NAIYER MASUD

Sheesha Ghat

Ṣad mauj rā ze rafṭan-e khud muẕṭrib kunad
Maujē keh bar-kināṛ ravad az miyān-e mā
Each wave that strikes out to embrace the shore
Leaves a hundred more pereturbed by its departure
—Naẕīrī Nīshāpūrī

And with such luck and loss
I shall content myself
Till tides of turning time may toss
Such fishers on the shelf
—George Gascoigne

I

After keeping me with him with the greatest of love for eight years, my foster father was finally forced to find another place for me. It was not his fault, nor was it mine. He had believed, as had I, that my stuttering would stop after a few days of relaxation with him, but neither he nor I expected that the people here would turn me into a sideshow, the way they do a madman. In the bazaars, people listened to my words with a greater curiosity than they exhibited toward others, and whether what I said was funny or not, they always laughed. Within a few days my situation worsened so drastically that when I tried to say anything at all, not only in the bazaar but even at home, the words collided with my teeth and lips and palate and bounced back the way waves retreat on touching shore. In the end, I would get so tongue-tied that the veins in my neck would swell and a terrible pressure would invade my throat and chest, leaving me breathless and threatening to suffocate me. I would

pant, forced to leave my sentence incomplete, then start all over again after I had recovered my breath. At this my foster father would scold me, "You've said that. I heard you. Now go on."

If he ever scolded me, it was over this. But my problem was that I couldn't begin my account from the middle. Sometimes he would listen to me patiently and at others he would lift his hand and say, "All right, you may stop."

But if I couldn't begin my account from the middle, I couldn't leave it unfinished, either. I would grow agitated. Finally he would walk away, leaving me still stuttering, talking to myself. If anyone had seen me, I'd have been thought insane.

I was also fond of wandering through the bazaars, and enjoyed sitting there among the groups of people. Though I could not utter what I had to say comprehensibly, I made up for this by listening closely to what others said and repeating it in my mind. Sometimes I felt uncomfortable, yet I was happy enough, because the people there didn't dislike me, and above all my foster father held me dear and looked after my every need.

For the last few days, though, he had seemed worried. He had begun talking to me for long stretches of time, a new development. He would come up with questions to ask me that required a long answer, and then listen attentively without interrupting me. When I'd tire and begin to pant, he would wait for me to finish what I was saying, and when I resumed my account he would listen with the same concentration. I'd think he was about to scold me, and my tongue would start to tie itself in knots, but he would just gaze at me, saying nothing.

After only three days my tongue began to feel as if it were unknotting a bit. It was as if a weight were being lifted from my chest, and I began to dream of the day when I would be able to speak as others did, with ease and clarity. I began collecting in my heart all the things I had wanted to share with others. But on the fourth day, father called me over and had me sit very close to him. For a long time his talk rambled aimlessly, then he fell silent. I waited for him to pose one of his questions, but he suddenly said, "Your new mother is arriving the day after tomorrow."

Seeing the joy begin to dawn on my face, he grew troubled, then said slowly, "She'll go crazy if she hears you speak. She'll die."

The next day my luggage was all packed. Before I could ask any questions, my father took my hand and said, "Let's go."

*

He didn't say a word to me during the journey. But on our way, he told a man who chanced to inquire, "Jahaz has asked for him."

Then they both started talking about Jahaz. I remembered Jahaz, too. When I had first come to live with father, Jahaz earned his bread by performing clownish imitations at fairs and bazaars. He would wear a small pink sail tied to his back—perhaps that's why his name became Jahaz, "ship," or perhaps he wore the sail because his name was Jahaz. The pink sail would billow when the wind blew hard and Jahaz would seem to be moving forward under its power. He could mimic to perfection a ship caught in a storm. We would be convinced that angry winds, raging waves, and fast-spinning whirlpools were bent on sinking the ship. The sounds of the wind howling, the waves slapping, the whirlpool's ringing emptiness, even the sails fluttering, would emerge distinctly from the mimic's mouth; finally, the "ship" would sink. This routine was very popular with the children and the older boys, but was performed only when the wind was high. If the wind halted, however, the young spectators were even more delighted, and called out:

"Tobacco, tobacco!"

I had never seen anyone smoke tobacco the way Jahaz did. He used every kind of tobacco, in every way it was possible to smoke it, and when the air was still he would perform such astounding tricks with clouds of smoke that the spectators couldn't believe their eyes. After producing several smoke rings, he would take a step back, then twist his hands and wrists in the air as though sculpting a figure in soft clay. And sure enough, the rings would take on a shape, just like a sculpture, and stand suspended in the air for some time. Some of his mimic-routines the boys weren't allowed to see or hear. When performing these he would hide inside a rapidly closing circle two or three spectators deep, and the only way those standing at a distance knew that Jahaz was performing his mimicry was by a glimpse of the fluttering sail and the sound of the spectators' laughter.

A year after I had come to my foster father's, Jahaz's voice had gone bad and he had been afflicted with a severe cough. In the course of his mimicry he had used many different voices, but now if he opened his mouth a coughing fit would seize him, and at times it took him nearly as long to finish his sentence as it would have taken me. Not only did he cease to perform his mimic-routines, he stopped coming to our village at all, and after the first year I did not see him again.

*

We passed many settlements and ghats by the Big Lake on our route. Everywhere we went, there were people who knew my father, and he would tell them that Jahaz had asked for me. I didn't understand what this meant, but asked no questions. In my heart I was angry with him, because I wasn't the least bit happy about the idea of living apart from him. But my father didn't look happy either; at least he didn't seem like someone who was about to bring home a new wife.

Finally we arrived at a grimy settlement. The people here worked glass. There were few houses, but each one had a glass-furnace; ugly chimneys belching smoke protruded from the straw thatch of the roofs. Layers of soot had settled on the walls, the lanes, the trees. The people's clothes and the coats of stray dogs and cats were black from the smoke. Here, too, a few people were acquainted with my father. One of them bade us sit down to eat and drink. An oppressive feeling stole over me. My father looked at my face observantly, then he spoke to me for the first time on the journey.

"People don't get old here."

I didn't understand him. I looked at the people strolling by and, indeed, none among them was elderly. Father said, "The smoke eats them away."

"Then why do they live here?" I wanted to ask, but the question seemed futile, so I simply stared in father's direction.

"Jahaz knows glass-working, too," he said after a while. "This is his home."

I stood up with a jolt. My tongue was in many knots all at once, but I couldn't stay silent now. Would I have to live with a smoke-belching bazaari clown like Jahaz in this settlement where a dark barbarity seemed to pour over everything? This question had to be asked, no matter how long it took to get it out. But with a reassuring gesture father beckoned me over to sit by him, and said, "But he moved away long ago."

I was relieved. As long as Jahaz doesn't live here, in this settlement, I said to myself, I can live with him anywhere. Then father said:

"He lives on the ghat now." He pointed off in its direction. "On Sheesha Ghat."

When I heard this name the oppressive feeling returned. Father must not have known that I had already heard mention of Sheesha Ghat from visitors in his house. I knew that it was the most widely known and least inhabited ghat on the Big Lake, and that a scary woman by the name of Bibi was its sole owner. She had been the lover of a notorious dacoit—or

maybe he was a rebel—and later become his wife. He had in fact been betrayed when he came to see her one time, and had died on the same ghat at the hands of the government people. But then things went strangely topsy-turvy and the entire ghat was given over to Bibi's custody. Her huge boat lay anchored in the lake and Bibi had made it her abode. She ran some sort of business, in connection with which people were allowed to come to the ghat now and then. Otherwise it was forbidden to go near. Nor had anyone the courage. All were too frightened of Bibi.

How had Jahaz come to live on Sheesha Ghat? Would I have to meet Bibi as well? Would she speak to me? Would I have to answer her questions? Would she go mad with anger on hearing me? I had grown so absorbed in these questions and their imagined answers that I didn't even realize we had left the settlement of the glass-workers. I was startled when I heard father's voice in my ear: "We're here."

2

This was perhaps the most deserted area around the Big Lake. An expanse of muddy water began at the end of the barren plain, its far shore invisible in the distance. On our left, set back from the water, a big boat obscured the view of the lake. Perhaps at one time it had been used to transport logs. Now the same logs had been used to build many large and small rooms on the deck. The planks on the boat were all loose, and a light creaking sound issued from them, as of some giant object slowly breaking apart. On the shore of the lake a low, long retaining wall was lying face down on the ground. Near it stood four or five rickety platforms with huge cracks in them. Close to them lay a moldy length of bamboo, nearly claimed by the soil. Though there wasn't much left here, I sensed that it must have been a bustling locale before it had fallen into this tumbledown state. It was called a ghat, but all that was left was a roofed shelter extending from a building toward the shore, the front of it overhanging a little pool of lake-water that had sloughed over into a depression in the ground. At the rear of the shelter, on a little rise, sat the shapeless building of logs and clay, which looked as though its builder had been unable to decide whether to construct it of wood or earth, and in these contemplations, the building had reached its completion. The roof, however, was all of wood. A small pink sail, perched on a projection in the center of the roof, was fluttering in the wind.

My foster father must have been here before. Grabbing my hand, he

quickly walked down the slope and over to the five earthen steps beneath the shelter that led up to the doorway of the building.

There was Jahaz, sitting on the floor smoking his tobacco. We, too, sat down when we went in.

"So you're here, are you?" he asked father, and began coughing.

He seemed to have aged quite a lot in eight years. The extreme paleness of his eyes and darkness of his lips made it look as though they had been dyed in different vats. From time to time his head would move as if he were admitting something. During one of these motions he glimpsed me with his pale eyes and said, "He's grown up!"

"It's been eight years," my father told him.

We sat silently for a long time. I'd have suspected that the two were talking in signals, but they weren't looking at each other. Suddenly my father stood up. I rose with him. Jahaz raised his head, looked up at him, and asked, "Won't you stay a little?"

"I've got a lot to do," my father said. "Nothing's ready yet."

Jahaz nodded his head as though agreeing, and my father stepped out the door. He descended the earthen steps, then turned back, came over and took me in his arms. We stood there silently for a long time, then he said, "If you don't like it here, tell Jahaz. I'll come and get you."

Jahaz's head moved in the familiar fashion, and father went down the steps. I heard Jahaz cough and turned toward him. He took a few quick drags of his tobacco, made an effort to even out his breathing, then got up, took my hand and walked out under the shelter. He just stood there quietly, running his eyes over the lake. Then he returned to the earthen steps, but stopped himself before putting his foot on the first step.

"No," he said. "First, Bibi."

We walked along the shore of the lake until we came to the big boat. A gangplank had been built between shore and boat by joining two boards. Carefully balancing on the planks, we reached the ladder at the other end, then climbed up onto the boat. Over the door of the small front room was a curtain of coarse cloth. In front of the curtain a two-colored cat was dozing. It peered at us with half-open eyes. Jahaz halted as he neared the curtain. I halted many steps behind him. At Jahaz's first cough the curtain slid aside and Bibi appeared.

The sight of her filled me with fear, but even more with amazement at the thought that this shapeless woman had once been someone's lover. She looked at Jahaz, then at me.

"Your son's here?" she asked Jahaz.

"Just got here," Jahaz told her.

Bibi looked me up and down a few times, then said:

"He looks sad."

Jahaz didn't say anything. Nor did I. The silence lingered for some time. I looked at Bibi and she asked me, "Do you know how to swim?"

I shook my head "no."

"Afraid of the water?"

I just nodded, admitting it.

"A lot?"

"Yes, a lot," I indicated.

"You should be," she replied, as if I had said what was in her heart.

I viewed the expanse of the lake. In the still air, the muddy water seemed entirely at rest; the lake could have been mistaken for a deserted plain. I looked up at Bibi. She was still looking at me. Then she turned toward Jahaz, who was handing her the tobacco-smoking paraphernalia. For some time they smoked and talked. The conversation had something to do with finances. Meanwhile, a brown dog appeared from somewhere, sniffed at me and went away. The cat, which had been dozing all this time, raised its tail on seeing the dog, arched its back, then retreated behind the curtain. I would peek at Bibi from time to time. She was a strongly built woman and seemed bigger than her boat, but it also seemed as if she, like her boat, were very slowly disintegrating. At least, that was my impression from looking at her, and from her talk, which I couldn't hear very well. Suddenly she stopped in the middle of what she was saying, raised her head and called loudly, "Parya!"

The sound of a girl's laughter came toward us as though floating on water. Jahaz took my hand and led me back to the gangplank. After we had stepped onto it, I heard Bibi's voice behind my back, "Take good care of him, Jahaz." And she repeated, "He looks so sad."

She said this in such a way that I myself began to think I was sad.

3

Yet there was no reason for me to be sad. When we returned from Bibi's and Jahaz showed me my quarters, I couldn't believe this was part of the shapeless house on the deserted ghat, between the muddy lake-water in front and the barren plain in back. The best preparations had been made for my comfort. The rooms were lavishly decorated, mostly with glass objects. Glass was also inlaid in the doors and the vents in the walls. I was surprised that Jahaz could create a place like this. I thought he must have

had help from someone, or else had been trained in the art of decoration. A lot of the items seemed to have been brought there that very day; I suspected that other things had been removed, and that before me, perhaps long ago, someone else had lived here.

After I had seen the place where I was to live, I thought I must have seen the whole of Sheesha Ghat on the first day. But on the second day I saw Parya.

To this day I am amazed that during the many times people at my father's house spoke about Sheesha Ghat, no one ever mentioned the name of Bibi's daughter. I first heard her name the day I arrived at Sheesha Ghat, when Bibi called her from the boat. I was overwhelmed by the day's confusion, it didn't even occur to me to wonder who Parya was. But the next morning, I heard the sound of someone laughing. Then a voice said, "Jahaz, let's see your son."

Jahaz jumped up and grabbed my hand.

"Bibi's daughter," he told me as he led me out to the shelter.

About twenty-five yards away in the lake I saw Parya, standing perfectly erect at the far end of a narrow, slowly swaying boat. With a light shimmy of her body she advanced the boat toward the shelter. Her body gave another little twist. The boat came nearer. Advancing and stopping in this fashion, she pulled right up to the shelter.

"Him?" she asked, with a questioning glance at Jahaz.

I was as wonder-struck that this girl was Bibi's daughter as I had been that Bibi was once someone's lover. I tried to look at her closely, but now she was inspecting me from head to toe.

"He doesn't look so sad," she said to Jahaz; then to me, "You don't look sad."

"When did I say I looked sad?" I tried to say, feeling a little irritated, but could only stutter. Parya laughed and said, "Jahaz, he's so …"

Then she began laughing louder and louder, until Bibi's voice boomed from the boat, "Parya, don't bother him."

"Why," Parya asked loudly, "because he's sad?"

"Parya," Jahaz said encouragingly, "you'll have a good time with him."

"Who needs a good time?" she said and began to laugh again.

I began to feel uneasy, as though trapped, but then she asked, "Have you seen your new mother?"

"No, I haven't," I told her with a shake of my head.

"Don't you want to?"

I didn't answer and looked the other way.

"You don't want to?" she asked again.

This time my head moved in a way that could mean yes or no. It occurred to me that my new mother was to arrive at my former house today, or perhaps had already arrived.

Father had said that she would go crazy if she heard me speaking. I tried to envision myself talking and her slowly going crazy. I tried to imagine how it could be possible to live with a woman who would go crazy because of me. I also reflected that at this time yesterday I was at my old house, and the memory seemed to come from the distant past. I relived my eight years there in eight seconds. Then I recalled my foster father's embrace before leaving me in Jahaz's custody. I believed now, even more than before, that he loved me deeply.

"Jahaz will love you deeply, too." Parya's voice startled me.

I had forgotten about her, but she had been watching me all this time. Then, balancing herself as she walked, she moved to the other end of the boat. With a little spin of her body, her back was toward the shelter. A light swing of her torso nudged the boat and slowly she slid away from us. I felt as if a wonder had taken place before my eyes.

"If Bibi had not called to her," I said to myself, "I would have thought she was the spirit of the lake."

If not the spirit of the lake, she was indeed a wonder, because she had been born underwater, and her feet had never touched the earth.

*

Bibi had received her boat from her forefathers and no one could say how long it had been in the Big Lake, Jahaz told me after Parya had left. But Bibi herself used to live far away from the lake where her husband, the same dacoit, or whatever he was, came to meet her clandestinely. When Parya was about to be born, the husband had Bibi sent to the boat along with a midwife. During the birth, Jahaz could hear Bibi's cries of pain. Suddenly, the voices changed. The government people had arrived and were interrogating Bibi as to the whereabouts of her husband. Seeing that Bibi wouldn't tell them anything, they started holding her underwater over and over, and in the midst of one of the longer episodes, Parya was born.

"I could clearly see bubbles coming from Bibi under the water," Jahaz said, "then amid the bubbles Parya's little head came out and you could hear her cry."

At this the government people realized that Bibi wasn't faking. They left, but continued their surveillance. And one day, Parya's father came to the ghat, just as they had thought he would. They surrounded him on the boat. He tried to escape, but was injured, fell into the lake and drowned.

Since that day Bibi had made the boat her and Parya's abode. Bibi sometimes ventured out to other localities herself, but had never let Parya set foot on land. She would roam around the lake in her small craft, or would return to her mother on the big boat. Why was this so? Had Bibi made a vow of some kind? Was it the condition of some pact? No one knew how long Parya would be circling the lake, and whether her feet would ever touch the earth.

4

I spent a year at Sheesha Ghat, and during that year I witnessed the passing of every season, and in each season I watched Parya's boat roam the waters. She was my only means of diversion. The outer door of my abode opened onto the barren field, which led only to the fishing settlements at its nearest outskirts, past the smoky dwellings of the glass-wallahs. I stayed away from these habitats because of the drying fish. The fishermen were always immersed in their work and were of no use to me, just as I was of no use to them. There were many ghats at the far ends of the field, including some at good-sized fishing settlements. A few ghats were lively with activity, but once or twice when I went to them I realized that the news of Jahaz's foster son had preceded me, and the people were going to realize who I was; that is why, except for roaming the abandoned field and amusing myself with a few stray objects, I mostly sat underneath the shelter. Jahaz, too, after running here and there to complete his errands, would come and sit here with his tobacco supplies and recount to me all sorts of tales which were worth remembering, but I forgot them anyhow. However, I do remember that when a story of his failed to hold my attention, he would become agitated, even frenzied, and narrate it the way he used to perform his imitations; in the telling he would suffer a fit of coughing and ruin what little interest there had been in the story.

In the beginning, I thought that Sheesha Ghat was a place totally cut off from the world, and that this part of the lake had always been a wasteland. That was not the case, but it was true that no one could set foot there without Bibi's consent. This is what I had heard from people at father's house, and I had assumed that Bibi never let anyone come here.

But once at Jahaz's I noticed that on certain special days the fishermen gathered here, bringing their nets and boats. Sometimes their numbers were so great that the scene looked like a little fair set up on the water. Sitting at my post under the shelter, I would hear the fishermen calling to each other and shouting directions. Filtering through their voices here and there came the sound of Parya's laughter. At times they seemed to be forbidding Parya from doing something. Occasionally, the voice of one of the older fishermen would be heard scolding Parya, yet laughing heartily at the same time. Then Bibi's voice would come from the boat: "Parya, let them work!"

Parya would laugh in reply, and the fisherman would tell Bibi not to say anything to Parya.

On those days, and other days too, Parya would come to the ghat early in the morning. Standing in her boat in front of the shelter, she'd converse with Jahaz for some time, then call me out to the shelter as well, and if Jahaz left she would talk to me. Her conversation was a bit childish. She would tell me stories about her dogs and cats, or why Bibi had scolded her the day before. Sometimes she would ask me a question so suddenly that I'd start to answer with my tongue instead of the bobbings of my head. She would laugh wildly at these attempts and get a scolding from Bibi, then she would push out to the far reaches of the lake. In the afternoon, Bibi would call her loudly and her tiny craft would be seen advancing toward the boat. Then the sounds of Parya laughing and Bibi getting mad would emanate from the boat. Late in the afternoon, she would set out again and stop in front of the ghat. If Jahaz were not there, she would talk to me about him. She found something to laugh at in everything about Jahaz, whether his tobacco-smoking, his disorderly dress or the sail on top of his house.

As she was talking to me one day, I began to suspect, and was soon convinced, that she had never seen the clown routines Jahaz performed in the bazaars years before, and at last realized that she knew nothing about them. That day I tried to speak somewhat calmly for the first time, to tell her about Jahaz's mimic-routines. I tried for quite some time. She listened to me very attentively, without laughing, the way my father had begun to listen to me in the end. At that moment Jahaz walked out underneath the shelter, smoking his tobacco. He relieved me of my efforts by telling Parya all that I had been trying to recount. He even performed two or three of his minor routines. To me they seemed pathetic imitations of his old ones, but Parya laughed so hard her boat began to rock. She wanted more, but Jahaz in the meantime had been overcome with a coughing fit.

Parya waited for the coughing to stop, but he gestured for her to go away. Laughing, Parya turned her boat around and said as she left, "Jahaz, Jahaz, you would make even Bibi laugh."

The next morning she arrived at the shelter earlier than ever, but Jahaz had slipped off somewhere. She began talking to me about Jahaz and describing the mimicking as though I hadn't seen Jahaz performing his routines the day before, indeed, as though I'd never known about them. I listened to her for a while, then tried to tell her that Jahaz used to walk through the bazaars with the sail tied on his back, and mimic sinking ships before the crowds. I could not tell her, by tongue or by gesture. Finally, I fell silent.

"Tomorrow," I said in my heart, "somehow, I will tell you."

I watched her as she retreated from sight.

"Tomorrow," I said again in my heart, "somehow."

My foster father arrived at the ghat the same evening.

In one year he seemed to have aged more than Jahaz had in the eight-year period before my arrival. His step was halting and Jahaz was supporting him, almost carrying him. As soon as he saw me he drew me into his arms. Finally, Jahaz separated him from me, made him sit properly, then turned to me.

"Your new mother has died," he told me, and the coughing overtook him again.

5

There was no conversation between my foster father and me. Shortly after he arrived, Jahaz took him off somewhere and returned late at night alone. I had just stretched out to sleep. I believe Jahaz too fell asleep after smoking his nightly tobacco. I kept pondering how my foster father could have grown so old so quickly. Then I thought of my new mother who had died without seeing me, and perhaps without going crazy. Then I started recollecting my year at Sheesha Ghat. At first I had been bored by the extended, nearly unbreakable silence there, but I now realized that the place was always full of noises. Faint calls would come from the glass-wallahs, fishermen and other ghats, and water birds would call over the lake. But I had never paid attention. Now, when I tuned my ears a little, I heard the halting sound of waves coming in and turning back after

touching shore, and the faint creaking of the planks of Bibi's boat.

I decided that Sheesha Ghat was the only place for me to live, and that I had been born to live at Sheesha Ghat.

"Tomorrow morning, I'll tell Jahaz," I told myself, and fell asleep.

In the morning my eyes opened, as usual, to the sound of Jahaz's coughing. Then I heard Parya's voice, too. They were talking much as on any other day. Jahaz was inside and couldn't see Parya's boat from where he sat, so he had to speak loudly, and was coughing again and again.

I got up and went out to the shelter. There was Parya, standing in the middle of her boat. She chatted with Jahaz a little more. Part of it had to do with Bibi. Then Parya retraced her steps to the other end of the boat. The boat made a half-circle from the light movement of her feet. Now Parya's back was toward the shelter. For the first time I took a good look at Bibi's daughter, and found myself more amazed than ever that a woman like Bibi could be her mother. At that instant Parya's body twirled and the boat moved away from the shelter. Then it swayed a moment and stopped. Parya scanned the expanse of lake before her. Again the boat rocked lightly, but Parya, straightening her body, adjusted its balance. She made another barely perceptible motion with her feet. The boat made a very slow half-circle, and I gazed at Parya from head to foot as she stood in the bow. I was afraid she might not like the way I was staring at her, but she wasn't looking in my direction. She was gazing intently at the ghat's still water, as if seeing it for the first time. Then, measuring her steps, she walked to the end of the boat nearer the shelter. Leaning over the water, she gazed at it once again, stood up, shook her whole body into alignment, and very calmly placed a foot on the water's surface as one steps on dry earth. Then her other foot left the boat. She took one step forward, then another.

"She's walking on the water!" I exclaimed to myself, my surprise tinged with fear; I turned my head toward Jahaz, who was smoking tobacco a little distance away, then looked back to the lake. Between Parya's empty boat and the shelter there was only water, concentric circles of waves spreading on its surface. A few moments later Parya's head emerged from the circles. She slapped the water with her palms over and over as though trying to grab onto the surface of the lake. The water splashed and I heard Jahaz's voice: "Parya, don't fool around with water."

Then a noose of smoke tightened at his throat and he doubled up, coughing wildly. My eyes turned to him for an instant. He was having a fit and needed someone's help. I looked back at the lake. New circles were

spreading on the bare water.

She rose again, then began to sink. My eyes met hers and I stood up with a jolt.

"Jahaz!" I shouted, as my tongue began to knot.

I leapt toward the old man. His coughing had stopped, but his breath was gurgling. He was rubbing his chest with one hand and his eyes with the other. Dashing up the steps, I grabbed both his hands and shook him with force.

"…Parya…," my mouth said.

He looked into my eyes with his pale irises, then lightning flashed in his eyes and I felt as though a bird of prey had escaped from my grip. Dust was dancing on the steps to the shelter and Jahaz was standing at the shore.

Parya's boat completed a full circle. Jahaz looked at the boat, then the water. Then with full force he let out a call in a strange language. I heard Bibi match his cry from her boat. Then from far, far away the same voice returned. Bibi's voice came again: "The sad one?"

"Parya!" Jahaz said with such force that the water before him trembled.

Other voices, far and near, repeated Jahaz's cries over and over and fishermen, some with nets, some empty-handed, began running toward the ghat from all directions. Even before they got to the shelter, some of them had plunged into the water. Jahaz was signaling to them with hand gestures when a splashing sound came from the left. I saw a barking dog running helter-skelter on the big boat and the two-colored cat, its back raised, looking at the dog from a corner of the roof. Then I saw Bibi, almost naked, like some prickly man-eating fish, cutting through the water. Her body collided with Parya's boat, sending it spinning like a top. Bibi dived and came up on the other side of the boat. She signaled to some of the fishermen and dived again.

Fishermen from other ghats were seen rowing toward Sheesha Ghat. Some had jumped overboard and were swimming in front of their boats.

Now heads were bobbing everywhere in the water between the shelter and Parya's boat. The crowd grew, collecting along the shore as well. There was din and commotion everywhere. Everyone was talking, but it was hard to tell what was being said by whom. The loudest noise was the splashing water, obscuring all sense of the passage of time. Finally, a loud voice rang out. The clatter peaked and suddenly died to nothing. The bodies in the water, swimming soundlessly, slowly gathered at one spot. All were silent now; the only sound was the dog barking from the boat.

At that moment I felt my hand clamped as though in a vise. Jahaz was standing next to me.

"Go," he said, giving my hand a shake.

I didn't understand where he wanted me to go. But now he was leading me inside the house. Turning back, I tried to look toward the lake, but Jahaz tugged my hand and I turned to look at him. His eyes were glued to my face. "Go," he said again.

We had come to the back door of the house. Jahaz opened it. In front was the barren plain. "They've found her," he told me, then pointed off across the plain and said hurriedly, "You'll reach the glass-workers' settlement in a short time. There you'll find transportation out of here. If not, just mention my name to anyone."

He deposited some money, tied in a handkerchief, in my pocket. I wanted to ask him many things and didn't want to leave, but he said: "Only you saw her drown. Everyone will ask you questions. Bibi more than anyone. Will you be able to answer?"

The scene rose before my eyes: the people—fishermen with rings in their ears, rowers with bangles on their wrists, visitors from different ghats—all forming a ring around me two or three deep, questions flying from every direction, Bibi fixing me with her intent stare. They all fall silent as Bibi approaches me …

Jahaz noticed me trembling and said, "Tell me what happened … Anything … Did she fall into the water?"

"…No…" I managed somehow.

"How did it happen, then?" Jahaz asked. "Did she jump?"

"No," I said, and repeated it with a shake of my head.

Jahaz shook me: "Say something, hurry!"

I knew I wouldn't be able to say anything with my tongue, so I tried to communicate through hand gestures that she had been trying to walk on the water. Yet my hands halted again and again. I felt that even my signals were beginning to stutter, and that they too were uninterpretable. But Jahaz asked in a constricted voice, "Was she walking on the water?"

"Yes," I said again with some difficulty.

"And she went under?"

"Yes."

"She was heading toward Bibi?"

"No."

"Where then?" he asked. "Was she coming toward us?"

"Yes," I gestured with my head.

Jahaz lowered his head and grew a bit older before my eyes.

"I've seen her every day," he said at last, "from the day her tiny head popped out of the water"—he was nearly coughing the words—"but I hadn't noticed how grown-up she'd come to look."

I stood silently watching him grow even older.

"All right, go!" he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. "I'll find something to tell them. Don't you tell anybody anything."

What could I tell anybody? I thought. And my attention, which had meanwhile strayed from the ghat, returned to it. But Jahaz gently turned me around and nudged me in the direction of the open field.

When I reached the edge of the field, I turned toward him and he said, "Your father came to take you back yesterday. I told him to wait a few days."

Again he coughed a little. He grabbed both panels of the door and slowly began to back away.

Before the door had closed, I'd already started on my journey, but I'd only gone some fifteen steps when he called out to me. I turned around and saw him walk toward me haltingly. He looked as though he were mimicking a ship whose sails had been torn off by the winds. He came up to me and embraced me. He held me to him for a long time. Then he released me and stepped back.

"Jahaz!" Bibi's wail was heard from the ghat.

The pale eyes of the old clown looked at me for the last time. He nodded, as though in affirmation, and I turned and walked on. ❐

—Translated by Moazzam Sheikh and Elizabeth Bell