

Yusuf Mian's Death and the Prime Minister's Water

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EXPLANATION

In the cold season, on the road that extends south of the city, night falls like a thick spiderweb.

In the distance bicycle riders suddenly emerge from and then become lost again in that web of darkness.

Though the fog quickly envelopes their shapes, their loud voices can be heard from far away.

These are the people who, as the afternoon begins its decline, load up their bicycles with all kinds of vegetables, bring them by this road into the middle of this new colony and set up a bazaar on the roadside. Do not assume the prices for these vegetables are low. We pay their relatively high prices because we appreciate the convenience.

As night falls they pack up their unsold produce and head back home. Going

such a long distance in darkness is not enjoyable, so to head off fear of being alone they converse through the darkness with unusually loud voices.

These people are this story's main character; it's a story of their world. It can begin, normally, something like this.

THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY

“Have you left, Nandalal?” That was the plantsman, who had set a few potted plants in the dust at the side of the road and was squatting there. He stood up. As dusk fell Nandalal the barber closed up his shop, four thin legs holding up a frame of bamboo covered by an old polythene sheet held down by pieces of brick. An uncomfortable chair of mango wood and a table bought from a junk shop were cleared off for business the next day.

That same table the plantsman uses to display his wares after Nandalal leaves. In the rainy season he has young tomato, cauliflower, eggplant and onion plants, and when the cold season begins its various kinds of croton, some local roses, and peacock feathers, etc. He had even been able to get three rubber plants. He knew that the current fashion among the wealthy was to decorate their spacious homes with rubber plants. His customers, though, were never so wealthy. They were usually clerk babus who came to buy vegetables on their way home from the office. Some would buy rose plants or evergreen plants, and they would look longingly at the rubber plants. He knew that among those some would begin buying crotons, too, and for sure some would even make the leap to rubber.

Nandalal never objected to this use of his shop. In fact, he was pleased because the plantsman had given him a sudarshan and two half-dead roses for

free, all of which were thriving now. The mess, however, he did not appreciate. On his table the plantsman always left behind dirt and dried-out leaves.

Placing on his handlebars the bag that held all his equipment, mirror, brush, comb, soap, scissors, cheap cream, etc., Nandalal warned the plantsman, “Sala, if you leave any dirt behind on that table, it won’t be good.”

The plantsman smiled and began rubbing the table with his shouldercloth to prove how much he enjoyed cleanliness. To pacify the barber even more he said, “Have a biri before you go.”

“Biri? That wretched thing makes such a stink — I smoke cigarettes.” And as he said that, from the back of the chair he pulled off the peg and headrest his customers used while he shaved them.

That chair of his was quite ordinary, but Nandalal had had the carpenter attach two pieces of wood to its back, with holes in them and a gap in between. He had a half-moon shaped piece of wood made with a long spike-like tail that also had holes in it. With a peg, then, he could adjust that half-moon headrest as high or as low as his customer needed.

A few times a mischievous boy found the shop empty and ran off with the headrest, so now Nandalal took it home every night along with his other things.

The plantsman was in no hurry to set his plants out on the table. In fact, even though Nandalal had cycled pretty far away, he kept cleaning and cleaning the table as if he had no special interest at all in setting out his plants.

That evening some sun yet remained. Two of the three stories of the hospital on the corner were bathed in light, and a band of light fell on the upper part of the

row of buildings to the right.

Now was the time the bazaar was set up. On the other side of the road Hariram had come with his ancient bicycle on which two bags of cauliflower were attached to the handle bars in front and a very high pyramid of cauliflower was balanced on the carrier on the back. Getting all that cauliflower off his bicycle was no mean feat because even the slightest mistake could cause the bicycle to rear up on its back wheel like a tonga horse. Next to him Yusuf mian sold greens, and he was usually among the first to arrive, so it was usually Yusuf mian who, while soundly cursing out Hariram for causing others so much trouble, prevented the pyramid from pulling the bicycle and Hariram to the ground.

That day, though, Yusuf mian wasn't there. Many times Hariram tried with all his might to keep his bicycle from overturning, but finally he failed and that cauliflower pyramid crashed against the ground. Hariram smiled with embarrassment.

The plantsman returned the cloth to his shoulder, crossed the road and said loudly, "Aré, what are you killing yourself for? I'm coming. You can't do it alone. . . ."

SECOND EXPLANATION

While a short story almost always begins according to the plan of the author, it can take a turn away from that plan and carry on according to its own will. And that is what has happened here. Without any such plan on the part of the author Yusuf mian has disappeared. Why did he disappear? Is he ill? Has he suffered an accident on the way? Has he become involved in something else? Or

is there some other reason for his disappearance that not even I have been able to imagine?

THE STORY'S FIRST THREAD

Here and now I should explain how this story came about, the incident that occurred, reverberated and even after a very long period of time grew into an entire fictional universe.

The bazaar I have mentioned above I will return to later. First, let me tell you the incident that became the seed of this story.

SEED INCIDENT

I do not have a high opinion of the workmen who come around this colony offering their services. They have always seemed to me to be untrustworthy and lazy. And if the occasion presented itself they would easily cheat you. My wife goes so far as to believe they are out-and-out thieves. So she considers the matter very carefully before she lets any of them come inside to do any work.

Once, she agreed to pay five rupees for someone to clear out some leftover bricks, stones and other debris from the back lawn. She estimated it would take the man at least half a day, but that dishonest fellow got it all done in half an hour, and he still had the nerve to stand before her with his hand out for the five rupees. My wife got so angry she wasn't willing to pay even four rupees, but he stubbornly held his ground.

Only a few days later a thief tried to get in. Since the dogs barked, all he could take was a worn-out blanket that was hanging outside. The thief's foot

prints weren't only on the ground, they were also on the wall. We looked at those unusually large marks with no little fear. Then, with total confidence, my wife proclaimed that the thief was that very same badmash laborer who had come a few days ago, because his feet, too, were unusually large and because she caught him looking around suspiciously.

So, it was only logical for us to decide not to buy aged cow manure for two rupees a bag from the man we bought from last year; obviously, he was taking advantage of us. So I threw some empty sacks in the dickey of my motor and went to a nearby dairyman for manure. Eager to get near my motor the dairyman's children eagerly filled the sacks.

The sunlight was quite strong then, but it so happened that Nandalal's barbershop was right nearby, and Nandalal was about to close up for his afternoon meal. Seeing me suffering in the sun, he very graciously urged me to sit in the shade of his shop in his barber's chair. I did not sit in the chair, but I did take advantage of the shade.

Meanwhile, the dairyman's kids were having a great deal of fun filling the sacks with manure. I had purposely brought the largest sacks we had in the hope of getting the most fertilizer possible for two rupees.

Avoiding boredom I took a good look around.

Right next to Nandalal's shop was another stall, in front of which was a bicycle pump, some wrenches, and a large old bowl filled with dirty water. In the stall were other tools, some tire pieces and three bicycle frames — a bicycle repair shop.

A few men were sitting in front of the stall, and with delight they hollered out, “Amaan, where did you get that scrap iron?”

I saw a man coming carrying the two broken halves of a child’s tricycle.

Hearing their challenge he placed the pieces on the ground and said, “This isn’t scrap. Look at its wheels. They’re completely new. After a little work, then you’ll see. I bought this because of its wheels.”

And he sat right down and held the two pieces together to show them how fine it would be.

COMMENT

The conversation that man has after this is the seed incident of this short story. You yourselves can understand how important that conversation was.

CONVERSATION THAT BECOMES THE SEED OF THIS SHORT STORY

Beaming at his find the man with the tricycle said, “What can I say, yar; I’ve been looking for this for a long time. My kids have been bugging me for it. I told them that I had one for them and that Rais was fixing it up. But they didn’t believe me. ‘Abba’s a big liar,’ they said. And not only that, yar, my wife had said they couldn’t even have one.” And with that he winked with a slight, knowing smile.

Hariram the park gardener said, “Have Iftikhar do the welding. He does good work.”

“No, thanks. Rais is my friend so I’ll have him do it. I’ll paint it and then you’ll see something.”

MEANWHILE, ANOTHER INCIDENT

In the line of tastefully-built homes on the northern edge of this sparkling, newly-inhabited colony a certain dishevelment could be detected. Two homes, in fact, started leaning because between them were the remains of the village of Ismailganj.

Between them was an old temple and its surrounding land which were not a part of this new development. Beginning from there and continuing along the length of the main road of B Block a bazaar was held every Wednesday. Before the colony was developed here that bazaar had included cattle and a small ferris wheel.

Today was Wednesday, and the bazaar was set up as usual, though perhaps larger, and instead of the usual old film songs we heard the noise of the buyers and sellers. Cheap, flashy clothing stores predominated. The buyers think they are cheating the sellers, and the sellers believe they are picking the pockets of the buyers. The truth of the matter, though, is that while they're trying to cheat each other, they're both being cheated by a third party.

For the past three market days my wife and I have had to suffer an inconvenience. In order to get our motor out more easily we had the empty space just outside our gate paved over, and it was there that a tall thin man had set up shop selling handkerchiefs, towels and pillowcases.

Although this was not a great inconvenience, we were still angered by this unauthorized use of the space outside our gate.

Last Wednesday we had confronted him, so he had moved his things a little to

the side, but in no time his store had returned to its original spot.

Inside, we thought seriously how to deal with the situation. To challenge the man directly again did not seem right. My wife had closely studied his large mustache and long beard and had concluded that while he sold towels during the day, he was a dacoit at night.

So, we decided to quietly seek the help of a police officer assigned to the bazaar. It was while I was wandering through the crowded bazaar in search of a police officer that I witnessed an important event.

The very loud crying scream of a woman pierced the bazaar and filled it with confusion.

Wearing an old tasteless but carefully washed thin nylon sari, a skinny, dark-skinned, bare-foot young woman, beating her head, came crying and screaming in my direction and then turned off into a side path. Right behind her ran two scared little children.

I inferred she must have lost one of her children. But when asked what was going on, two women who were following her explained that she had lost one of her ankle bracelets.

Then I remembered that on one of her ankles I had seen a thin, light silver chain but not on the other. It would have hardly cost forty or fifty rupees. At the loss of a forty or fifty rupee ankle bracelet she was wailing as if a dear friend had died.

SOME POSSIBILITIES

That woman could be the wife of any of the characters in this story. She could be

the wife of the man who had purchased the broken tricycle, or of Hariram, or Nandalal or the plantsman. Even of Yusuf mian.

The truth is that the wives of all those are all more or less alike. Every one of them would have screamed and cried terribly at the loss of an ankle bracelet. Because after hearing about that loss, be it Hariram, Yusuf, Nandalal or Riyaz, her husband would drink more than usual. The husband who drinks more than usual also beats his wife more than usual. But actually, a woman doesn't wail like that out of fear of being beaten. She wails like that because she has lost the one thing in her life that she loved most.

THE NECESSITY OF MOVING THE STORY ALONG

After all that, and wanting to move the story along, I'm sure you will remember that Yusuf mian had not come to the bazaar today. Where is he? Why didn't he come?

Any character in any story must have a reason for being there. Likewise, any character in any story who is not present in that story must have a reason for not being there. Where could Yusuf mian have gone?

WHO YUSUF MIAN IS IN THE STORY

When I was a boy a Yusuf mian came to tutor me in Urdu. I still remember his very tall but dirty hookah and his bare, broken-down, loose rope cot.

After partition he began teaching me Hindi. Not long after that, he was murdered. His own sons had killed him, thinking he had received a lot of money for the sale of his land and was hiding it from them. But the truth was that the

patwari had signed his land over to somebody else. After murdering their father, all three of Yusuf mian's sons disappeared and were never seen here again. Over the years, with each monsoon, Yusuf mian's home slowly deteriorated.

A second Yusuf mian is the one who sits in the bazaar mentioned above, across from Nandalal's barbershop, with a wonderful variety of greens, all fresh and clean.

Today he didn't come. Why didn't he come?

There is also a third Yusuf mian.

COMMENT

Any character in any story is sometimes made up of a mixture of many other characters.

THE THIRD YUSUF MIAN

Among the seven people who died in Badshah Nagar, one, according to the papers, was a Yusuf mian who had a connection with my area. My area, meaning — Minaganj, development area. Yusuf mian lived in the Ismailganj village of my development area. So it was reported that his death, along with the death of six others, occurred in Badshah Nagar on the eighteenth of April.

It was a most unfortunate affair.

The Prime Minister and his family were going to vacation for three days in the preserved marshes outside Lucknow. Their drinking water was helicoptered in to the helipad in Badshah Nagar from where a special truck brought it to the bungalow in the marshes.

This was no regular drinking water; it was pure water from a glacier in Greenland. To maintain its purity and special taste it was kept in a large refrigerated bottle whose temperature was maintained, and if necessary adjusted, by computer. In a large glass vat held together by straps of glistening steel that water looked from far away like sparkling diamonds. Of course, transporting that amazing vat from one place to another had its own particular problems.

While it was an American institute that had sent this water to the Prime Minister, it was Russia that took on the responsibility of making sure nothing untoward happened to it once it was in our country. Russia was where the special truck to transport it had been made. It was specially equipped to prevent our country's air pollution from having any effect whatsoever on the drinking water. To guard it a specially trained SWAT force accompanied the drinking water at all times. Some time ago West Germany had sent the Prime Minister a set of one hundred eight very expensive drinking glasses which could be cleaned only by a special powder that had to be imported from France. To prevent any contamination of those drinking glasses and cleaning powder a special glass-sided truck had been ordered. The sight of those drinking glasses sparkling through the truck's glass sides reflected India's regal grandeur, and newspapers frequently printed, along with photographs, descriptions of their beauty.

It was from those newspaper accounts that people learned when the Prime Minister's special helicopters would land in Badshah Nagar and when the especially-equipped trucks would set out from there to the marshes. Not wanting to be deprived of the illustriousness of that occasion, the people had gathered

there from early morning. And it was the Prime Minister's own firm order that no one (we are, after all, officially a casteless society) should be deprived of experiencing this auspicious event. So the district administration had put in place a complete and thorough system whereby the people would easily be able to see these special vehicles and their rare cargo. As an official of my development area, it was not necessary at all for me to be there, but I was needed much later.

That a way to provide drinking water for the people was forgotten in all those complex arrangements was not considered particularly important. After all, they were resilient folk. They could bring their own water or they could drink enough at home before they left to last them till they returned.

The helicopters did not land until two o'clock in the afternoon, by when the heat had become unbearable. And the number of people wanting to see the trucks and the drinking water was so large that they weren't finished even by five o'clock.

Meanwhile, it was learned that some people fainted in the oppressive heat, about thirty men, women and children, all unconscious. By the time they reached the hospital seven of them had already passed away. The rest were saved by an intravenous drip of glucose.

The next day the newspapers reported: IN THE CROWD VIEWING THE PRIME MINISTER'S DRINKING WATER 30 DIE OF THIRST

The district administration immediately issued this correction and further information: Only seven died, not thirty, and the administration is giving a commiseration sum of five thousand rupees to every corpse.

That it was a shameful thing for even seven people to die of thirst did not occur to the administration until opposition parties demanded an enquiry.

Among the seven dead was one Yusuf mian who lived in the Ismailganj village of my development area.

When I was searching the Wednesday bazaar for a policeman an official from the Secretariat was looking for me. When he found me, he seemed to return to life. Deliberately and slowly he said, “The Chief Minister ji has asked me to ask you that since no man by the name of Yusuf mian is in your development area, why is his name in the list of the dead?”

For a long time I stared silently at the man and considered the situation. Then I said, “On the list the name is Yusuf, son of Hanif. The Yusuf in Ismailganj was Yusuf, son of Akhtar. In this situation it is the administration’s practice to work with care. It was Yusuf’s weeping and wailing wife who had the parentage written, but I was the one who wrote it. Besides, she was illiterate, so it was my duty to write his correct parentage, wasn’t it.”

He stared at me for a while and then got up and said, “Our problem has been taken care of.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

So that is why, that day, Yusuf mian, the seller of greens opposite Nandalal’s barbershop, did not arrive. He did not come because while viewing the Prime Minister’s drinking water he died of thirst. This Yusuf mian was Yusuf, son of Akhtar, not the Yusuf, son of Hanif, of the government’s files. Happy at having arranged for their tricycle, he had taken his children with him to see the Prime

Minister's water.

But I want to turn your attention to Yusuf, son of Hanif, and I want to assure you that the woman running through the crowd screaming and beating her head with both hands was not his wife and she was crying because she had actually lost an ankle bracelet, not her husband. I also want to assure you that Yusuf mian did not come today because after having the tricycle fixed he set off for a bicycle ride with his wife and children. And as it is, the road that goes far out of the city to the south has such a thick fog around it that who can be sure who the bicycle rider is who appears there for a few seconds?