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Monkey's Wound

SHE was bundled up on the loose-roped cot on the veranda like a new bride. It was an afternoon of torrid heat and then the fever that wouldn't go up or down—she was feeling miserable. All the members of the household were shut up in the room, comfortably chatting and talking. There were moments when she too felt like seeking refuge from the sun's insufferable heat by getting up and going to the room, but she was afraid that if she did, she would have to face a torrent of vitriolic advice. That was why, despite the heat and her fever, she valued the little privacy she had.

The heat, so fierce, and she in the grip of a raging fever. Again and again she felt as if the marrow in her bones had melted and every fiber of her being was being fried in it, and that her ribs, arching like a bow, were being crushed by a strong hand as if they were just straws in a *jharu*. This odd sensation caused her to cough. The same cough ... as if someone were beating a rhythm on a hollow, crumbling wooden box! Something came up in her throat as she was coughing and, pulling aside a few loose ropes in the cot, she bent down and spat it out. A tiny gob of blood landed on the floor with a *chup*. Before the sight of blood could generate any thoughts in her head she heard the *khun, khun* of the monkeys and froze. She was terrified of monkeys. Without turning her neck she rolled her eyes and looked in the direction of the noise.

"Oh my God ..." The words escaped from her dry, chapped lips, the burning sensation increasing. *Uffoh!* So many monkeys there were, leaping about in all directions from the tree in the backyard to the roof. She was suddenly seized with the urge to run into the room, but fear made her immobile. She was afraid all these monkeys would attack her if she moved.

Sitting on the parapet blackened with mildew was a sickly, whimpering monkey surrounded by several fat monkeys busy scratching a black, ghastly wound on his back with their sharp nails. She began to feel sick at the sight of the monkey's loathsome wound. The monkeys were thoroughly absorbed in their activity. No sooner had one started puttering around in the wound than the other bared his teeth, slapped his eyelids, and followed suit. It was a case of a single wounded individual surrounded by a thousand surgeons. And all that the sickly, feeble monkey did was fling his head down in pain. It appeared that he was going to die soon. She thought, "Why doesn't the fool run away from here? What's to be gained from losing his life by having his wound examined?" But he was an animal lacking in reason. Still, the unfortunate monkey's helplessness aroused great pity in her. She wanted to save him from the pack of monkeys who, pretending to be helpful, were merely spectators. But ... but suddenly someone placed strong hands over her ribs and pressed her down. Coughs accompanied by a tickling sensation ranging from her chest to her throat. Her chest filled as if she had soaked up the juice of several paans at once. She hastily coughed up spit.

Hee...eee. Bright red, living blood. Her limbs felt watery and she started rubbing her head against the splinter-ridden cot.

The monkeys were making noises and the people in the room were complaining about her habit of isolating herself. She wearily stretched her legs and placed her hands on her chest. The sound of her family grumbling and the *khun, khun* of the monkeys seemed to descend into her ears like red-hot rods. "How similar the monkeys and my family are," she thought. And she began to feel the veins in her body throbbing. Suddenly it seemed as if someone had said to her, "You too are like that sickly monkey, deliberately courting deadly diseases." And as if to offer proof, some images of the past emerged on the surface of her feverish brain.

"A full-grown twenty-three or twenty-four year old, like a second story room—it's difficult not to worry now," Amma would mutter anxiously and she would suddenly become overly conscious of the heavy burden of still being single. In her own family, girls her age, actually many who were even younger, had been married for years. Several already had four or five children each, and some, deemed old and worn-out merchandise by their husbands, were back in their parents' homes attempting to repair their tattered youth with the help of amulets and the prayers of holy men. But as for her, God knows what kind of a fate she had come into the world

with because no one had bothered to throw a stone at this unique berry tree. She was not at all bad looking. She was well mannered and well bred. Yet her marriage could not be arranged. It is true, though, that except for her and her mother no one was that worried about her. As far as the father was concerned, all he could do was gurgle on the hookah all day long or proudly add to his progeny every other year. The older brother was absorbed in his own affairs. Today he's in love with the washerwoman and tomorrow it's the sweeperess who has his heart. And he wasn't doing any of this surreptitiously either; everything was undertaken openly. He didn't show the slightest hesitation in sighing, passing lewd remarks, or scratching himself in proper and improper places in front of his youthful sister.

So this was the environment in which she was spending her life. Her mother tried very hard to keep the vigor of her youth pressed down under the slab of household chores, but God help us! There comes a time when the winnowing basket loses its balance. You must have seen dal cooking on the stove and you must have also observed that when the dal comes to a boil the person watching its progress immediately removes the lid of the pot. This way the bubbling is tempered, is it not? And if the lid is not removed the dal boils over, thereby creating its own release. So a condition similar to a full boil had been created in her life as well. Her eyes, lowered by the weight of modesty all this time, began to look up here and there, as if in search of something. The house next door had been vacant for a long time, but it was said a student was to be renting it soon. Well, that was that. The lava churning in the earth's belly found a split in a layer on the earth's surface from which to erupt. While she would be working, her gaze would be drawn to the wall behind which someone was sure to be pacing. Her mother would be scolding her for her lack of concentration, but she didn't hear her; her eardrums would be vibrating, hoping instead to imbue a strange, masculine voice. Her parents would be quarreling about something while she would be jumping the wall in her imagination to be held in an embrace. It was lava, wasn't it? It was bubbling inside.

"Why are you going on the roof?" Her older brother was a veritable psychologist.

She squeezed the wet, dyed dupatta tightly between her hands.

"I'm going up to dry my dupatta." She frowned. Will a hungry person not be angry if a plate of food is pushed away from him?

"Isn't there enough sun here that you feel the need to go upstairs?" He glared at her like an honorable brother and then he lighted a cheap

cigarette. Muttering, she threw the dupatta on the cot and sat down. The brother, satisfied, began humming.

Holding your gaze in mine,
O beloved with the fanciful eyes.

Fuming, she silently cursed him.

Today, she looked all around her. No one was there to stand in the way of her desire. *Uffob!* How many days she had yearned to peep through this hole. Taking this to be her opportunity she placed her eye on the hole. It wasn't long before a fair-complexioned face appeared before her and then, *chap!* was gone. Just one glimpse, just one! Her longing swelled. If only he would come before her one more time. She stayed with her eye pinned to the hole. The location of the wretched hole was such that one could neither sit nor stand. She bent as if in a posture of genuflection. Both hands on her knees, eyes on the hole, and her ears directed to the doors of the room. Her back began to ache from the awkward position she was in, her hands became numb, and once or twice the rubbing of her eyelashes against the hole caused specks of dirt from the area around the hole to fall into her eye. But she remained glued to the hole while all kinds of strange longings remained glued to her.

One day. Two days. Three days. For months her body longed to travel through the hole the way her glance did, but finally, exhausted from the effort, she realized that was an impossible task.

"Amma!" Her younger brother was racing down the stairs noisily. "The wretch cut my kite off."

"*Arey* son, who?" Amma was flabbergasted. She had given him four paisas only yesterday to buy a kite and today the kite was gone.

"That same person who's living next door. He was saying, don't fly kites on the roof, you'll fall down." He angrily stamped his foot.

"So, that wasn't so wrong, was it?" she said, pausing in her kneading.

"Come on, you be quiet," Amma scolded her. "Who is he to give advice? If the boy doesn't fly the kite on the roof will he fly it on his mother's chest? So son, why did he cut off your kite?"

"I said, who are you to stop me? I'll fly kites as much as I want, you don't own this place. And that's when he took a cable and cut off my cord." The boy then proceeded to spit out three or four heavy curses. She was enraged and felt like leaving the flour she was kneading to go up and give him a few hard slaps. And Amma? She didn't stop him. A little fellow like him using such profanity! She was so much older, but once when

she was angry and had used a harmless curse commonly heard in the house, Amma had threatened her with a pipe, but ...

“*Ai hai*, he’s nothing, that self-appointed guardian ... my son, you should fly kites on the roof when he’s not around. One should stay away from low-class people like that and you know, your father is a very strict person—if he gets wind of this no one will be safe.”

“Well, we’ll see about that!” she muttered again. Had she been punishing herself all this time for this? That someone should curse him?

“What do you mean when he’s not around? He’s there as soon as it’s evening and he also has his bed there and maybe he also sleeps on the roof. May he die, may I see his funeral ...”

Her brother was trying to cool his anger down by cursing. But she was smiling to herself. As if she didn’t hear the curses at all. As a matter of fact, she was thinking of something altogether different at this moment. What a delectable thought it was!

The bird in the cage was getting ready to fly.

That night Amma untied the bunch of keys from her waistband and giving it to her, said, “Here, take these, put the lock on the storage room door and lock the door to the stairs. Today he’s gone after the child’s kite, tomorrow he’ll clean out the house, the wretch!” And then, baring her rotund, shiny stomach, she calmly stretched out her legs on the charpoy. As far as she was concerned, she had made the necessary arrangements to protect her house.

But something else was going on in her mind. She was thinking, as she unbolted the lock on the storage room door, “The two roofs are adjacent to each other. Why shouldn’t I say today everything that has been brewing in my heart all this time?” And she bolted the lock on the door to the stairs. But the key to that lock disappeared from the bunch and was stowed under her pillow.

The police station’s tower clock struck two. Everyone in the house was sound asleep. She slipped the key out from under her pillow and began walking in her bare feet. A moist whiff of breeze gently fondled her emotions. Someone moved a foot and she tiptoed to the water trestle. For a few moments she stared at all the faces in the light of the stars and then, making certain that everyone was asleep, she calmly unfastened the padlock. Now she was faced with the opening of the door. But the door opened easily without any creaking noises, pliant like a hungry beggar woman who turns into a corpse for the sake of a few pennies. How

fiercely her heart was beating. As if it would smash her ribs. Dancing in front of her eyes in the darkness of the stairs were all the stars she had been counting since evening fell. The veins in her temples throbbed with the force of her emotions. And on top of this the *bhin, bhin* of the mosquitoes and their little jabs. She laboriously climbed the stairs. She was halfway up. Her body felt like a mountainous weight. Anticipation, fear, darkness, and her stilled breath made her head swim, and then a wave of kaleidoscopic colors radiated before her eyes.

Gadda-gad! The full-grown second story attic, rolling like a ball down the stairs, falling, bouncing, hit the leg of her father's charpoy.

"Hoho, hai—thief! Allah!"

The radiating colors in her vision suddenly recoiled when she heard the screams. The wick in the lantern was quickly raised.

"Hai, hai, it's her." The mother beat her own shaking bosom. *"Arey, I knew this strumpet would be up to no good. Hai, why didn't you die!"* The poor mother was about to faint.

"I'll slaughter her, don't anyone stop me, I say—she's just been upstairs, the wretch." The father lost his senses because his honor had been attacked. But how admirable that although he was out of control he was keeping his voice down—*arey* what if someone in the neighborhood heard him?

The older brother probably awoke from a dream about his newest paramour. His condition was simply indescribable. Secondly, he had often in the past tried to explain indirectly to his sister, "Look, this is a well, no sister should fall into it." But she had not heeded his advice, so there—he grabbed her plait and began to swing her about. The father's integrity was suffering from inner turmoil and when he saw such an easy way out, he too joined in. Because the mother was in her twelfth pregnancy, she avoided the exertion, but all the singular expletives she could remember she proceeded to spew out at this time.

But despite the pain she was in, she couldn't scream. A failure of resolve makes you a coward and it is the coward who is afraid of the world. She didn't have enough courage to open her mouth in protest against these criminal arbitrators.

Many months passed. She thought that just as her older brother's waywardness was always excused with, "This is the age for such things," her great sin would also be eventually forgotten. *But you fool! Did you forget what a woman's status is? A woman is a puppet whose strings are held in society's mangled hands. And when these mangled hands feel an itch, the strings make the puppet dance. But if this puppet comes to life and she begins*

to act according to her own volition, then what will society's inert, decaying body have left to play with? She thought that just as members of her family had lent a deaf ear to the demands of her youth, they would, similarly, forget this incident and accept their mistake. But this was *her* conviction. In the eyes of her virtuous protectors, however, the sinful scar that marred her life could never heal.

“Tramp,” her brother would say at the slightest provocation.

“*Ari ...*” Her mother would take one look at her downtrodden expression and spout hefty curses in one breath.

An ordinary abrasion was scratched by poisonous nails until the scratch turned into a big wound. A wound that would putrefy on the inside and become toxic. Whose poison then engulfed her life with the agony of death. But these horrifying nails still had no rest.

“Why are you stretched out here? The wretch has fever all the time and this scorching heat on top of that and the sunlight. But I know, why sit with the others, everyone will talk and the dear girl's mind will wander.” The mother continued grumbling, and taking the *lota* disappeared into the lavatory.

Feeling worn out, she curled her legs. On the kitchen roof the villainous monkeys continued with what they thought was treatment of the wounded monkey. Her chest reverberated again with pain. A susurrations beginning from her chest traveled to her throat and once more the melting marrow of her bones began to fry her on the inside.

“Allah!” she called out ardently and then raised her pleading eyes toward the blue sky that rested on the world like a vast lid. For a long time her glance attempted to go to the other side of the lid—where she thought a world of justice and compassion existed. But her pleading eyes failed. Wearied, she finally realized that Allah Mian had become content after placing a lid upon His world, just as once she put some leftover dal in a bowl and was satisfied that she had saved it. But when she remembered the dal after a whole blistering afternoon had gone by and went to look at it, she saw that the dal had putrefied and was bubbling. □

—Translated by Tabira Naqvi