Terminal TRANSLATED FROM HINDI BY ALOK BHALLA

Nirmal Verma
Abstract
She did not say anything, but he always knew when she had drifted away from him. He shook her by her shoulder, ‘Are you angry?’ She let herself be shaken like a wax doll. The same thing used to happen when they made love, her body would become malleable, and she would let him do what he liked with her, yield completely to him. Even when she sobbed, it seemed as if she had emerged, wrapped in sorrow and joy, from a third body which existed in some boundless present on which the future had cast no shadow. Perhaps that’s where the thistle of ill-omen had begun to grow - can one simply refuse to look into the future? ‘We should find out about the future,’ she insisted, ‘find out what’s going to happen.’ He folded her in his arms. Wondered what she saw in the dark which was invisible to him. ‘You say there is nothing. Are you sure there is nothing, are you sure that nothing will happen?’ She pushed him from her.
She did not say anything, but he always knew when she had drifted away from him. He shook her by her shoulder, 'Are you angry?' She let herself be shaken like a wax doll. The same thing used to happen when they made love, her body would become malleable, and she would let him do what he liked with her, yield completely to him. Even when she sobbed, it seemed as if she had emerged, wrapped in sorrow and joy, from a third body which existed in some boundless present on which the future had cast no shadow. Perhaps that's where the thistle of ill-omen had begun to grow – can one simply refuse to look into the future? 'We should find out about the future,' she insisted, 'find out what's going to happen.' He folded her in his arms. Wondered what she saw in the dark which was invisible to him. 'You say there is nothing. Are you sure there is nothing, are you sure that nothing will happen?' She pushed him from her. Turned away from him in rage; became hard like stone. She felt hot when he touched her. 'Your hands are always feverish,' he said. Unmoved, she continued to look away. He realized that he could do nothing at such moments. Over the last seven months he had known all the different seasons of her soul, but the coldest, the most chilling was the one in which he found himself sitting holding her hand while she drifted somewhere far away from him.

When they met the following day it was like a new morning after rain and storm. Her face began to glow the moment they stepped out of the hostel. She took off her scarf and her hair scattered over her shoulders. Away from the city, in the direction of the setting sun, there was a bend in the river where they sat on their usual bench on the embankment which was always vacant. There was a skating rink across from it where delirious music and the excited shouts of children could be heard mingled together. Most often they sat there before returning home. After a stormy day, it was a quiet, clean and dry place where the threads of things left half said could be picked up again. But she was silent. She watched some women, who were busy gossiping, as they strolled along pushing the prams in which their children were asleep. A man, smoking a pipe, ambled past them. Blue smoke from his pipe swayed in the light of the setting sun like a snake and then disappeared. She watched till the man
was out of sight, and then she turned towards him and smiled. A small
tremor ran through her hand as if all that was good had just passed in
front of them in the form of gossiping women, sleeping children and a
man smoking a pipe.
'Isn't this like a hallucination?'
'What is like a hallucination?'
'This feeling that all that is faithful merely touches us and then passes
by?'
'Yes, that's true,' he said, as he laughed. 'I must find out why you
always distrust me. Is there a cure for distrust?'
'If my parents were alive, I could have asked them. If they had told me
not to meet you, it would have been a comfort to know that they had
decided for me. Even if they hadn't, at least I would have known they
supported me – now there is nothing.'
'Why does this absence cause you so much anxiety; why does it
torture you so much, oppress you so much?'
'It's a question of trust,' she said, as she gazed into the darkness of
her heart. 'We'll somehow have to find out if what we are doing is right.'
'Who will tell us that?' he asked irritably. 'Who will you go to see in
order to find out?'
She brushed his unshaven cheek with her lips and whispered, 'I know
where to go. Will you come with me?'
'Again the same madness.' As he turned his face away, her bruised lips
left a thrilling damp stain on his cheek. 'I won't go anywhere,' he
moaned sorrowfully. 'I don't want to go anywhere.' He repeated himself
like a rotating tyre stuck in mud.
'Why not?'
'I have already told you but you refuse to listen.'
'Tell me again. I can't remember what I haven't heard, can I?'
'I don't believe in such things. If you are so keen, go yourself. I won't
go.'
The finality of 'I won't go' made her refrain from urging him any
further. She never begged, she only backed off a little. 'Whom do you
trust?'
He wanted to say, I trust no one. When I met you, I didn't think that
our meeting was such an unfortunate accident that we needed the
approval of others. Do you know that whatever I have belongs to you;
whatever I am is a result of you. In this dark city, every heart-beat of
mine glows in your body – I can see nothing beyond that. After I leave
you at the hostel, I find the presence of my self very oppressive. I take
my clothes off as quickly as possible so that I can get rid of my self. I try
to forget my self till you remind me of my presence the next day ... Is
that such a sin that I must cleanse myself before someone else?
But he didn't say anything to her. To have said anything would have
meant acknowledging her suspicions, drawing them into the circle of sin.
His words would have so terrified her that she could have done anything. She was like a somnambulist, who instinctively turns away from the edge of the roof, but falls when startled awake by someone's warning. There were no guarantees with her. Therefore, at moments like this he preferred to stay silent. He did, of course, talk to himself in the hope that at some future time she would find out what he was actually feeling now. Immediately, however, it occurred to him that his thoughts were a bad omen — black magic — and he wanted to forget them.

'Alone?' She looked at him with tears in her eyes. 'All right, I’ll go alone. There is no need for you to come with me.'

She got up from the bench. Tied a scarf around her hair. Dusted her clothes and looked at the bench to see that she had not left anything behind — apart from himself, still sitting there. His presence did not concern her. She climbed down the embankment to the street. Started walking. She did not look back to see the city lights sparkling on the surface of the river whose banks were lost in the evening shadows.

He sat rooted at the same spot for a few moments, and then ran after her anxiously. He caught her hand which was still burning hot. He was afraid that she would pull it away with a jerk. She didn’t do that, but neither did she respond in any way. Her hand lay in his like a soft and limp glove. There were no women, or children, or shops, or bars on the street. They seemed to pass from one end of the town to the other through a tunnel, only to find themselves at her hostel where the lights were still burning on every floor. Had it been daytime, he would have overcome his anger and gone in with her, but at that dead hour of night, all he could do was to leave her there and turn back. She stopped at the porch. 'You can go now,' she said, without looking at him, as if she was addressing the night.

'Shall we meet tomorrow?'

'That depends on you.'

'Why on me?' He was grateful that in the darkness of the porch she couldn’t see his face.

He started walking towards his house. He lived in the old city across the bridge. The bridge had been built a long time ago. It was said that the Emperor had mixed the yolk of thousands of eggs in mortar to build it. That is why it was still in as good a shape as on the day, three hundred years ago when the Empress had driven across it in her horse-carriage for the first time ... One day as they were walking across it and going towards his house, she had told him that on moonlight nights when the city was silent, one could still hear the sound of carriage wheels on the bridge. Before marriage, the Emperor, instead of telling the Empress that he loved her, had said that he was tired of crossing bridges alone and that from that day onwards he only wanted to cross the bridges he came to in his journeys with her. Do you know what the Empress replied? She said, bridges are meant for crossing rivers, not for building homes ... The
Emperor didn’t understand what she wanted to tell him. Years later, the Empress jumped from that bridge into the river which still flows under it.

The next day, when she reached the tram-station, he was already there waiting for her. Even though it was not winter yet, he was shivering. It was difficult to tell if he was shivering because it was cold or because he was nervous. The sun was hidden behind the clouds. The morning rain had washed the tram-lines clean and they were gleaming. After last night’s conversation both were so self-conscious that the arrival of the tram was a relief. Without saying anything to each other, they quickly boarded it.

There were very few people inside, and even they were sitting crouched in their raincoats. All of them sat with their feet raised a little above the floor so as not to touch the mud left behind by the previous passengers. Instead of looking at each other, the two of them sat and stared out of the window even though there was nothing to see outside. The windows of the tram were covered with such thick layers of dust that the trees on the footpaths, the lamp-posts and the people walking on the streets seemed to slip by like dirty smudges on some old film. A few passengers got off at every stop. Whenever the conductor pulled the bell-rope, the tram hiccupsed and dragged itself forward.

When the conductor came, she quickly took some money out of her purse and bought two tickets. After he had gone, she did not shut the bag. Instead, she took out a hair-brush and began to brush her hair. She turned to look at her face in the glass window, out of habit at first, and when she could see it clearly, with some anxiety, for she saw him there staring at her instead of sitting beside her. When she smiled, his reflection smiled back. But the moment she turned away from the window and looked at him, he wasn’t smiling. He was sitting quietly. Suddenly nervous, she squeezed his hand so hard that he winced and pulled it away. Her nails scratched his hand so deeply that they left small trails of blood on it. She quickly pulled a handkerchief from her bag and wiped away the blood ... Both of them started laughing and, pushing the previous night aside, moved close to each other. She put her head on his shoulder and shut her eyes.

He looked out of the window. Her warm breath caressed his cheek. Nothing will happen, he thought, we’ll go and return by the evening. There were two tickets for *The Magic Flute* in his pocket, which he had bought many days ago. He wanted to surprise her. It was the opera they had seen together exactly seven months ago, when they had hardly known each other. Now it seemed as if that was years ago. He had reached the auditorium well ahead of time so that he could get a ticket with ease. But when he got there, the advance-booking counter had
closed and the queue had begun to disperse. He had stood around despondently. He had waited for that day for a long time and was not yet convinced that he would have to return home disappointed. He had found his tie and black coat, which he wore only when he had to go to a concert, a bit amusing. Irritated, he had been reading the list of future performances on the board outside so that people would not think that he was merely hanging around, when he heard a soft voice behind him ask, 'Do you need a ticket, I have an extra one ...' When he turned around, he saw her. She seemed tall in her black dress and rather young. After they had got to know each other, he realized that she was shorter and older than he had taken her to be. There were two tickets in her fist which were clutched so tightly that it had been difficult to separate them for some time. It was only later, when they had sat down next to each other, that he realized he had forgotten to pay her for the tickets, but by then it was already too late.

Her hand was warm and soft. She seemed to have a fever. As he gazed at the misty and rain-washed city through the tram window, he wondered if all her actions were not performed in some feverish delirium, so that she heard the sound of each approaching event in the throbbing of her veins, in the pulsating flow of her blood, in the pounding of her heart.

One day, after they had got to know each other, he had asked her, 'That night when we met at the Mozart opera, who had you bought that other ticket for?'

'For you,' she had replied with a laugh.

'No, tell me truthfully, who were you waiting for?'

She was silent for a while. She had neither laughed nor said anything. 'There is nothing to tell ... I won't tell you because you won't believe me.'

Suddenly anxious, he had said, 'Don't make excuses ... You don't want to tell me who you were waiting for ...'

'For you ...' she had said.

'But we didn't even know each other.'

'That's why I didn't want to tell you. Such things happen to me often. I feel as if something is about to happen, like a signal from a distance. I see it only once, but I know it is asking me to be ready. That day I was the first in the queue to buy tickets. When a voice from the ticket-window asked, "How many?" I replied, "Two". After I had bought them, I wondered who the second ticket was for. It was then that I saw you.'

They had reached the terminal. The tram didn't go any further. It returned from there, went back to the city which was lost in the afternoon haze. They got off the tram but for a while he was confused about where they were ... All he could do was to follow the girl, who was walking very fast. After walking some distance, the girl left the main road and turned into small lane. It was then he remembered that he had been
there before.

It was a narrow lane. The houses on both sides seemed to lean into each other. The sky above, masked by smoke and mist, was like a dirty rag spread over the houses. She stopped at every turning and waited for him to catch up with her. Every now and then they came upon the ruins of some old houses. Their broken walls, their swaying rods of iron, seemed like the skeletons of forgotten corpses. She avoided the rubble with such confidence that it seemed as if she was walking, not through some strange part of the town, but towards her own home. But suddenly her steps faltered. She stood uncertainly before a door, and when he caught up with her, she looked at him as if she was terrified of losing the very thing which she longed to possess. But before doubt could take root, she crushed it under her feet and knocked at the door. Instead of waiting for an answer, she took him by his hand and pushed him against the door. It began to open by itself with a strange low whine. It would perhaps have continued to whine for a long time had she not suddenly shut it with a bang.

The first thing he noticed was the dirt in the house. It leapt out at him from every corner. It had the sharp smell of old, damp and moth-eaten clothes which have been locked in a trunk for a long time, or of unwashed, lice-infested hair. Strangely enough, instead of being repulsive, the house seemed to invite him in, urging him to cut himself off from everything and walk in, calling to him like a wild forest which offers shelter from the harsh glare and deception of the world to anyone who seeks it. If she had not impatiently signalled to him to enter, he would have forgotten why he was there.

Did he know? He didn't know that desire would make him walk through twisting and turning lanes and bring him here. The courtyard was surrounded by dimly-lit jute curtains. In the middle of the courtyard there was a low table, dark as ebony. There were two candles burning at each end of the table.

'Come closer,' a voice called from a distance. When he approached the table, he saw a pale white face framed by long hair on the other side staring at him. He realized that the girl was not beside him.

'She'll be back soon,' the woman said, as if she had guessed his fear. 'Please sit. Not there, but here beside me ...' Then she pushed the red velvet-covered stool, which was on the left of the table, towards him. When he sat down, she said in a strangely high-pitched voice, 'You are different from what I had imagined.' He continued to sit with his head bowed.

'Were you afraid of coming here?'

He raised his head. In the pale light of the candle, her face seemed to be carved of marble.

'I didn't know what to expect?' he replied.

'I am glad that you came,' she said gently. 'Do you know where one's
longest journey begins? With one’s first step!’ She laughed for the first time – softly, without kindness or sarcasm. Full of knowledge and trust. ‘Look at me,’ she said, and when he gathered the courage to look at her, he felt that he had never seen a face which was wiser or more beautiful. He leaned forward a little so that he could see the other side of her face which was hidden in the shadows cast by the candles. Suddenly he saw the girl emerge from one of the dark walls in the back. Joy surged through him as she sat down on a cushion across from him. Unable to restrain himself, he leaned forward to whisper something to her, when he felt someone gently touch him. The woman had placed her hand on his head. It was still and cold like death, covering his inner being like a black lid.

‘Do you love this man?’ The woman’s eyes were fixed on the girl. The girl nodded. The woman then turned to look at him. ‘And you?’ She waited for a reply for some time and then sighed deeply. He was still wondering what he should say, when he suddenly realized that the girl’s hand, which had crept under the table like a thief, was clutching his fingers, and anxiously urging him to reply. He wondered if there was a word between yes and no which could express his feelings? ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘What is your name?’

‘Name?’ The moment it escaped his lips, the woman caught it in her hands like a flying kite – imprisoned it in her five fingers which were glittering with rings. It was then that he felt a slight tremor in his soul. The hand, which had felt like death on his head a few moments ago, was now encircled with diamonds and mocking him. The woman wrote out their names on two pieces of paper. She did not ask the girl her name because she already knew it. Then she crumpled the two pieces of paper, shook them in her cupped hand and dropped them on the table ... For some time their names lay trapped in those crumpled pieces of paper. Then she picked them up with her bejewelled hand and held them to the flame of the candle till they slowly unfolded. In the light of the sparkling diamonds, their two names glowed on the charred remains of paper. She stared at them for a while, and then suddenly clapped her soot-covered hands and watched grey flakes of ash slowly fall on the table ... She shook her head, as if she had seen a vision of something fated, something which had been ordained before the two of them had been born. She shook her head sadly, once, twice, thrice, like a pendulum wildly oscillating on its axis, or like an epileptic patient. She stopped only when the girl placed her head on the woman’s hand lying on the table. When the woman opened her eyes, they were as calm and peaceful as they had been in the beginning.

She began to caress the girl’s hair with her white marbled hands. ‘Silly girl, you should be happy ... You have been saved from a grave misfortune. And he too ... this man who has come with you.’
She lifted her head from the table and looked at the woman with defeated eyes, 'What misfortune? Won't we live together?'

The woman was silent. For the first time a trace of anguish passed over the remote sadness of her face, as if she wanted to banish the shadows that had emerged from the walls of darkness and were standing around her. 'I can't describe what I have seen, I can only show it to you. Would you like to see it?'

The girl's hand, which was still grasping his under the table, trembled a little and then was steady ... Perhaps that was when they should have left the place because, at that moment, what was hidden, and at stake, was not only the future of their love but the seduction of seeking to attain it. Perhaps that was what the woman also wanted them to do, but she could neither tell them to do so nor prevent them from finding out. She could not help them in the region which she had opened up before them. In fact, she was herself only an observer of the vision she wanted to show them.

The woman withdrew the hand on which the girl's head had been resting. The woman's hand, which now lay on the table, seemed like the hood of a snake glittering with diamonds. Slowly she slid her hand across the table till it lay before the girl's eyes, which were still, like the eyes of a fish under the surface of water watching the sun glowing in the sky. 'Is this what you wanted to see?'

He did not remember what happened after that even though he had often tried to do so. He heard the girl's scream, sharper and brighter than the edge of a knife. The candles flickered and were then extinguished, and ghostly shadows jumped off the walls and surrounded the woman. After that, he saw nothing except that scream which continued to flash in the darkness. 'Now that you know, decide.'

He felt like jumping up and strangling the woman. Instead, he dragged the girl by her hand and hugged her. 'Let's get out of here.' This time she did not resist. She allowed herself to be dragged away like a log of wood, but when they emerged from behind the jute curtains, she stopped, hesitated at the threshold of the door. She pulled him towards her and kissed him, kissed him in a frenzy – her tongue sought his as if she was in search of something in a deep and dark well.

It must have been a coincidence that they returned to the city in the same tram they had taken to the woman's house. The ticket conductor smiled when he saw them. He recognized them as the couple who had got off at the terminal in the afternoon.
Everything was as it had been before. They occupied the seat they had earlier and which had perhaps remained vacant. The only difference was they were now sitting a bit apart, and the misty afternoon had given way after the rain to a bright evening light in which the roofs and the towers of the city seemed to glow with beauty. No one could have guessed that they had recently emerged from the shadows of a candle-lit room and the darkness of an old house.

Before they reached her hostel, the girl looked at him for the first time, touched his hand, gave him his tram ticket, and said, 'Never try to see me again. Forget all that happened today.'

When the tram reached her station, she collected her bag, adjusted her scarf and got off. She walked along the tram-lines for some distance, then turned into a brick building which was her hostel and where she had a room on the third floor.

When the tram reached the other terminal, he gave the conductor his ticket which still carried the warmth of her hand. After he got off the tram, he slowly walked towards the bridge which he used to cross every evening on his way back home after dropping her at her hostel. It was an ancient bridge and the red light of the setting sun was sparkling over the river that ran under it ... Absent-mindedly, he put his hand in the pocket and discovered that he still had the two tickets for the opera that evening. He felt that they belonged to another world. He started walking again, but stopped when he reached the end of the bridge. He watched the river, which was now partly lit by the setting sun and partly covered by the evening shadows, flowing peacefully under the bridge. Then, suddenly, in the confusion of light and shadow, he saw a face floating on the surface of the water, staring at him, gazing up at the place where he was standing, and he couldn’t decide if it was the face of the Empress who had drowned at that same spot under the bridge three hundred years ago or of the woman he had seen in candlelight three hours past and who had saved them from drowning.