

SAJJAD ZAHEER

A Summer's Evening*

AFTER FINISHING his evening prayers, Munshi Barkat Ali went on his regular walk and found himself at Ameenabad Park. A summer's evening, the air was completely still. People stood and talked near the dirty little stalls that sold cold sherbet. Boys screamed, trying to sell their newspapers and the men who sold jasmine garlands raced after each well-to-do man. At the intersection, one could hear the interminable ballyhoo of the carriage and buggy drivers.

"The square! A ride to the square! Sir, take you to the square?"

"Hey mister, need a ride?"

"Garlands of jasmine! Garlands of marigolds!"

"Fantastic ice cream!"

The Munshi bought a garland of flowers, drank some sherbet and ate a paan before going into the park. There was absolutely no room left on any of the benches so some people had lain down on the grass. A few tone-deaf enthusiasts of song were creating a ruckus nearby. Other men sat quietly and hitched up their dhotis, totally absorbed in scratching their shins and thighs. Looking ridiculous, they would also pounce on the mosquitoes in unison. The Munshi was the kind of man who always wore cotton pants, so this ill-mannered display annoyed him. He was thinking to himself, "These miserable fools have no shame," when suddenly someone called to him from a bench.

"Munshi Barkat Ali!"

The Munshi turned around.

"Is that you, Brother Lalaji? You're well aren't you?"

Lalaji was the head clerk in the same office that the Munshi worked in. The Munshi, actually, was his underling. Lalaji had taken off his shoes

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so that he could lift his legs up and sit more comfortably with his massive frame covering the bench. He was stroking his pronounced belly gently and had been talking loudly to his companions, who were sitting reverently on either side of the bench. Seeing the Munshi walking along, he decided to call out to him. The Munshi came and stood before Lala Sahib.

Lalaji laughed and said, "What's this Munshiji? Bought a garland of flowers have you? Planning on having a good time tonight?" And saying this, he burst into a loud guffaw and looked over toward his two companions for support. They began laughing at Lalaji's intended joke.

The Munshi also laughed a weak, forced laugh. "Having a good time. You know that I'm a poor man. It's so hard to breathe, you know, in this heat. I haven't been able to sleep for nights. I bought this garland of flowers hoping that it might help me sleep for an hour or two."

Lalaji stroked his bald head and laughed again saying, "You are a man who enjoys things, Munshiji. And why not?" Then he became absorbed in talking to his companions. The Munshi saw his opportunity and said, "Well Lalaji, I'll take my leave. Good day." As he spoke he began walking away. He thought to himself, "Why did I have to run into this idiot after a day at the grind. Asks me, 'Planning on having a good time?' What does he think I am, some rich landlord who can spend his nights listening to mujras or visiting the brothels? Would that I ever had more than a quarter in my wallet. The wife and kids, and a sixty-rupee a month salary—and on top of that the money that comes under the table is hardly reliable. Who knows how I managed to fleece a rupee out of one of them today. These rural clients—the wretches are growing smarter every day. After hours of trivial, useless conversation, they take a few coins out of their pockets and then treat you as if you were their personal slave. They don't speak politely either. These vulgar lower-class types—they've become big-headed these days. And the worst part of it is the situation for us respectable middle-class folk. On the one hand, it's impossible to mix with the ill-mannered lower classes, and on the other hand, the upper class and the government are becoming increasingly strict. Just two months ago, in Banaras district, two unfortunate scribes were suspended on bribery charges. That's what always happens. The poor are punished. But the only thing that happens to a senior officer is that he gets transferred from one post to another."

"Munshiji Sahib!" someone yelled from one side. It was the voice of Jumman, the orderly.

The Munshi said, "Is that you, Jumman?"

But the Munshiji kept on walking and didn't stop. He turned away from the park and continued on until he came to Nazirabad. Jumman followed behind him. A strange spectacle: short, thin Munshi in front, a velveteen, boat-shaped hat on his head, the string of flowers in his hand and, two paces behind him, turbaned and wearing a short vest, the tall, broad-shouldered orderly Jumman.

The Munshi began to think, "What business could Jumman have with me to follow me at this time of day?"

"So Jumman, how are you? I just met the head clerk in the park. He was complaining about the heat, too."

"Well Munshiji, what can I say. It's not just the heat that's killing me. I got off work about 4:30 or 5:00 and had to go straight to the manager's house to report for duty. I just got done there so I'm headed home now. And you know how hard the daily grind is, every day from 10:00 in the morning to 8:00 in the evening. After I finished at the courthouse, I had to go to the bazaar three times. Ice, vegetables, fruit—a person has to buy all sorts of things, and gets yelled at—why did you pay more today and why are these fruits rotten? The manager's wife hated the mangoes I bought for her today. She ordered me to return them. I said, 'Mistress, how can I return them at this hour?' And she said, 'I don't care, it's not like I sent you to buy this trash.' And so you see, sir, I was stuck with a rupee's worth of mangoes. When I went to the mango-seller's I had to do a lot of haggling with him and then I only got twelve annas back for a rupee's worth of mangoes. I lost four annas. I've spent this month's salary, and I'll swear to it, sir, I don't even have stale bread to eat. I don't know what to do or how I'll show my face to my wife."

The Munshiji became anxious about Jumman's purpose in telling him this story. Who didn't know that the poor suffered and went hungry? But what fault of the Munshi's was this? It wasn't as if his was a life spent in luxury. The Munshi's hand involuntarily reached for his pocket. The rupee that he had extorted earlier in the day was still there, safe and sound.

"You're absolutely right, Jumman. In this age, the poor suffer greatly. Everywhere you look, it's the same troubles. There's nothing to eat at home. To tell you the truth, it seems to me that all the signs indicate the Day of Judgment is near. There's a world full of cheats who get to enjoy everything, while the pious followers of Allah have to endure all kinds of suffering and hardship."

Jumman listened to the Munshi quietly and followed him. The Munshi may have been putting on a calm face, but he was growing

increasingly worried. He didn't know, after all, what effect his words were having on Jumman.

"Yesterday, after the Friday prayer, the Maulana gave a sermon on the signs of the Day of Judgment. Brother Jumman, I'll tell you the truth, everyone who listened had tears in his eyes. In reality, brother, these are all consequences of our sins. Whatever punishments are meted out to us by God will not be enough. There are no faults that can't be found in each and every one of us. And it makes my hair stand on end to think about how God punished the Beni Israel for lesser crimes than ours. But then again, you must know all that."

Jumman said: "I'm a poor man, Munshiji. I don't know all these educated things. I've heard about the Day of Judgment, but, sir, who are these poor Benny Israel?"

The Munshi was relieved to hear this question. It was good that the conversation had turned away from talk of hunger and poverty and toward Judgment Day and the Beni Israel. The Munshi himself wasn't all that familiar with the history of the tribe, but he could talk about it for hours.

"What are you saying, my dear Jumman. You call yourself a Muslim but you don't know who the Beni Israel are! Brother, the entire Qur'ān is full of stories about the Beni Israel. Have you heard of the name of the Prophet Musa Kaleem-ullah?"

"What was that? Kaleem-ullah?"

"Come on, now, the Prophet Musa ... Mu ... sa"

"Do you mean that fellow Musa who was struck by lightning?"

The Munshi laughed out loud. Now he felt totally at peace, and before long they found themselves at the intersection near Qaisar Bagh. I'll certainly be able to get rid of this starving orderly here. In the evening, after one has eaten his fill and said his prayers, when he sets out for a walk to relax his mind for a while, it's not a pleasant thing to run into a poor, starving man, especially one already known. But what was the Munshi to do! He couldn't shoo Jumman away like a dog because, on the one hand, he had to run into him every day at the courthouse, and on the other hand, he was a lower-class man. If Jumman were to insult the Munshi in public, it would ruin the Munshi's reputation. It was better to get rid of him by parting ways, perhaps at this intersection.

"Well, I'll have to tell you all about the Beni Israel and Musa some other time. Just now I have something to take care of over here ... salaam, Jumman." He finished speaking and turned in the direction of the Qaisar Bagh cinema. Upon seeing the Munshi walk away so quickly, Jumman

stood still where he was for a moment. He didn't know what he would do if he had the chance. Drops of sweat were sparkling on his forehead. His eyes looked here and there dully. The bright electric lights, the fountain, the movie posters, the restaurants, the stores, the cars, the carriages, the buggies, and above them all the dark sky and the twinkling stars. In short, all God's creation.

But in the next instant, Jumman raced after the Munshi, who was looking at a movie poster and feeling thankful that he had gotten rid of Jumman.

Jumman walked up to him and said, "Munshiji!"

The Munshi's heart sank. All that religious discussion, all that talk of Judgment Day, all in vain. The Munshi didn't respond.

Jumman said, "Munshiji, if you could let me borrow a rupee today, I would be forever ..."

The Munshi turned, "Brother Jumman, I know you're in a difficult situation now, but you know what my situation is. Forget about a rupee, I couldn't even lend you a paisa. Would I hide it from you if I had it. You wouldn't have to ask for it. I would have given you whatever I had first."

Despite this, Jumman began insisting, "Munshiji, I swear, I'll pay you back as soon as I get my wages. I'm telling you the truth, sir. There's no one else who can help me...."

These kinds of conversations always made the Munshi very uncomfortable. It never matters if there is a legitimate reason to turn someone down or not, it's still very painful. That's why, from the beginning, he didn't want to let things get to this point.

At that very moment, the movie ended and the audience spilled out into the street.

"Brother Barkat, what are you doing here?" someone said nearby. The Munshi turned away from Jumman to look in that direction. A well-to-do gentleman, fat and round, maybe thirty or thirty-five years old, wearing a long tunic and a double-seamed cap, came up to the Munshi chewing a paan and smoking a cigarette. The Munshi said, "Oh, it's you. It's been ages since I've seen you. I thought you had left Lucknow. And brother, even when you visit the city you never have time to see poor people like me." He was an old college friend of the Munshi, a wealthy aristocrat. He said, "Well, forget all that. I'm here for a few days for some fun and relaxation. Come along with me now. I'll take you to hear a mujra that you'll never forget. I have my car. Don't think about it too much, just come. Have you ever heard Noor Jehan sing? Oh ho-ho, she's marvelous, and she moves and dances beautifully. Those coquettish gestures, the

way she spins, the way she moves her hips, the sound of the bells on her ankles. There's going to be a gathering at my house in the courtyard, under the stars. It'll continue until we've heard a Bhairavi. Just come. It's Sunday tomorrow.... You're afraid of getting a beating from your wife's shoes, eh? If all you want to do is be a slave to women like that why did you ever get married, huh? Come on brother, it'll be fun. There's also something enjoyable about trying to appease an angry wife...."

An old friend, a car ride, song and dance, the promise of intoxicating eyes, a heavenly place—the Munshi jumped into the car. He didn't even think twice about Jumman. As the car was pulling away, he saw Jumman still standing there, quietly. □

—*Translated by Snehal Shingavi*