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from Basti

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from *Basti*

Yar Zakir!

I first send you the usual salutations. I'm fine, and I hope everything's well with you too.

You must be wondering at my foolishness: "What a time that wretch chose for writing a letter, what a time for him to send word that he's well and to ask how I am!" I too realize how many years it's been that I haven't written—nor have you. And now, in this unsuitable time, I've suddenly thought of you, and am writing to you. Considering how disorganized the mails are, I'm not even sure that this letter will reach you. But nevertheless I'm writing. And after all, why? I'm about to tell you. First, you should know that I've transferred myself once more into a new department. Now I'm with the Radio. One benefit of coming here is that I've pretty well escaped from the boring business of files. Here we deal with people, not with files. Compared to files, it's more difficult work, but never boring.

Yar, since coming here I've met a strange girl. The thought never entered my head that I might run into her. A wheat-coloured complexion, delicate features, slender figure, medium height, an honest and sincere manner; I always see her in a white cotton sari. She parts her hair in the middle and wears it in a plain braid, but sometimes a lock comes loose and falls on her forehead. Her behaviour is always reserved. She's quiet and melancholy. Yar, her simplicity and sadness together have ravished my heart. You don't have to pause when you read those words. First hear the whole story.

From time to time, I have to go to the newsroom. That's where I encountered her. Previously, I'd seen her in passing, around the office. I knew she was an announcer. I'd heard her name too. But I still wasn't especially curious about her. Simplicity at first says nothing to a man, then gradually sadness becomes a spell. She used to quietly go to the newsroom, find out the news from Dhaka, and go away. The news was usually disturbing, but not a trace of anxiety was permitted to show in her face. It was my guess that she was inwardly very worried by the news. One day I asked her, "Bibi, do you have some relatives in Dhaka?"

“Yes, my mother and sister are there.”

“Are you getting letters?”

“The last letter came two weeks ago. Since then I’ve written two letters. I’ve sent a wire too, but no answer has come.”

“But what will you learn from the news on the radio?”

“At least I can get an idea how things are in the city.”

“Then please come to my office. All the Dhaka newspapers come to my desk.”

After this, she began to come to my office. She came every day, looked through all the Dhaka newspapers, and went away.

“Where is the rest of your family?” I asked one day.

“Some in Karachi, some in Lahore, some in Islamabad.”

“And here?”

“There’s no one here any longer.”

“You’re the only one here?”

“Yes, I’m alone in India.”

One Muslim girl who stayed alone in the whole of India—this seemed a strange thing to me. I know whole families left, and one person would stay behind. But this person was usually an old man. These old men who stayed on alone were not held back by the thought of their property, but by the thought of their graves. There was no problem about property: people could go to Pakistan and enter a claim, and by entering false claims they could even get a larger property in return for a smaller one. But no one can enter a claim for a grave. In Vyaspur, that Hakimji from the big house, you remember? His whole family went off to Pakistan. He stayed in the same place and continued to take sick people’s pulses. I asked him, “Hakimji, you didn’t go to Pakistan?”

“No, young man.”

“And the reason?”

“Young man! You ask for the reason? Have you seen our graveyard?”

“No.”

“Just go sometime and take a look. Each tree is leafier than the next. How could my grave have such shade in Pakistan?”

I laughed inwardly. Yar, you Muslims are wonderful! You’re always looking toward the deserts of Arabia, but for your graves you prefer the shade of India. Seeing the old people who had stayed behind here, I realized what great power the grave has in Muslim culture. But did the thought of graves hold this girl as well? The idea bewildered me. One day I asked her, “Your whole family has gone to Pakistan. You didn’t go?”

“No, I didn’t go.”

“And the reason?”

“It isn’t necessary for everything to have a reason.”

“It isn’t necessary—but anyway?”

“Anyway, if I’d gone to Pakistan, it wouldn’t have made any difference. I’d have been alone in Pakistan too.”

I looked closely at her face. “What town are you from?”

“Rupnagar.”

“Rupnagar!” I was startled. “Why, you’re that Sabirah?” This reaction of mine confused her. But I didn’t leave her in confusion long. I hastily asked, “You know Zakir?”

In reply, she looked at me carefully from head to foot. Then she said slowly, “I see, so you’re that Surendar Sahib.”

After that she became absolutely silent. I too was silent, in confusion. Then she went away. The next day she didn’t come. The day after she didn’t come either, but now this girl had a new meaning for me. Now for me she wasn’t a radio announcer, but an evocation of a lost friend. I went and got hold of her and abandoned formality. “Sabirah! Are you angry with me?”

“For what?”

“No matter what the circumstances, it’s necessary to tread carefully around someone else’s emotional life.”

She made no reply to this, but the next day she came and examined all the old and new Dhaka newspapers with close attention. And from then on she made a habit of coming at a regular time, going through the Dhaka newspapers, chatting a little, drinking tea, and going away. Once or twice I mentioned your name, but each time she either said nothing or changed the subject. So I’m careful now, and I don’t mention your name. But I know that when we meet, we aren’t just two, for a third person is invisibly present with us. Perhaps she meets me for that man’s sake. The Dhaka newspapers are secondary now. One day I asked, “Sabirah, don’t you have any plan to get married, or anything?”

“None.”

“And the reason?”

She hesitated, then said with a wan smile, “Look, you’ve stepped out of bounds now.”

“Sorry,” I apologized.

“It’s all right,” she said with the same wan smile, then fell silent.

Zakir, this Sabirah of yours seems less like a girl than like a historical relic! Yar, don’t take it amiss, your history in India has progressed very awkwardly. First your conquerors came—so forcefully and tumultuously that their horses’ hooves made the earth quiver, and the clashing of their swords echoed in the air. Then the political leaders appeared, and thundered out their power. The great Mughal emperors Babur, Akbar, Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb. Then Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Maulana Muhammad Ali, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and all the others—and after them, your Sabirah. A silent melancholy girl, staying on alone in the whole of India. I don’t know whether your history is unique, or whether the histories of all cul-

tures progress like this. “First the sword and spear—and finally?” Didn’t your “elder statesman” Iqbal have his gaze fixed on this final stage? This stage too is a part of the destiny of the group. Yes, it was the day of Id. I saw Sabirah coming out of the studio. I was a bit surprised to see her on that day. “What, you? You didn’t take the day off today?”

“No,” came the short reply.

“Then please celebrate Id here, and give me a treat.”

“Of course, come into my office.”

Entering her office, she ordered tea and sent for cake. She was pouring the tea, and I was wondering if any Muslim was actually on duty in an office on the day of Id. Most office workers didn’t even stay in the city for the day. Even the day before, they slipped away from the office early and got their train tickets and went straight to their own towns. And girls? Girls celebrated Id even more enthusiastically than men did. Drinking tea, I gathered my courage and asked, “Sabirah, you didn’t go to Rupnagar?”

“Rupnagar?” She looked at me with surprise. “Why should I?”

“You people have the custom of not spending Id away, but going home to celebrate Id.”

“Perhaps I’ve already told you my family situation. There are now none of us left in Rupnagar.”

I fell silent. Then, drinking tea, I asked casually, “Don’t you even have any distant relatives there?”

“Even my distant relatives have all gone. Rupnagar is empty.”

“What a strange thing,” I murmured.

“Won’t you have some more tea?” She interrupted me, and without waiting for my answer began pouring tea into my cup. Drinking my tea, I threw in one more question: “Since you came to Delhi, have you never been back to Rupnagar?”

“No.”

“It’s strange. How long has it been?”

“A long time. In the early fifties my brother-in-law’s letter came from Dhaka, saying that he had a job and we should come. In those days I’d just been offered a position by All India Radio. I left for Delhi. My mother and sister set out for Dhaka. They were the last batch that Rupnagar sent to Pakistan.”

“And you decided to settle in India?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

At this answer, I should have kept quiet, but I ignored her politely sarcastic tone and said, “What I mean is that if you had gone to Pakistan...”

I paused briefly, and she interrupted me in a sharp tone, “Then? Then what would have happened?” And she gave me such a look that I didn’t have the courage to finish my sentence at all. You’ll understand what I wanted to say.

Yar, how strange it is that the same town becomes more meaningful than before for one of its inhabitants, who has left the country, so that he dreams about it; while for another inhabitant all its meaning disappears, so that even though he's in the same country, he never feels any desire to see the town again. How meaningful the journey to Pakistan made Rupnagar! And how severely Sabirah was punished for staying in India, that for her Rupnagar became meaningless. I think my fate is the same as Sabirah's. And sometimes I feel that in my childhood I must have offended some holy man, and he cursed me: "Son, your native land will no longer let you see her." So the town of Vyaspur doesn't let me see her. When I go there, the town seems to ask, "Where is the other?" And when I can't find an answer, she closes her door against me. That constant eagerness I used to have for my vacation to come so I could run to Vyaspur—that eagerness is now utterly gone. Last June I went there, after a long time. It was late in the month. The rains hadn't started yet, and the afternoon heat was at its height. In the middle of the afternoon, I began to feel once again my old itch to wander, and I set out. From one lane to another, from the second lane to a third. Yar, every lane asked me, "Where is the other?" I felt that I no longer had any kinship with these lanes, as though all of them were angry with me. I passed through Rimjhim's lane too. The doorway looked absolutely desolate. Rimjhim's mother sat alone in the doorway, with her half-naked body and withered youth, spinning. I left those lanes and set out toward our school. It was the vacation, so the school was closed. I passed through the empty verandahs and went toward the field. Suddenly my eye fell on the mango tree by the chapel. I went and sat in its shade. Yar, how much time we used to spend sitting in its shade, throwing bricks at the green mangoes to make them fall! This time too the branches were full of green mangoes. I had an overpowering desire to throw bricks at them and make them fall. But yar, my hands were somehow paralyzed. They didn't move to throw a brick. I sat in silence, watching the green leafy branches laden with green mangoes. Then a green mango fell in front of me with a little thump. What was this? At the time, there was no wind blowing and no flock of parrots perched in the tree. Had our mango tree recognized me? I felt melancholy and stood up. If the lanes, birds, and trees don't recognize you, you're sad, and if they do recognize you, you feel melancholy. You go around looking for a neem tree (did you ever find one?), and here the neem, tamarind, mango, pipal trees are all still in their places. But when they see me, they turn into strangers. When one tree recognized me, I felt melancholy.

My dear friend, for me there's now nothing but melancholy. You must have earned something since you've gone there. Staying here I haven't earned anything; I've only wasted my life. Yar, the hair at my temples is absolutely white. How is the hair at yours? I'll tell you one thing more—

and this is the saddest thing of all. Yesterday when I was drinking tea with Sabirah, my eyes fell on the parting in her hair. How elegantly straight a parting she had made. I saw that among the black hairs one hair was shining like silver. So, my friend, time is passing. We're all in the power of time. So hurry and come here. Come and see the city of Delhi, and the realm of beauty, for both are waiting for you. Come and join them, before silver fills the parting in her hair, and your head becomes a drift of snow, and our lives are merely a story.

That's all,
Surendar

Translation from Urdu by Frances W. Pritchett