

DUSK fell with a peculiar sadness in that courtyard with its vaulted doorways. At twilight the solitary guava tree standing in a corner of the yard suddenly began to throb with sound. The birds, returning from the day's wanderings, would perch on the guava tree and relate their woes to one another, raising such a racket with their twitters that the people in the house had a hard time of it. At twilight a suffocating fog would begin to settle on Farida's heart. That sad orphaned fairy who had lived hidden in her heart ever since her childhood would begin to weep, and the echoes of this din would hammer at her brain, crying out: "What should I do? Where can I go?, Can this wretched existence be called life?"

The walls of this fortresslike house were strong and high as mountains. In the narrow valley between these mountains, her heart flowed on, shrunken, melting, gurgling. An unrest, an unease, strong as an avalanche, continually battered against the stones, allowing her not a moment's peace. In dreams she often saw herself flying but in reality was she not dragging herself along on the earth? So heavily were her feet fettered by various norms, restrictions, customs, rituals, that it was impossible to walk unless she first broke those chains. Her future too promised no sunshine. It appeared like a dark damp narrow burrow in which she could only crawl a-jong on her knees until one day she dropped dead and the burrow became her tomb. Yes, her future was death. Black, fearful, horrifying.

The pillow is soaked but the sobs show no sign of abating. Why, after all, does she feel so suffocated in her own home? She was born here, brought up here, then why? She does not know. All she feels is that she must flee this atmosphere. Ever since she was a child, Farida has felt that she was not born to live here, that here she will never get what she wants, what her soul thirsts for. In this house she can only live at the mercy and at the command of others.

In the adjoining room, the voices grew louder. Her brother was demanding money from her mother. He refused to do any work yet he insisted on living in the style of his

SHORT STORY
NASIRA SHARMA

Corridors Of Stone

forefathers. He was always ready with hollow and meaningless words. He kept taunting Ammi as if she was concealing the key of some treasure from him. He dreaded the idea of taking up a job as one would dread a mean and base action. Heaven knew in what world Bhayya was living and why he was bent on thus destroying the family.

"You can do what you like, sell anything you like, but I must have a woollen suit. I want it stitched before winter comes."

"You already have four or five suits. Why don't you manage with those? Farida has to have wool for a sweater, and Shakil doesn't even have a coat —"

"I'm warning you that if you don't give me money for a suit I won't go back to the hostel. Let my studies and this academic year go to the dogs!" Ammi was startled. The young gentleman had already spent a couple of years in each class. She was now waiting for him somehow to complete his training and get a job. Worried, she said: "Think of your younger brother and sister."

"I am younger than you, why don't you think of me?" he retorted smartly, "Sell that orchard of yours."

"How can you talk so childishly?" Ammi grew irritated. "Farida has to be married. Do you want to hand over the girl naked to some beggar?"

"Anyway I am going out now. You'd better think it over. Otherwise I won't go back to Lucknow." And off he went.

How long could things go on like this? Farida continued to sob. Ammi called out to her but getting no reply, thought she must have fallen asleep, and left her alone.

A summer afternoon. Gusts of hot wind. Farida and her friends were sitting on the steps leading to the terrace. The door to the terrace was closed so the stairway was somewhat dark and cool. Shakila was reading a story. Each girl had a peeled green mango in her hand, which she was sprinkling with salt and eating. The exams were over. There was nothing left to do but chat or read stories. When the story ended, each one's eyes were wet. Such a painful end to such a pure love! The girls' emotions smouldered, their hearts throbbed like glass in fire. Suddenly Najma said: "Listen, I forgot to tell you. Khudaija has eloped."

"What?" All of them were startled.

"Yes, Najma is telling the truth", said Nahid, "But she hasn't eloped. She has gone with a friend of hers." Nahid frowned at Najma and added: "Elope is a bad word, very bad. You should not use such a word for Khudaija. She was not only our classmate but also our friend."

"But listen, how do you know..." Farida lapsed into silence. Shahin began to wind her white dupatta round her fingers.

"It was during the procession on the tenth day of Moharram. You know what a racket there always is. Those densely crowded narrow lanes—the weeping and mourning, the offerings of flower woven sheets, the sweetmeats - well, in the midst of all that confusion, Khudaija *bee* vanished into thin air!" Najma looked around with laughing eyes. Once there had been a big fight between Khudaija and Najma, but then, that kind of thing does happen between friends. That doesn't be little one to mock at a friend's vulnerable points.

Khudaija had been their class mate. From kindergarten to high school, they had passed each examination together. They all found it strange that Khudaija should have eloped. Their minds were filled with curiosity, surprise, wonder. The fear of dishonour, the romance of love, the excitement of romance! Each one's voice was as though trapped in her throat. Who could he be? *How had he fallen for Khudaija?* Khudaija was not beautiful she was less than plain. When the girl in a story is beautiful, the story becomes more colourful. But Laila too was dark yet Majnu was mad about her. What is this thing called love...?

The young girls' hearts pulsed like newly opening buds. When Najma saw that everyone was quiet she said: "I've heard that her family is too ashamed to step out of doors. Her father hasn't opened his shop since then." No one said a word. No one knew what to say.

After this the get together could not retain its flavour. Lost in thought, the girls one by one got up to go. Jamila and Nahid, who lived nearby, began to put on their burkas. Shakila opened the terrace door, crossed the burning terrace, and leaned over to look into the adjoining house. "Afsana, Afsana, come here a minute. O Afsana's mother! Just send Afsana to get rickshaw, will you?"

"She's gone to the factory to deliver the *bidis*. I'll send her when he gets back", Afsana's mother replied as she put more bundles of *bidis* into a basket.

Shakila came down, soaked in sweat. "Why don't you people stay on a while? It's dreadfully hot outside. Stay till evening. I'll make you some lime juice."

"No, we'd better go. We've been here since morning. And this news is so disturbing."

"Yes, that it is."

Afsana came running in. "*Baji*, give me the money first."

"Then you're not staying?"

"No, today we won't stay any longer."

"Here." Shakila gave a 20 paise tip. Now only Shakila, Saleha and Farida were left. Jamila and Nahid had gone. Silent, the three looked at each other. As if there was

nothing left to be said. A strange sadness enveloped them, as if they had come to attend a funeral.

Suddenly Afsana appeared, sucking a green and red ice lolly. Scratching her head and screwing up her nose, she announced: "The rickshaw puller has come. He'll charge 60 paise."

"So when do we meet again?"

"The day after tomorrow. At Jamila's house", Farida said.



"Fine."

"Listen, don't forget to bring that book."

"Which book? Oh, that one — OK, I'll bring it."

Saleha got down at the corner and Farida went on alone in the rickshaw. She felt uncomfortable when the rickshaw passed the wine-shop. Broken pots, the wet reek of wine, dogs, filthy men. If she hadn't had to drop Saleha, she would perhaps have taken another route. All kinds of trades were plied in this lane. How extraordinary it looked— embroiderers, tailors, vendors of popcorn, grocers, washermen, donkeys, houses, children, temples, mosques, abusive rickshawmen perched on their rickshaws, icecream, cream, ice, *kulfi*, dozens of eatables, to top it all, the wineshop with a filthy drain on either side of it—and how frightening that open gurgling cesspool looked! She held her burka down firmly with her feet, and covered her hands securely. Soaked in sweat, the rickshaw puller pedalled on. The hot gusts of wind made it difficult for him to drag the

rickshaw. As they reached Ghantaghar, the chain of the rickshaw came off.

Thank god they had got past Shahganj. If the rickshaw had stopped there even here, two or three cheap boys began to whistle and make gestures at her. Farida burnt with shame and anger. She felt like scolding the rickshaw puller but she kept quiet. What good would it do?

The bad mood persisted when she reached home. As soon as she took off her burka, she got the order that tea was to be served in the outer room. Bhayya's order for tea could not be delayed even by two minutes. His orders filled everyone with dread. Two months ago he had smashed all the crockery in the house with a stick just because his tea had been delayed while food was being served to some guests. Bhayya was always surrounded by sycophants, and he plunged himself heart and soul into entertaining them. She put on her slippers and ran to the kitchen. Ammi was sitting silent, with bowed head, on the doorstep under the creeper, preparing *pan*.

How quiet this house had become after her sisters had got married and left. When they were here, the house used to be full of life. When would such days come again? She made the tea and knocked at the door which led to the outer room. Bhayya took the tray and asked: "Where is Shakil?"

"He's gone to study", she answered and came away. His question scorched her heart. He knew very well that at this hour neither aunt nor Shakil was at home. If she had not happened to be here, poor Ammi would have had to make the tea.

At 3 in the afternoon, Ammi picked up the *pan* box and went inside to sit under the fan. Farida took a book and lay down on the floor. Khudaija came to her mind. Surely her home could not have been in a worse state than Farida's. Khudaija was the oldest daughter, the first girl in her family to have been sent to school. Then...what was the reason? It was from her family shop that they had been used to buy heavily scented *pans*. Khudaija's house, her family shop and their school were situated at three different points on

the same winding lane.

“What’s the matter? What are you thinking?” Ammi’s voice broke her reverie.

“Nothing.”

“If you’re not doing anything, why don’t you reply to this letter for me? It’s ages since it came.”

“Give it to me, I’ll write it.” A tumult rose in her. Not a minute could she call her own in this house. Everyone wanted to make use of her, all the time. She sat down with pen and paper. “Tell me what to write”, she said, and the pen began to move fast.

After writing the letter, she went straight into the bathroom, determined not to emerge for at least an hour. This one hour would be her own, even if it was wasted under the tap.



The pattering rain, and the first day of school. What a pleasant moisture spread everywhere, indoors and outdoors. It felt as if school was opening after centuries. As she wore on her uniform, Farida thought: “Let’s see how many girls rejoin this term. Quresha and Shama have got married. They’ve left not just the school but the country too. They have gone to Pakistan to keep house for their husbands. Khudaija has gone and ..” Just then someone from downstairs called out to her. “I’m coming.” Hurriedly she put on her dupatta, picked up her books and folded burka, then went downstairs. “Yes, Ammi.”

“What if you don’t go to school today?”

“But today is the first day of school,” she retorted, surprised and irritated.

“I know that. The school hasn’t opened today for the first time. Four children from this house have studied in school.” Ammi opened the *pan* box. Farida could never understand why Ammi sometimes wanted to revenge herself for the emptiness of her life on her. Ammi’s problems, children, household. Farida was not of Ammi’s age nor was she in such a relation to her that she should bear her harsh words or give harsh answers. She herself needed her mother’s care, her brothers’ and sisters’ affection, but it was as though everyone wished to make her the kingpin round which the house revolved, and thus search for a solution to all their problems.

“I’m telling you, don’t go to school today. I’ll be left alone. Jamila’s in-laws are coming and there’s nothing in the house. That *lat* governor won’t stir an inch and everyone in the city recognises Shakil.” A sharp pain rose in her throat, anger screamed in her bones, yet Farida said calmly: “What do you want me to sell?”

“That topaz.”

“At what price?”

“If I knew so much about it, would there be any problem?” Ammi said irritably, putting the stone in her palm, “You are sensible enough, just take care to make a good bargain.”

Clasped in her fist, the stone grew wet like the unshed tears in her heart. She went and put her books back in the room. Well, this was her fate. How should light come to those who are fated to live in darkness!



“Why didn’t you come to school yesterday ?”

“Just like that—because of the rain.” Farida laughed.

“Have you bought all the books?”

“Not yet.” Unrest bubbled in Farida’s mind. Where would the money come from for her books and fees? Ammi would once more unravel the pure gold or silver border of one of her dupattas. She would sell it, and only then would there be money for fees and books. Her sisters were married into well to do families but they thought only of taking, not of giving. They were daughters after all. Bhayya doesn’t think of doing anything because he has been bred in a cradle of gold and silver. She is the only one eager to change herself in a changed time, a changed atmosphere. The whole family seems content to lay the burden of its honour on her shoulders. She will do everything. Who? Farida, who is only a 16 year old girl. But that tender 16 year old is long dead in her. In her place is white haired, miserable woman, who has to save her family honour. She must share all sorrows, solve all problems, and never utter a word of complaint !

“What world are you lost in.. madam?” Rehana came up from behind, and put her arms round her neck.

“Oh, when did you come? How are you?” Farida turned round and saw

Rehana.

“I’m fine. But tell me, wher. were you wandering just now?”

“Oh, there’s no knowing with her. She must have been lost in the mazes of life’s philosophy. She should never have been born a girl, She should have been a bearded bespectacled ‘great philosopher of India.’ “

“I’ll become one yet-don’t you die of jealousy !”

“OK, let’s go and eat something.”

“Oh you fatty, it’s because you; eat so much that you’ve grown so fat.”

“What’s happened to Salma?”

“Some teachers say she’s pretending. But everyone else says that demons have possessed her.”

“They don’t possess Farida”, put in Saleha mischievously.

“If you are afraid they’ll possess you. I’m not afraid”, Farida laughed.

“Memsahab always goes to that toilet up on the roof.”

“Yes, I’m more afraid of the dirty toilet in this school than of any demon”, said Farida, screwing up her nose.

“That’s all right, but these evil spirits have overshadowed the school, see?” Rehana warned, “If you try to be too bold, they’ll get you. If you come in their way, they’ll pick you up and hurl you down like a rubber doll.”

“Let her be. Why are all of you: after Farida? What is it that happened to Salma, anyway?”

“Yesterday when she was sitting. in class, she began to shake. She started waving her head in circles. Then she said: ‘Demons are taking: possession of me.’ At first Kamla *behnji* thought it was a joke. Then she thought it was mischief, and scolded her. But Qamar *baji* who was passing by, told her: ‘You are new here. This happens to three or four girls every year. They get possessed by demons which have to exorcised. Send her home with maidservant. I’ll speak to the principle.’”

Both the demons and Salma were in the din around the *chat* shop with everyone screaming: “Let me pay, “I’ll pay.”



Farida always had a major role in the

school dramatics but when it came to acting at the Kala Kendra, her family refused permission. It would bring a bad name to the family. Farida was forced to submit. Then came the debating competition but it was for both boys and girls, so Bhayya, who otherwise never bothered about what she was doing suddenly grew worried and spoke up. When he forbade her to take part, he felt that he had performed a brother's duty and had saved his sister from the wrong path. He went on to give a lecture as well. 'Girls should stay at home. They should try to keep their waste slender and their hands soft. who look like men are not girls or women.'

Farida's heart revolted. She wanted to retort: "And how should a man behave, pray? Wherever he sets foot, the earth should give way, should it not? In his shadow, a woman should feel that she has reached a strong fortress within which every blow falls on the air?" But how could she answer, and ask how a man was supposed to behave?

Bhayya was only too free with his hands. He was always ready to hit anyone he felt like hitting. Once, when squabbling over money, he had even picked up a gun and threatened Ammi. Of course he would hardly have dared fire it but he had enacted a whole drama. As for her, one slap would be enough to send her flying.

"Actually, the problem is that our women don't know how to work. If you go to Ramesh's house you realise how women should live. If one vegetable is cooked, another more tasty one will be made from its peels, and the *rotis* — how nice and hot they are! Here nothing gets done without a servant."

"In this house, there's nothing but misery over money, night and day", Shakil said bitterly, "Yet there's no shortage of food, or of guests either. This house has become our tomb while we're still alive." So saying, he got up and walked out.

The atmosphere grew tense. Bhayya was discomfited by this sarcasm, because the speaker had not waited for an answer, or even waited to witness the display of Bhayya's greatness. There are two brothers in this house. Of different hue.

One deeply dyed in the dreams of the old world, the other so wedded to reality that it becomes difficult to listen to him or bear with him.

This is the story of all her friends' homes. Their brothers don't work. Those whose fathers are alive have some relief. Those who do not have fathers are forced to submit to all kinds of humiliations. Look at Feroza. She was forced to marry a man old enough to be her father. Could he ever be the prince of her dreams, of her delicate thoughts, of her heartbeats? How many unmarried teachers there are in the school. All are burdened with family



-Max Dashu

responsibilities. Their brothers are good for nothings. There aren't enough educated boys to marry the educated employed girls. People say that good boys who earn well are only to be found in Pakistan. As if good boys grow on trees there. That is nothing but a lie. The grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence. That is how Maryam was entrapped. It was said that the boy was a doctor in the railways. They were married over the phone, and later he turned out to be a compounder. These boys do nothing but roam around combing their hair, trying to look fashionable, and blaming others for their plight. When it comes to looking

for a job, every boy's forefathers turn out to have been related to Wajid Ali Shah. How then can the boys possibly do any ordinary job?

Burning on a pyre of hatred and disgust, scorched and baked in its coals, Farida has spent 20 years in this house. She has got into the habit of talking to herself. That sad fairy inside her has come closer to her than ever before. Now she herself laughs, cries and throbs in her stead. Some time in her childhood, this sad fairy slipped into Panda's heart and today she has become her bosom friend. Farida's face has grown hard, emotionless like a weatherbeaten rock that has survived many, many seasons. Only in her eyes can one see grief like melted glass, a reminder that at any moment this volcano may explode and scatter destruction. What is it that will be destroyed? Who knows? Living in this house, Farida feels that her soul is wandering down some stone corridor, where the walls are of stone, the floor of stone, and the roof of stone—a corridor which has no exit. Large slabs of smooth white stone confront her on every side. A stone corridor with endless stone pathways leading out of it.

Farida could not reconcile herself to the new events that were taking place every day. Who was responsible for this conspiracy? The time, the society, the circumstances, the customs and traditions? Would she too from sheer perplexity end up in some such mess one day? No, no, never! Better to die than to cultivate these messy sentimentalities like so many slimy plants. She would go nowhere near them. One by one, all the faces surrounding Farida began to take on an alien appearance. The lust to live in the thick of that game of fire and death which pervades the world had not just seared their garments but reduced them to ashes. Nahid was teaching in a school and there she had been compelled, who knows how, to have an affair with the principal. What could the compulsion have been? The principal had a wife and three children. What had Nahid got out of the affair? Such a pretty girl and that filthy rascal.

ugh ! Her fiance should have taken poison for very shame. What kind of man was he ? He failed thrice in the intermediate examination. Nahid's parents got fed up, and refused to solemnise the marriage. So the fiance, Jamal, spared no effort to torment them. Instead of feeling remorseful or ashamed, he went around defaming Nahid. In spite of all this, Nahid should not have allowed them to break her spirit. Nahid said she had done this to teach her would be in-laws a lesson, impotent creatures that they were. But Farida could never, never accept that Nahid had chosen the best way to do so. Surely they could have been taught a lesson some other way.

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By the time Farida joined BA, only four girls of her batch were still studying. They took up different subjects and gradually became distanced from each other. For her, the university too was a suffocating place. Could she break the glass castle in which she was encased, and suddenly begin to walk on the hard stony ground ? Here some of the girls were more forward, they expressed themselves freely, they had loving families. But she was stoppered up in a bottle which had been tossed into the sea. As the bottle bobbed on the waves, she could see everything but she could not spread out her arms and legs to swim. She could not play with the oysters, the pearls, the fish. She could not create anything according to her own desires. She had to stand still, inanimate, like a stone statue, while the world hurried and scurried past her. This awareness throbbed in her soul, in her fast boiling blood. While the country was changing its shape, that breath which was the country's dawn was being suppressed, being strangled.

Saleha had not yet come out of class. The two of them used to go home together in a rickshaw. But Saleha was gradually growing away from her. She was getting sucked into the white eddy of the stream. She had found new girlfriends. What did Farida have to offer ? The same *lakshmanrekha*, the life mapped out by others, fettered by family honour, ideals, norms, superstitions. Stale, overgrown with moss.

"What are you thinking ?" Saleha's smiling face and eyes.

"Nothing. Let's go", she replied, downcast, controlling herself.

"Farida, Mr Kumar was just wonderful today. The discussion was so interesting. I've decided. I'll do MA and then Ph D. in history. Really, what a superb teacher he is. My father too has agreed." She was bubbling with happiness.

Saleha had found good companions. In an open atmosphere, there is less filth. But Farida had been forced to take specially selected subjects. Urdu, education, Arabic. She did not like any of these subjects. As a child, she used to be fond of art. Her sister had not allowed her to opt for it, saying that she would waste time painting instead of studying. Now she wanted to choose other subjects but if she did, she would have to study with boys. What a disgrace that would be ! That a girl from a house whose women had never been glimpsed by outsiders should study with boys— that could never be ! She had to submit. Well, at least she was doing her BA. She ought to thank god for that.

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"Why don't you stop wearing the burka now ?" Saleha said, leaning close to her as they sat in the rickshaw. Saleha had given up wearing the burka. She only put it on when she entered their neighbourhood, for fear of getting a bad name.

Today she felt annoyed with herself when she heard this. Why was she dragging herself along like a snake in a worn out skin ? Why should she not forget these restrictions and do all that she had a right to do ? She was no longer listening to Saleha's talk. Hot coals smouldered in her mind. The fairy hidden in her heart, who used to cry weep for her, was today gazing her in amazement. Her body, like rice puffing up in a furnace, was being transformed, and taking on a new shape. She alighted from the rickshaw and entered the house. Bhayya was sitting in the courtyard. He must have come from the hostel to demand more money. The sight of him roused a storm of hatred in her.

Ammi was silent. Shakil sat the bed,

head bent, eating his food. As soon as he saw her, Bhayya exclaimed : "So there you are ! Where were you all this time ?"

She looked at him with blood shot eyes, and said through clenched teeth : "In the university." Her burning face, clenched teeth, coldly bitten off words startled all them. Ammi stared at her in astonishment. Shakil stopped chewing and forgot to swallow the morsel that was in his mouth.

"I told you she shouldn't allowed to study further", Bhayya shot another arrow. "Just look at the way she's changing her colours. It was his birthright to taunt her.

"What about you ? Should you have been allowed to study ? Who are you to object to my studying? Take your money and get lost", she, replied, like a lioness, "You are worse than a moneylender who sits on people's chests to recover his loans. You are a bloodsucker."

"Keep quiet and go make the tea", Bhayya replied, in a mixture of perplexity and evasiveness. He was not prepared for these sharp sarcasms flung at him like so many burning brands.

"Get up and make it yourself. I'm not a maidservant. I have to study, understand? My exams begin next month."

The words were barely out of her mouth when Bhayya got up, snatched the books from her hand and started flinging them round the courtyard. Farida too seemed like one possessed. She began to tear up the books, and flung her pen into the gutter. Seeing this behaviour. Ammi began to tremble. Shakil grew upset. Tearfully, he got up to wash his hands, while Bhayya, mad with anger, began hitting Farida on the back, slapping her face, and showering abuses on her. "*Sali!* Well known ruffians tremble at my name, and here you are, trying to bandy words with me !" His abuses were of the kind one would scarcely address to a stranger, let alone to a sister. But he was not a brother now. He was the scion of a ruined royal family. He was one who would not let a fly sit on his nose, one who toiled night and day to uphold the facade of family honour and glory. How could he tolerate

pardanashin women of the house answering back to men? When it came to misbehaving with his sister, however, such considerations did not deter him one bit.

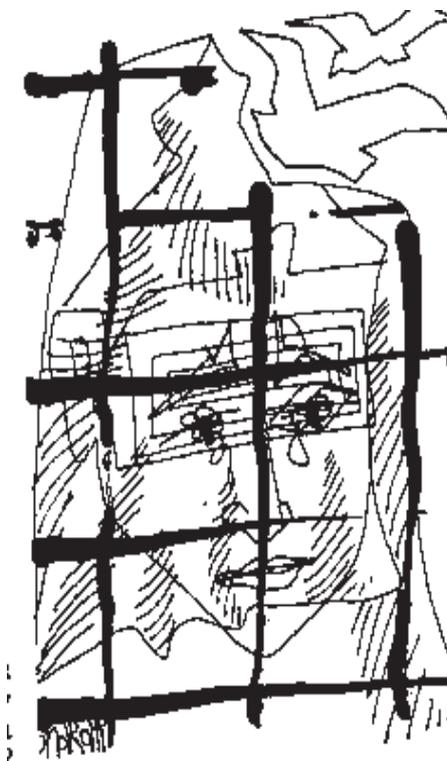
Today Farida was broken, scattered. Her nose and mouth were bleeding, her jumper was torn in several places, pages of her books were flying around the courtyard. Ammi had fainted. Shakil stood with clenched fists and locked jaws, tears flowing down his cheeks, nostrils fluttering. If only he could, today he would have strangled this wretch to death, who, in the name of brotherhood, was bent on digging a grave for all of them. Perhaps it was the flow of emotions which held him motionless. He stood there, trembling, and the walls of that ancient house too trembled and shook.

Farida is very unwell. That sad fairy, her childhood friend, who used to weep for her and console her, has disappeared. To whom can she talk about her predicament? Everyone thinks that someone has put a black magic spell on her. Why else would a girl who is meek as a voiceless cow start talking that way? In fact, all their neighbours and relatives used to full throatedly commend Farida's good behaviour. Maulvi saheb comes every morning and evening to pray and to give her holy water. Women crowd around, but she sees no flicker of understanding in any face. Some say one thing, some another. "Perhaps an evil spirit has taken possession of her. I've heard that Farida *bibi* was not afraid of them." Under the guise of possession by evil spirits the girls procure fulfilment of their desires. On the pretext of such possession, they meet their boyfriends on the open rooftops. Whether others know this or not, at least she is quite aware of it.

Suffocating, dying, perishing, the girls quench the fire of their bodies by invoking these superstitions. How can she be compared to —oh! these women who sit at home do not understand anything of what she feels. They live shrouded by religion, by blind values and norms. Their words hit her brain like so many stones.

Suddenly filled with disgust, she begins to scream aloud. Hitting her head again and again on the pillow, she cries: "No, no, I don't want to become the kind of girl who makes her way by finding some useless prop or other. I won't become Nahid, I won't be like Julekha *baji* who has illicit relations with her uncle...I won't be like Khudaija either-, let me be free •• let me become Farida—let me live like myself...please have mercy on me...free me from all these chains, take me out of this prison...set me free--free!"

Ammi shrieks: "Oh brothers! Look after my daughter! Oh, I am lost! Her heart too is affected. Run, fetch her a cold



drink." In the meantime Farida, weeping bitterly, becomes unconscious.

Now no one doubts that Farida really has gone mad. Surely some enemy has tricked her into swallowing an evil potion. How else could a gem of a girl like her get into such a condition? People used to say of her that one would have to look far before one found such a bride. She would

truly light up the house that she married into. But for the last few years, neither her mother nor her brother has taken any proposal seriously. When have they ever seriously thought of her marriage? There was no need to think of it since Farida was no burden on anyone. Rather she was a support to everyone. Farida was a ruined building in which anyone could take shelter. After all, was not the whole building lying empty?

Her brother is trying his best to get her admitted into the lunatic asylum. The volcano that has erupted in Farida's mind is fast throwing up all the accumulated lava of the last 22 years. The cork of the sealed bottle has flown off in one jolt. Who knows whether the smoke that emerges from this bottle will shape itself into a personality or whether it will remain mere smoke, rising up into the sky, there to mingle with the clouds? Her elder sister has written a letter: "...You people should not have written to me on a post card. When my in-laws read about Farida's condition, their remarks made me feel insulted. Please be more thoughtful in future." The two younger sisters have written to say that they will try to come but it will be difficult for them to make it in the next couple of months.

It is a sad bleak discoloured evening. The hospital is quiet as a corpse. Farida sits silently on her bed. An open park stretches away into the distance. Yet the same old shape remains imprinted in the courtyard of the mind. The solitary guava tree in the yard, filled with twittering birds. That is the babble which oppresses Farida's mind.

Her inability to mould herself in the way expected of her has been Farida's undoing. Her family members are sad and bewildered. The doctors cannot diagnose her sickness. The mention of home immediately sends her into convulsions, otherwise Farida appears to be at rest. There is a peaceful expression on her face as if she is saying: "At least in this place I...I exist. What a din there was in that madhouse... Ugh, even now the memory of that babble continues to deafen me..."

(translated from Hindi by Manushi)