of the temple that sprawled over some five hundred acres, I had just sat down, removed my burning feet from my shoes, and plunged them into the cool, refreshing dirt. The old man sat close by, carefully holding my movie and still cameras in his lap to protect them from the dust. In my tranquil surroundings, I began to make notes.

The sky was crowded with dark, low-hanging rain clouds. The old man panted for breath. "I hear," he said, as if to himself, "*that* drug roots out the disease."

I jotted down the old man's name and address in my notes on the Angkor Wat ruins, setting them apart carefully within parentheses. Even as I did that, I couldn't suppress a smile thinking how Cathy would type out the lines on a separate sheet of paper which she would then hand over to me saying, "Perhaps this gentleman belongs to the present century; we can't possibly include his name and address in the book."

I promised the old man to ask my doctor friends back in England about the drug. If such a drug really existed, I would be sure to send it to him. One of my journalist friends could bring enough of it to last him six to twelve months.

I had been expecting my offer to brighten up the old man—amazing, isn't it, how the East eagerly awaits every new discovery or invention to come from the West!—but his face remained entirely expressionless. With measured politeness, he said, "All right, sir, if you say so."

The old man handed me back my cameras and got busy in his work. He had as little hope of hearing from me again as he had of being able to fall asleep that night; and failure to get the drug would have hurt him as little, I thought, as the realization that his life was coming to an end. He would have accepted them both with the ascetic detachment befitting a Buddhist monk. "Time" and "human dependence" had become meaningless words for him in the ruins of that centuries-old temple, which resembled a veritable town in its vast sweep.

Then there was this other *bhikshu* I had met in a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka. I had mentioned to him a recent publication from New York and London which contained color pictures of all the important Buddhist monuments the world over.

This monastery, flanked on all sides by king coconut palms, was a short distance from Colombo. I was visiting it for the second time. I had first come here when I was on my way to Kandy and Anuradhapura, and now again as I was leaving Sri Lanka for India. In between, I had managed a trip to the ruins of Anuradhapura and taken pictures of the brick *maths* erected during the Sinhalese period in honor of Buddha.

The Temple of Buddha's Tooth at Kandy, with the delicate art work on every stone and beam, was also fresh in my memory. I was terribly disappointed that they would not open for me the room which housed the celebrated relic, so that I could verify for myself whether there really was a tooth or whether the gullible people had just placed their faith in a velvet box.

The ceiling of the balcony outside this room held a painting of an elephant. I would have passed through the balcony almost without noticing it, or would have at most given it a cursory glance, had not one of the temple devotees invited me to look at it carefully. I looked up without enthusiasm, hoping to find a profile of Ganesh, the elephant god, but stopped short, and the devotee let out a short, gentle laugh, which I am sure he must have laughed many times before. The accomplished painter had so skillfully depicted a bevy of young female shrine-devotees

that they merged into the figure of a colossal elephant. I asked him about the painter but he chose to ignore my question, thinking, perhaps, that it was insignificant. Instead, he started telling me about some white flowers that lay in front of the statue of the seated Buddha.

I was to ask the same question of my *bhikshu* friend in Colombo during my second meeting with him. The intervening period, which I had spent in different cities of Sri Lanka, had created a sort of closeness between us—a closeness which was obvious from his expression but which he was loath to admit. I guess this was because intimacy bred the very attachment which he had wanted to curb by renouncing the world and adopting the austere, saffron-dyed garb of a *bhikshu*. My single question prompted him to ask a few of his own about India, about Burma. Finally, I gulped down the coconut milk he had offered and got up.

It was to him that I had promised to send the book. I telephoned Foyles. They did have it in stock. Price: two pounds. I placed the order and instructed them to send it directly to the monk in Sri Lanka. This done, I crossed his name off my check list. I felt a sense of relief slowly coming over me—I couldn't have wanted it more.

A little while later Faiq Ali telephoned from Manchester. He wanted to know about his relatives whom I had met in Karachi. It was strange, wasn't it, that before embarking on my voyage to the East it was I who had asked him, "Well, aren't you going to give me the addresses of all those first and second cousins you keep telling me about all the time?" and now it was he who was so impatient to find out from me about those same "first" and "second" cousins: "What kind of people are they? Did they treat you well?" So on and so forth, as if Naima and her relatives were in fact mine, not his.

The only reason I had asked Faiq for addresses was so I could see first-hand how people lived in Pakistan, what sort of problems they had, what kind of hopes and dreams they cherished. One rarely gets an accurate idea of a country and its people by putting up in hotels, or reaching out to them through tourist guides and travel books.

The morning after I arrived in Karachi from Colombo I first confirmed my reservations in the hotels where I was to stay during my visit to different cities in West Pakistan, then made a few phone calls regarding my schedule. Finally, I called the European drug manufacturing company where Naima worked. I had thought everybody would know her there. This was not the case. I was told that she was just a packing girl, free to talk on the phone only during the lunch hour. I had not

finished talking when the receptionist rudely hung up. I dialed again, this time asking to speak with the General Manager of the company. The man at the other end sounded irritated. Why didn't I go to Naima's house and ask her whatever important thing it was that I wanted to ask her? Why was I wasting his time? But when I told him that I was a writer from England on a trip to Pakistan and knew next to nothing about this country, his voice changed noticeably. He asked me courteously for my phone number and instructed someone on the intercom in Urdu, "Look, there is some girl called Naima who works in the packing department. Ask her to come right away to my office and take the phone." He then politely asked me to wait awhile.

As I waited I could hear faint snatches of some Pakistani music playing in his office and two men talking in one of the regional languages.

When I picked up the phone again I heard the voice of a frightened female at the other end talking in barely audible tones. This was Naima who, I sensed, was quite embarrassed talking to a perfect stranger like myself in the inhibiting presence of her boss, scared that her voice might ruin the decor of his room. I guessed from her voice that she must have been around twenty years old.

"What do you want?" she asked in a whisper.

The rest was more or less a monologue. Had it not been for her faint "yes"es that echoed dimly through the receiver from time to time, I would have thought the line had been disconnected, all the more so as the sound of Pakistani music had meanwhile died out and the other human voices, too, had stopped.

As I talked to her I couldn't resist imagining a frightfully pretty girl at the other end—all alone, skewered by the lustful stares of the men in the room, trying her best to crawl into the receiver to avoid those piercing glances, but who did not know how. Even her "yes"es were no longer audible to me.

I told her that I was a friend of her cousin Faiq and had come to spend a few days in Karachi. Then I asked her if I could, perhaps, come and visit her at her house. I asked her for her address and mentioned that I would drop by some evening after my return from Taxila.

"Tell me the day you want to come and give me your address," she whispered. "I will have my brother come and pick you up."

This was the second and the last full sentence the girl uttered. I fished through my date book and gave her my address and the date on which I was scheduled to leave for Beirut.

I related the details of my meeting with Naima and her folks to Faiq.

All he seemed to be interested in, though, was my comment that if he was looking for an Eastern wife he would not find a better girl than Naima, from east of Suez to Cambodia.

To return to my meeting with Naima and her family: On the appointed day, the hotel receptionist sent to my room a youth whose face was all but covered with pock marks. He looked just as frightened as Naima had sounded over the phone. He had come to escort me to their house. I offered him some refreshments but he declined, adding courteously, "Back home, we are all waiting for you to join us for tea."

The poor man seemed even more over-awed by the hotel than by me. It was probably the first time that he had set foot in it, and was feeling quite out of place in its plush, swank environment. I asked the waiter for a taxi and came out of the hotel with the youth in tow.

Throughout the ride I remained silent. I didn't wish to embarrass my young companion further. He, on his part, preoccupied himself with giving directions to the cab driver. We passed through different parts of the city, each with its peculiar lifestyle. The faces, bodies, and garb of most of the pedestrians suggested that we were proceeding from affluence to poverty, from a world of plenty to a world of dire need. The women in Naima's neighborhood flitted about in veils. Children, some barefoot, some with runny noses, romped around. Here and there along the street some people had set up cots on which they sat or lay. There were no foreigners.

Naima's brother led me into a dull, pale building. We climbed several flights of dark, dank stairs and entered a flat on the third floor. I had to spend some time alone in the living room. In fact I had expected that and was mentally prepared for it. As I sat there waiting for my hosts to appear, I realized my mistake. I should have met these people immediately after my arrival in Pakistan, so that on a second visit around the time of my departure we would have become informal enough for me to gauge their true feelings, and to have some idea of their hopes and aspirations. It is amazing how a first meeting, no matter how protracted, almost never creates the same degree of informality as that generated by the interval between two short meetings.

The first to enter the room was Naima's mother: middle-aged, sallow-complexioned, tolerably good-looking—I thought. Next came Naima's sister. She looked more like a younger sister of the middle-aged lady, with nothing striking about her. The last to enter was Naima herself. She was truly stunning.

I had thought I would spend at most an hour with them. But I

ended up spending the whole evening. By the time I got up to leave, I had become thoroughly acquainted with the entire family and their past life.

The hospitality started with fried snacks. Later, the older daughter, succumbing to the old lady's persistent requests, sang a Mira *bhajan* for me, and Naima, again at her mother's behest, played a cracked disc on the gramophone, to which I listened with feigned interest. I was also formally introduced to the photographs which hung from the wall. One of these, a picture in copper tones, shot most probably some time between 1930 and 1940 and printed on orthochromatic paper, was of the girls' father. Like the occupants of the house, I, too, had to pick up the picture and look at it in reverent silence for a while before replacing it on the wall.

I promised to write to them and apologized that I must do so in English as I wasn't fully conversant with the Urdu script. Throughout the evening I had noticed how my halting Urdu had amused them. I also promised to have Faiq's mother write to them as well. However, when I got up to leave, I knew deep in my heart that I was neither happy nor satisfied with this meeting. I noticed that everything which might be even the least bit offensive to look at had been deftly removed from the scene. Soon upon entering the room I had spotted items of laundry left to dry on the clothesline on the balcony. But when I got up to greet the lady, my eyes fell accidentally on the clothesline and I was mildly surprised to find it bare. It was as though somebody had in the meantime crawled to the balcony unnoticed and pulled the laundry off the line without attracting attention.

After talking with Faiq I crossed another item off the checkl ist.

The pictures had been sent out to be developed. I expected them back within a few days. I would then send Amand the pictures of his family as well as the baby overall with the zipper which I had promised him.

I had met Amand on a lake in West Pakistan where he worked as an oarsman. He had given me the most detailed information about this region. He had told me how the lake was once the land between two hills and how the waters of the neighboring river had been diverted to fill it. And, there, on the island that I saw, was the shrine of some venerable woman saint. Formerly people walked all the way to it for pious visitation but now, since only a few could afford to pay for the boat ride, most returned from the waterfront after making their votive offerings.

Amand's family had given me coarse reddish bread of rice flour to eat

and a single fish to go with it, which he had borrowed from a fellow oarsman and fried for me. Color photos were not the only things I had promised Amand. I was going to send him an overall, too, for his baby who was spending the last trimester in its mother's womb. Bundled up in the overall, the baby would be freed from the danger of catching pneumonia from the lake's cold winds.

Most of Amand's children had suffered from acute bronchial pneumonia—I had guessed as much from the description he gave of their illnesses—but he and his family firmly believed their ailment to be the work of some evil spirit, which, in fact, as they thought, had even claimed a couple of Amand's children's lives.

Even in their wildest dreams, Amand and his family couldn't have imagined such an overall, let alone owning a brand new one. This overall was going to be the expression of my gratitude to them for their hospitality and service.

The list began to shrink—slowly, gradually.

In time I crossed off Amand's name, too; as well as that of the old Catholic lady who taught school in India to whom I had mentioned having seen the first resting place of Saint Francis Xavier at Malacca—that rectangular pit from which his body was later exhumed and carried to Goa and reinterred there. "I'll do anything you want," the old woman had entreated me most respectfully, "if you could, perhaps, send me a picture of that pit."

And I had promised that indeed I most certainly would.

I did some stock-taking of myself after crossing the old lady's name off the list. I had been back in London for a good fortnight now and had started work on my new book. My life had swung back to its normal rhythm, the one it had before I began my travels to the East: reading newspapers, writing, other chores, study, visits to the library, afternoon strolls, then TV and sleep.

One day Cathy picked up the packet which had been lying on my table for the whole week and asked, "Aren't you going to mail it?"

I was in the other room, so I asked, "Mail what?"

"This packet, addressed to Miss Naima so-and-so, Karachi?"

I returned to my study and asked her, "Do you know what's in it?"

"Two hundred feet of Scotch magnetic tape … made of polyester, right?"

"Is that all?"

"Well, the tape is enclosed in a cardboard box which is wrapped in soft padding. You have had the housemaid wrap the whole thing in cloth

and sew it up and then enclose it in this manila envelope."

"But the tape—what's on the tape?"

"Your message for the girl—isn't that rather obvious?" Cathy said, returning the packet on the table.

"No, I wish it were that simple. For then, I would have either mailed it myself or asked you to mail it for me."

"Your friend Faiq's message, then," Cathy said, thinking hard, "or maybe Faiq's mother's voice … for that *sallow-complexioned, good-looking, middle-aged woman?"*

After a while she asked jokingly, "Which of these two, the girl or her mother, is likely to be the central character in one of your future novels?"

I remained silent.

"Still hung up on mothers, eh?" Cathy continued. "When are you going to outgrow this fixation? Why not the young lady …"

But I remained impassive. My expressionless face prompted her to probe, "Well, aren't you going to answer?"

"Cathy," I began, "every single day for the past week I have thought of mailing this packet but have put off doing so for one reason or another. You have no idea whose voice I have taped on it."

"Well, whose voice?"

I ignored her query and continued, "I have been thinking all week long whether I should send the packet to Naima. I ask myself, now that I have got the tape and have gone through the trouble of having it neatly packed, why not take it to the post office, have it weighed, put the stamps on it, and mail it? But then I think, suppose I later regretted it, nothing would stop the packet from reaching her. I am finding out, for the first time in my life it seems, that whatever you have committed to another ceases to be yours."

"What, for instance?"

"For instance the arrow committed to the wind, the dead body to the earth, and …"

"There you go again," Cathy interrupted. "It is the Eastern man inside you that makes you say all this."

I continued. "Cathy, I am unable to decide what to do with it. Once or twice I have even run my fingers over the wrapping to see if it has gathered dust and then laughed at the foolishness of my act. There is no dust here. How can there be any in cold countries? Perhaps I am driven to do so by my desire to find out how long it has been lying on my desk. You see, in the East, they judge the length of time passed over a thing by the amount of dust it has collected."

"Hold on, let me grab a pen and notebook," Cathy said in dead earnest. "I guess this must be part of the book you are writing now."

But I went on. "Then again, it is entirely possible that I am no longer quite so anxious to send it off to Naima. The book eats up most of my time. As I work on it, I become completely oblivious of Naima, her dead or living family members. Moreover, a busy writer, in search of new materials for his book, soon forgets the people he meets and photographs he takes of them during the course of his travels, and the promises he makes to them. There comes a time when these people, uniquely individual and vibrant with life, are transformed into mere characters, and all the places he has visited become the stage on which all the different acts of the cosmic drama of life are enacted all at once."

"I can easily use this material for the Foreword of the book, you know," Cathy said. But I continued in a slow, halting voice: "It is quite possible that Naima and her family have by now become mere characters to me, and that this packet no more than a mere reminder of the time when I had just returned from my travels in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, of a time when I had noted in my diary what I had to do or send to whom.

"You remember I had told you how at my request Naima's brother had come to take me to their house, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," Cathy said, putting aside the pen and the notebook on the table.

"Let me go over that scene once again. Then when you have heard the whole story, tell me whether or not I should send the packet on to her.

"Well, every single object in that living room disguised an overwhelming desire to be recognized, to be esteemed. That is why everything that failed to measure up to their standards, that seemed mean or odd or otherwise betrayed poverty, had been spirited away from the scene. Naima's brother, who suffered from some chest ailment, told me that he worked for the railway. But he never did tell me what exactly his job was. Naima, too, was more than a little diffident about the nature of her own work at the drug company. And time and again the mother kept saying, 'You cannot even imagine what their father was and all the things he wanted to do for his children.' But when I asked, 'Well, what was he?' she answered, 'An *artist!*' She also told me that Naima was born after her husband's death. It was at this point that they removed that picture from the wall and showed it to me—the picture of a young man shot on an orthochromatic plate, who couldn't have been more than thirty years old,

I thought, when he left her widowed.

"My earlier excitement at meeting the attractive widow had begun to wane in that stuffy, lackluster atmosphere. I was looking at everything without enthusiasm or interest. I was told that it was Naima's elder sister who had inherited all the artistic talent of the girls' father—perhaps because she was fortunate enough to have been raised by him—for she sang very well and was an accomplished vocalist, while Naima, well, let's just say she had been trained for a career job right from the start.

"I was at a loss. I had no idea what they took me for. Had my movie camera led them to believe that I could, perhaps, put the girls in films? The accolades they liberally showered upon the older girl forced me to ask her for a song. Not unexpectedly, she declined. Ultimately, giving into the persistent, urgent pleas of her mother and younger sister, she did however sing a *bhajan,* by Mira Bai, I was later told. I was now beginning to pity them. The girl, or woman if you will, simply couldn't carry the higher notes of the song.

"Next they bragged about their record collection. Some of the discs had been collected by the girls' father and some, after his premature death, by their mother. One by one they showed off every single disc. As I looked at them I couldn't help feeling they were light years away from the age of 33⅓ and 45 rpm records. They were all old 78 rpm discs—bulky and awkward, which you played by changing the gramophone needles every so often. Their center labels—depicting the yellow Gemini Twins, an elephant trunk, a lion, a horse—were a novelty to me and I wanted to buy a few of these relics and bring them along. I had seen them being sold, along with used books, in Sadar, the city's biggest shopping center. Their grooves were all but gone, some didn't even have any grooves left.

"Naima's brother sat silently on one side. Outside the window daylight had waned. The middle-aged woman handed me a record and said, 'Here, this is their father.' I looked at the record. It had a light blue label with the picture of a pair of spotted deer and the legend: Calcutta Recording Company; Music by: R.C.B.; Orchestra conducted by: P.K. The remainder was in Hindi. The record had a hairline crack running all the way from the center to the outer rim where it had been deftly mended by a piece of copper sheet and minuscule nails.

"I asked them to play the record for me and they were quick to oblige. The voice sounded vaguely familiar. I knew I had heard that song in England at the house of one buff or another of old Indian music, but try hard as I might I failed to recollect exactly where. Just then I heard the lady say, 'Watch, here he comes!' What came was a piece of flute music.

Naima and her sister pointed simultaneously at the rotating disc and screamed, 'There he is!'

"The record kept playing, making a click each time the needle hit the crack. Once it even got stuck in a groove so that Naima had to quickly lift the heavy playing head and advance it a couple of grooves. I was trying hard to avoid looking directly into their faces. The flute intermezzo was incorporated several times in the composition and each time it was played they listened to it in hushed reverence, while I wondered, what if the record broke one day … what would they hang on to, just what?

"On my way back to the hotel I realized with frightening clarity how terribly incomplete all my notes were. The most they could do was tell me the names of the kings who had built those temples at Anuradhapura and Kandy. Granted, the accounts of the monuments at Delhi and Agra were somewhat more detailed; for instance, it was possible to find out who had designed a particular building, who the architect was; but could they tell me, would I ever know anything about the man who had actually picked a particular stone or slab and carried it there, or about him whose dexterous hands had wrought such marvel on that stone?"

"Well, let me tell you what to do," Cathy said. "Just let this two hundred feet of magnetic tape sit right where it is. I think I know what it is that you want to send to that family. But are you sure they can afford a tape player to listen to it?"

"I can easily send them one," I said in a choking voice.

"And make them realize that all you noticed about them was their poverty? That besides that snatch of flute music, to which they clung so miserably, they owned absolutely nothing? Surely you don't want to insult them, do you?"

Cathy picked up the packet, played with it for a few seconds and put it back down. Then she said, "Just let it lie here. With it before your eyes as you write, the individuals you wish to talk about will not turn into mere characters."

After a brief silence I asked, "Care for a walk?"

"Sure, why not. To my place?"

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon