NAIYER MASUD

Weather Vane

1

Our weather vane, which looked partly like a fish, partly like a bird, had quit showing the direction of the wind long before, yet it stayed on our rooftop till my father's end. Now and then my father was asked why, since it no longer did its job well, it wasn't taken down, but each time he replied that it belonged on the rooftop, and if not there, where? Sometimes he added that it was the emblem of our house, and that this indeed was its true function, for who needed to know the wind's direction anyway?

Well, I did. I was fond of kite-flying. But I didn't need the weather vane. During the daytime I often looked up at the colorful kites sailing in the sky. With a glance at any one of them, far or near, I could tell which way the wind was blowing. I could also tell things the weather vane could not: whether the wind was gentle or strong or uneven. In the evening when it got dark the kites were brought down, and the sky looked somehow desolate. From then until morning one might, of course, need the weather vane to learn the direction of the wind, but when the time for kite-flying was over, why would I want to know the direction of the wind?—and even had I wished to, the vane could not be seen in darkness.

Sometimes after watching a kite in the sky I would glance at the vane and notice that it was pointing the right way. Whenever I saw all the kites aloft in the hot afternoon sun move slowly in one direction, I would suspect that the wind was changing direction even as it blew, and I'd have an impulse to look at the vane. At such times, slowly, as if involuntarily, but quietly and effortlessly, the weather vane would turn right or left and stop

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in the direction the wind blew. When that happened, I'd go up to the roof for a closer look.

On one such occasion I heard it make a sound for the first time ever. I drew still closer to it, but now it had come to rest in the wind's direction and was soundless. I looked at it for a long time that day, and from quite close. It had looked like an animal—part fish, part bird—from a distance. Now, up close, its form bore no resemblance to a bird; it looked entirely like a fish, but its maker had fastened it to its anchor in such a way that it evoked a bird perched on a treetop. It had side and tail fins like those of a fish, but from a distance they could be mistaken for a bird's outspread wings and tail, making it appear at an idle glance to be simply a bird, and not a fish at all; perhaps this was also because its business was with the wind and not with water. Distance also made it seem delicate and slim, but now, on closer examination, it looked rather heavy and ungainly. No doubt it had been constructed to endure all manner of intemperate weather and wind.

I had been staring at it for a long time, and just when it had become clear to me that it was only a fish, the thought crossed my mind that it was in fact a bird that had by some strange process turned into a fish. Precisely at that moment my eyes caught sight of a kite flying in a straight line in the direction the vane was pointing, and I sensed that the gently blowing wind was again changing course. Involuntarily my eyes returned to the vane: it was still pointing in the earlier direction, quivering slowly. I pushed it gently in the direction of the prevailing wind, and as I did, again heard it make a feeble sound. I couldn't determine which of its components was making that sound, nor did I realize then that its inexorable decline had already begun, for my attention was fixed on the sound itself, which seemed vaguely familiar to me, though I was having difficulty recalling where I'd heard it. My eyes probed the vane all over. By now it had stopped wavering and had aligned itself with the wind's path.

After that I noticed several times that it was not pointing accurately, and each time it occurred to me that I should tell Father that our weather vane was behaving erratically. Since it did work accurately at times, however, I didn't mention it, but now, the minute I got to the rooftop I would first look at the vane and then search the sky for a kite to determine which way the wind was blowing. Usually the wind was blowing in a direction other than the one the vane indicated. Now and then, though, the wind changed its course and started blowing in the direction indicated by the vane. On those occasions it occurred to me that our vane was not bound by the wind, but rather that the wind was bound by our vane.

Strange thoughts came into my youthful mind in those days, the strangest being the notion that not only could the vane turn itself in the wrong direction, it was also quite capable of turning the wind in that direction.

Finally, one day it came to rest in a direction no wind had ever blown. The season of hot, gusting winds had arrived, and the time for flying kites was over. The wind early in midday had started to turn hot and I could feel the sensation of it on my body, although it had not become so strong that I could determine its direction merely by this touch. Even then I really didn't feel a need for the weather vane. I ran downstairs, took a sheet from my stationery supplies and picked up a shard from the broken clay water jar lying in the trash in the courtyard. By the time I returned to the rooftop I had ripped the paper into round pieces, which we called *tukkals*, and pressed them together into a small wad. Standing near the vane I placed the shard under the wadded paper and tossed the entire lot straight up. The shard rose some distance, projecting the wad along with it, then halted in midair for an instant before falling back down alone. The *tukkals* also remained immobile for a second, then scattered everywhere. Just at this moment I heard the shard hit the back end of the weather vane, making a hollow sound, and my attention was diverted from the *tukkals*. The faint vibration in the vane was just dying out. I gently rubbed the back part of the vane with my hand, exactly the way one pats a child after an injury, or an animal when one is pleased with it. And then I looked up. All the *tukkals* were moving in a single direction, from west to east, tossing and turning in the air. At last they disappeared below the rooftop.

I looked at the vane. It was fixed in a different direction from that of the wind. I made a feeble effort to move it, but it had jammed in its position. I tried to move it the other way, but it didn't budge. When I tried to turn it with some force, it again emitted a faint sound and vibrated, and I feared that if I applied more force I might break off a piece of it, or the vane itself. I had drawn back a little and was gazing at it when I heard a voice.

"Why—is it broken?"

A girl was standing on the rooftop of the house that abutted our own. The wind made her diaphanous dupatta ripple ever so gently. Her eyes were fixed on the weather vane. Then she looked at me. This girl, and others from the neighboring houses, came up to their rooftops in good weather and talked among themselves in hushed tones. Sometimes one would have a few girlfriends with her. At such times they all talked and laughed loudly. They also looked at our weather vane and pointed it out

to each other. I paid more attention to my kite-flying than to these girls, although their voices always reminded me of the cacophony of the little birds that twittered, at roosting time in the evening, amid the vines covering the low walls of our courtyard.

This, however, was not the time for girls to appear on the rooftops. Seeing this girl standing all alone on her roof in the dead, barren stillness of the noon hour, staring at the weather vane, gave me the inescapable feeling that one of our family secrets had been divulged. Meanwhile she asked again, "Broken?"

"No," I said. "It works all right."

"Oh?" she said, looking at her dupatta. "But the wind …"

"The wind is blowing wrong," I said before she could even finish.

She stayed on awhile longer, gazing wistfully at the vane, then she turned around, picked her way slowly over to the stairs on the other side of the rooftop and climbed down.

I thought I might now inform my father that the weather vane had stopped working. But I decided against it, thinking to give it another few days, perhaps. Now, though, I did make several trips to the rooftop every day and, finding the vane always turned in the same direction, came back down. I made it a special point to visit it early in the day. I stared at it until the sun got stronger and the air warmer. Sometimes as I watched I began to doze off, only to be quickly roused by some sound or other nearby. Once I heard some rustling sounds, looked up, and saw the sky filled with soaring kites of different colors, as on certain festival days. I observed this crowded assemblage with interest for a while, then remembered the weather vane and looked back at it. It had oriented itself in the direction the kites were flying. I glanced up at the sky. The kites were moving slowly to the right. Then I looked at the vane; it too was moving slowly to the right. Just as I was about to sit down and inch my way toward it, a gust of hot air slapped me lightly in the face and I was startled awake. The sun had grown quite strong and the ground had started to heat up. I looked at the sky: not a kite anywhere, but I could tell that the wind was blowing west to east from the scorching blasts of its gusts. However, the vane was still stuck in that totally mysterious direction. I rose and went up close to it. The hot gusts of wind violently assaulting its right side seemed to be trying to knock it down from the roof, but it held its ground, like a stone statue, without even a slight shudder. At this I concluded with certainty that it was definitely broken. I hastened downstairs to let Father know. I was also feeling somewhat elated. It was the same kind of elation that children—even grownups, I can say now—feel

when they come upon some special news, even if it's bad news, that they can relate to others before anyone else.

As I climbed down the stairs I remembered that in my dream I had also felt angry with the vane, but now, after waking up, I couldn't recall the reason for my anger.

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I went straight to the reception room in the outer side of the house, where my father had taken up residence. He lay there reclining in a large rattan chair. Although I had observed him in this room and in this chair for a long time, I remembered the days when he used to live in the inner part of the house and would often be obliged to go to the reception room, because quite a few people came to see him. Many visitors still came to see him now, but at this particular time only my mother was sitting near him, and at first I didn't see her. I had just walked in from the bright sunshine outdoors and the room seemed to be filled with darkness. I couldn't even see the rattan chair, though I was certain my father was in it, and moreover that several visitors must also be present in the room. That's why I blurted out the news about the vane excitedly, almost as though I were making an announcement. I even volunteered that it had been stuck in the wrong position for the past several days, and that its parts had probably gotten jammed. Meanwhile the darkness in the room dissipated and I saw that Mother had her finger on her lips, asking me to be quiet. So I was. I would have stopped talking anyway, because I'd already said all I wanted to say. I glanced at my father. He was lying almost flat in his chair, covered up to his waist with a sheet, his eyes closed, his tranquil face indicating he was sound asleep.

I was silent; still my mother again brought her finger to her lips, beckoned me to come near her and whispered to me, "He had a very hard time falling asleep."

Just then my father's voice was heard, "What happened? What's broken?"

My mother again gestured me to be quiet and whispered, "He's sleeping."

My father's face and closed eyes continued to reflect the same tranquility. Both my mother and I kept looking at him and then she said softly, "Are you busy?"

The season for flying kites being over, I had all the time in the world. I shook my head to indicate that I was free.

"Well then," she said, "sit by his side for a while. I'll be back soon."

I sat down near my father. Mother got up to go outside but then she hesitated and turned around, signaling me to come to her and asked me even more softly, "Really, it's broken?"

I was about to nod when my father made an effort to turn over. This was very hard for him to do, and he needed help to accomplish it. His eyes opened a few times and then closed. Mother came to his chair and carefully helped him turn over, and he went back to sleep. Mother bent over and whispered into my ear, "Don't tell him that," and went out of the room.

I sat gazing at my father in silence. He was still stretched out, his eyes closed, his face tranquil. Lying with his eyes closed he asked, "Since when has it stopped working?"

Is he sleep-talking? I asked myself. Just then his eyes opened and a look of pain crept over his face. He was again trying to turn over. When I tried to assist him, he stopped me and said, "Wait until your mother's back."

"Shall I call her?" I asked, rising.

"No. She'll be along soon," he said, and then he asked, "Since when?"

I felt obliged to give him the answer, and was rather happy to have this obligation. I remembered the day the weather vane had begun to work erratically, how the wind had been changing course while the vane failed to move along with it. I told my father all that had transpired since that day forward. What I didn't tell him he asked himself: "You tried to fix it, didn't you?"

I flatly denied it. He kept gazing at me with his half-open eyes. I suspected that he didn't believe me, and I started to feel a bit guilty. And as a guilty person will, I was coming up with another lie when he said, "All right, but don't tinker around with it, and…" he placed his hand on mine, "don't tell your mother."

He wanted to say something more, but hearing a sound at the door, he stopped. My mother had brought something for him to eat. Before she had reached his chair he gently pressed my hand and said, "Don't tell anyone."

The very next day he was surrounded by visitors, all of them talking about the weather vane not working properly.

2

As I have said, the visitors who came to see my father were numerous. They included some who were unfamiliar; they came once or twice and then I didn't see them again. Besides these changing visitors, there were

also those who came to see him regularly, almost every day. If one of these showed up after an absence of several days, my father inquired after his well-being in a partly disgruntled, partly anxious voice. Even though most of them were residents of our own neighborhood and lived in houses close to ours, I rarely saw them out in the lane or street. However, I did see some of them on their rooftops, mostly taking sun in the winter, when I went to our roof to fly a kite. At those times they all wore ordinary domestic clothing, but when they showed up at our house they were dressed from head to toe in formal clothes, as if they had come to attend a party. My father, too, whenever a visitor was announced, went to the reception room not in his home clothes but fully dressed as if to receive a guest. But ever since he had made the reception room his permanent living quarters he had put aside this formality, preferring to pull a sheet up to his shoulders rather than change into formal clothes.

Often I had to escort the visitors to this room. Sometimes my mother also commissioned me to carry fruit drinks and such like to show the guests hospitality. At those times I enjoyed catching snippets of the conversation in progress, though I never could hear them well enough; I never really stayed there very long. All I knew was that they all, my father included, made exceedingly fine conversation and laughed heartily, although the minute I appeared they would hush up somewhat, and I would quickly leave.

That day, however, when I entered holding a tray of food all the visitors suddenly grew quiet and looked at me so attentively that I was disconcerted and, for no reason, began to feel guilty, although all of them, including my father, were smiling and looking at me the way kindly elders regard young people. After some time one of them asked, "Son, that thing on the rooftop, the thing that shows the direction of the wind…"

"It's broken," I quickly told him, and then, embarrassed, I looked at my father, but he was still smiling. Gently, he said to me, "Tell them everything."

"Yes, Mian, from beginning to end," one of the visitors said.

And I told them everything I had already told Father, but not that I'd tried to correct its direction.

Silence followed and continued for a long time, until the smiles slowly evaporated from their faces. Then someone said to Father, "That's why we keep telling you to have it taken down."

In response my father gave the same explanation mentioned earlier. After that they started talking of other things, and I left with the empty tray.

In the days that followed I heard the weather vane mentioned in that room many times. Gradually, though, it came to be mentioned less and less, perhaps because the number of daily visitors had also started to dwindle.

Before two winters had passed only a few visitors still came, and even that remainder thinned down to one or two at a time. In the end only a single visitor was left, and he came only sporadically. He had started to experience difficulty in walking. Someone from his house escorted him to our place, then returned later to help him go back. But even in those days this visitor was dressed from head to toe in the finest garb.

One day, while I was present, I heard this last remaining visitor talking once again with my father about the weather vane. He put the same old questions, to which my father gave the same old answers. That day, for the first time ever, I butted into my elders' conversation and asked them something that had often crossed my mind, "Can't it be fixed?"

"Who'll fix it?" my father said in a despairing tone.

"Only he could have fixed it, son," added the visitor, even more despairingly, "who made it in the first place."

My father shook his head abjectly in agreement, then said, "Others will only make it worse."

The visitor nodded despondently, agreeing with my father. A long silence ensued, during which the two men seemed to be carrying on a nonverbal conversation, until the servant from the visitor's house showed up to take him home.

After he was gone, my father called me over to him.

"Give up worrying about *that*, son," he said, "worry about your mother instead. You do see, don't you, how she is killing herself caring for me."

Right then Mother, who had perhaps been waiting for the visitor to leave, walked into the room. She was holding a round brass salver in her hands. A brazier was set in the middle of the salver and some kind of oil was being warmed in a small vessel over the burning coals. The oil's aroma filled the entire room and it began to feel safe and warm. She placed the salver on the floor close by the chair, removed the vessel, holding it with the edge of her dupatta, and set it too on the floor. Father kept looking at her, and then he said, "You do all the work yourself; aren't there other people in the house?"

Without troubling to answer him, Mother removed the sheet covering his body and started to fold it.

3

Surely there were other people in our house, but my mother personally took care of all of Father's needs. She never complained of anything at all, so none of us ever imagined that she was killing herself. One morning, though, time went by and she didn't get out of bed. By afternoon her dead body was lying in the midst of all our relatives, from near and far.

That day other people in the house did everything for Father and kept the news of Mother from him. In the evening, however, instead of inquiring about Mother, he himself gave the news of her, adding, "I'd already foreseen it."

He didn't talk to anyone for several days. Various people in the house tended to his needs. Visitors had long since stopped calling on him. And no one came even when Mother died, or perhaps someone came but I didn't know about it. Now we made sure that a member of the household was with him at all times. I also went into his room several times during the day and stayed for quite a while.

One evening as the birds were twittering in the vines of our courtyard, I stepped into the reception room and found the last of the visitors with my father. Only with difficulty was I able to recognize this person, but I couldn't calculate how many days had passed since he had last come to our house. He was sitting in the visitor's chair rather precariously and one of the servants of his house, who himself seemed to need assistance, stood behind the visitor to keep him from pitching this way and that. This time around the visitor was wearing ordinary at-home clothes, and it occurred to me that he used to sit on the rooftop of the house adjoining ours in the winter sun, with a single cloth draped around his waist. Back then, though, I had not thought he was one of my father's visitors.

He was sitting in silence with his head bowed, his body rocking this way and that in uncoordinated motion. My father too was silent. It seemed neither was conscious of the other's presence. And I too was standing silently. As I continued gazing at the two of them I once again felt as though they were talking to each other without words. I was near the headrest of my father's chair, the visitor directly in front of me. His

body was still shaking, the servant supporting him, sometimes with both hands and sometimes with one, while fanning his head with the other as if shooing away flies. I looked closely by turns at the visitor's face, then at my father's and, with no evidence, began to suspect that they were on the subject of the weather vane. My suspicion became a certainty when all of a sudden my father said aloud, "Use? No use at all. All the same, it's not getting in anyone's way, is it?"

The visitor nodded over and over for a long time as if in confirmation. Finally, his old servant took him home, supporting him along the way; twice the servant himself staggered and nearly fell down.

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By the time the rains ended everyone sensed that my father was not likely to last much longer. He was receiving more care now; his every need was diligently attended to. Whenever something was done for him he would bless all of us in a happy tone. But he also appeared to be thinking about something. I spent most of my time in his room now, watching him think. Sometimes his eyes were open fully and sometimes only halfway, yet he didn't seem to be looking at anything. Seeing him in this condition I thought sometimes that he was remembering Mother and sometimes that he was thinking of the weather vane. But his condition was deteriorating so rapidly that pretty soon I forgot about the vane and about Mother as well.

There were no longer any clouds to be seen in the sky. Still, without a cloud in sight, lightning would suddenly flash, prompting people to speculate as to whether it might rain. One night—it must have been during the last days of the waning moon—the silent flashes increased in frequency. I was in my father's room. Here it remained dark even during the day, but that night it seemed as though very strong lights were being turned on and off in unison. My father would appear, sitting in his chair, and then disappear in darkness. The experience of this light and darkness, which had quite pleased me in my childhood, now made the room seem as though captured in the throes of a terrifying struggle. My father was lying quietly. Suddenly I sensed that he was caught in the throes of death. I thought of calling to the other people in the house, but just then I heard his weary voice: "Who's up there?"

I drew close to him.

"Up where?" I asked, bending over him.

"Up on the roof," he said. "Someone is talking up there."

I strained my ears. It was quiet all around, with only the flash of lightning; I strained harder; now even I began to hear a faint sound. It was a little like the moaning that issues involuntarily from the mouths of very old people when they move. But it didn't appear to be coming from the roof, or from anywhere.

The faint sound was heard again, and I quickly remembered that a long time back it had come from the weather vane, once when the wind was changing direction, and a second time when I'd tried to turn it in the direction of the wind.

Lightning flashed again and I saw that my father was trying to hear that sound. I said, "I'll go up and have a look."

He didn't respond. I quickly left the room, crossed the courtyard, climbed up the staircase and came out onto the roof.

The weather vane could be seen sparkling intermittently a little distance ahead. In a flash of lightning it looked like a delicate object of pure silver. I walked up to it and looked it over. It was still locked in the same mysterious direction, without movement or sound. As I walked round it repeatedly, looking at it closely, I caught sight of a figure standing on the roof of the house adjoining ours, the face illumined repeatedly from the light of the flashes.

Some old woman in her declining years, or so it seemed. I was having great difficulty trying to make out who she was and was straining to get a better look at her each time there was a flash.

Finally I remembered that in the past she used to come up to the rooftop with her women friends, and even alone. Now she was alone, watching the weather vane from her rooftop and apparently oblivious of my presence. I also tried to act unaware of her presence and, taking slow steps, I climbed down the stairs.

In the room my father was still lying on the same side. I tiptoed in, but he heard my footsteps and asked, "Was anyone there?"

I told him that only the weather vane was up there. And also that it was quiet and hadn't changed direction. For a long time he continued lying on the same side in silence. Just when I had convinced myself that he had fallen asleep, he drew a deep breath and said, "Do see to it that it's taken down," and drew another deep breath.

I stared in the direction of his voice. The lightning had meanwhile stopped flashing and a cloud was thundering somewhere in the distant sky. I came close to my father and looked intently at his face in the dim glow of the only light burning in the room. He was sleeping soundly, the cloth lying on his chest heaving gently up and down.

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After that, as we had all already sensed would be the case, my father didn't live much longer. He was entirely lucid until the end, and he even talked a little. Mostly he gave blessings to those who looked after him, expressing regret now and then that he was causing them inconvenience. As for the weather vane, he never once mentioned it. This didn't surprise me as much as the fact that he didn't even mention Mother. However, on his last day he did utter Mother's full name, including "daughter of…," but before he could say anything further, he died.

4

After my father's death I became preoccupied with household matters. During this period new levels were added to several houses in the neighborhood. This new construction surrounded my house to such an extent that it was no longer possible to see the weather vane from the ground. I hadn't noticed it at first, but one day on my way home I came to the corner where my rooftop and the vane atop it had once been visible. The newly built upper story of a house blocked the sight of both of them. I went around and looked from different angles. The vane could not be seen from any of them.

After circling around unsuccessfully a few times, I returned home and went straight to the roof. The vane was still fixed firmly in its direction, without the slightest change in its appearance. Its drab color and clumsy shape made me wonder with surprise how it could have appeared delicate and silvery in that flash of lightning. Even so, it looked more charming at this moment than it had that night.

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The next day a workman began tearing down the small platform to which the vane had been anchored. Before starting he had made it clear that he would take the vane down carefully, but he wouldn't be able to reattach it at the correct angle again. Upon which I had told him, "No reattachment will be needed." After that he had set to work, relieved.

He removed several layers of mortar from the platform, until the vane's anchor grew loose and began to wobble. As he continued to work, the man turned toward me and asked, "Do you have a place in mind for it?"

I hadn't thought about that at all. I made a quick decision and said, "On a high shelf or inside a big trunk."

"It'll get ruined lying around like that," he said, and then, after a pause, added, "I have a suggestion, if you'd agree to it."

And I accepted his suggestion.

5

Not as many visitors call on me as called on my father. These visitors keep changing, and they come only when they have something to ask me, or I have something to ask them. When they first come, every visitor looks with curiosity, at least once, at the odd-looking fish resting on its anchor on the small platform built in a corner of the reception room. Its tail and its head are exactly the same height from the floor, which is why it looks flat, sitting there on the tip of the anchor, and no one looking at it ever thinks that it's a bird, whose business is with the wind. Everyone thinks of it as a decorative object, so no one asks me what it's for. Nor do I tell anyone that it's our weather vane, which no longer works. ❐

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon