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THE ASTROLOGER

Habib Mohana

Her rickety kiosk stood on the busy court road on the left side of the District Headquarter Hospital. In her kiosk she lived all by herself. Originally the kiosk was a heal bar that had fallen into disuse. She scraped a living by reading people's palms and selling herbal powder for abdominal troubles. She bought the dried roots and herbs from the apothecary and ground them into rough powder. Clove-complexioned, muscular Zenat was over forty-five. She had veinous hands and jet black hair adorned her skull.

At the backside of her kiosk an open sewer flowed indolently. It belched sulfurous fumes and an unseen cloud of stench danced around her kiosk but she had become so habituated to it that she did not feel the stench. Her residence was sandwiched between a cycle repair kiosk and a thatched tea stall. The hospital sanitary staff dumped the surgical garbage near her place. The rubbish dump was a favourite haunt of the paupers and dogs. The dogs forged for the edible leftover while the paupers scavenged for the disposable syringes, surgical gloves and IV bags among the mountain of bloody cotton, gauze bandages and plaster casts that once homed and supported broken limbs.

Every other day Zenat made a trip to the vegetable market on her dwarf ramshackle bicycle. Here she savagely haggled with the shopkeepers over the price of tired vegetables. She would hang the shopping over her bicycle's handle bars and head to her place.

The rotting wooden walls of her dwelling were beefed up by tin plates while a distressed tarpaulin swathed its roof. Its creaky wooden floor was covered in a threadbare rug, while on the walls hung medicine jars, sooty utensils, small plastic bags of spices and edibles, and bundles of her personal effects. In the evening, outside her den she cooked meal on a coal-fired stove and bantered with the café man and cycle repairman.

In the morning Zenat would meticulously broom and sprinkle water on the ground in front of her place. On the broomed place she would unroll the date palm mat upon which she showcased a few glass jars of herbal bellyache powder, a big convoluted conch, a stack of peacock plumes, and her top-notch tools of palmistry: three brass dices, a handful cowry shells and a soiled unread book about astrology. Under the one corner of the mat she kept a smooth bludgeon. Most of her clients were villagers, rickshaw drivers, unemployed youth and those who were bogged down in court cases. Sometimes the clients would squat down before her and get their palm read by her but most times she sat idle.

Opposite her kiosk, a lame elephantine dark beggar had his small tin shack. After breakfast he would burrow out of his cavernous den, and throw a rag-filled manky pillow on the ground before his place. He seated himself on the pillow and placed a dark aluminium begging bowl before him. He had a fluty voice and sang begging songs to attract the attention of the passersby. Often he gave Zenat toffees and stale fruits the passersby dropped in his bowl. The beggar and astrologer had a tea break at noon. Zenat

would bring tea from the nearby tea stall and they would drink tea and chitchat. There was an unwritten contract between them: one day she paid for the tea and the next day the beggar paid for the tea. Most times they ate lunch together.

Once the beggar suggested to Zenat, 'beg for money like me, begging is more paying than your palmistry. You will make a mint.'

'You can do it because you have been blessed with a withered leg but I am not as lucky as you. People would not give money to a healthy able-bodied person like me,' puffing on an unfiltered embassy cigarette, she replied.

One night in the monsoon downpour, the sewer broke its banks and the rain water flooded her shack. Some of her jars, edibles and pots were washed away by the deluge. Wading in the knee-deep water she salvaged some of her items and placed them on the string bed and waited for the dawn. From the rain water she retrieved fruits, vegetables, container vessels and scrap metal.

Zenat's clan people were bear handlers and they lived in straw huts on the edge of the river Indus. At sixteen Zenat was hitched to her cousin who died of malaria and at twenty five she was married off to a widower donkey driver who was twice her age. She had been remarried hardly for three months when her husband divorced his wife on his mother's advice who thought Zenat to be disrespectful to her. Faizo, a truck driver, was her third husband and he dearly loved her. After spending a couple of months with his bride he returned to the truck seat. After three months when he returned home he had utterly changed. He treated Zenat like a leper. He would not bring in provisions, or talk to her nicely. Often he would dine and sleep out. One day Faizo told her to go her father's house and forgot about her.

A few years later Zenat's both parents expired. She lived in her hut all by herself in the bear-handlers colony and eked out a living by reading peoples' palms. One day she came to the city with her female friend, and they rented a kiosk. Zenat read palms while her friend sold ground roots and herbs that cured bellyache and indigestion. At day the kiosk was their shop while at night it was their bedroom. Some months later her friend tied the knot with the server from the neighboring café and he took his bride to his house. But Zenat remained loyal to her kiosk.

Zenat's father was a bear handler who walked the streets and bazars with a stocky moon bear on a leash. The bear danced, showed tricks and the onlookers tossed coins into his jet-black oval begging bowl. While her father was out with his bear her mother would go from house to house selling colourful paper toys that she made from scrape papers and twigs. Zenat was babysat by her hunchback toothy grandmother. The grandmother told fortunes and her clients visited her hovel. From her grandmother Zenat had learned a few things about fortunetelling. This knowhow lay useless with her for years. She resorted to palmistry only when her truck driver husband gave her the push and she was left to fend for herself and fortunetelling saved her from sure starvation. Grinding roots and leaves into useful medicines was in the blood of their clan that lived in the outskirts.

Zenat had stayed at the kiosk for nearly a year when one late morning her estrange husband appeared before her place. The road in front of her kiosk was busy with passersby. Faizo hunkered down on the pavement before his wife's shack and locked his eyes on her. After some time he approached her and said, 'We need to talk.'

‘No! Go away, there is nothing between us,’ she hissed.

‘I humbly beg your pardon! Can’t you forgive and forget.’ her husband clasping his palms together said.

‘No.’

‘I will never be bad to you again. I promise.’

‘Promise? You don’t know the value of promise. Move along or I will shout.’

Faizo did move away but next morning when she was sweeping the ground before her kiosk, he returned. She did not register his presence. When she had placed her items before her shack in order and she had seated her down in the middle of her tools and medicines, he approached her but she waved her bludgeon at her and he moved away.

Next day the desperado, in one last ditch effort presented himself before his wife and begged her to go with him. First the couple talked in whispers, then their voices rose sharper until they became screams and in the end they came to blows. The passersby stood and watched. His crutch under his armpit, the lame beggar was the first to respond to his neighbour’s distress calls. He lifted his crutch threateningly at Zenat’s husband and yelled at him to bugger off but the former did not listen to the beggar. Then the repairman and the café man rushed to succor the damsel in distress. Faizo warned them not to meddle in the affair of a husband and his wife.

Zenat grabbed the bludgeon and clobbered her man and he pelted her with brickbats. Dripping with blood they managed to reach the nearby hospital. At the emergency unit the doctor asked Zenat how she got hurt. She pointed to her husband, ‘this is the doing of this devil.’

‘And I am here thanks to this bitch,’ Faizo retorted. Again the brawl broke out between the husband and wife. The peppery doctor flatly refused to treat them. The paramedical staff separated them and dragged them to separate rooms.

Once a middle-aged porter came to show her his palm and when she was busy scrutinizing the line of his palm he gave her lewd stares. He questioned her about the physical features of her future wife in vulgar language and then pressed Zenat’s hand naughtily. She jerked his hand down so hard that a scream of pain emanated from the client’s lips. She clamped her horny, stubby hands around the client’s neck and when the porter struggled to unclamp her grip she clawed at his shirt and tore it. The passersby dashed to the porter’s rescue and saved him from the harpy’s wrath. The porter wrapped a sheet around his body to cover up his ripped up shirt.

Once a motor rickshaw driver came to Zenat’s kiosk, sat on his heels before her and held out his palm for her to examine its lines. She told him about his future: the colour of his would-be wife, the number of the children he would sire and his future financial situation. Without bothering to pay her fee, he made a bolt for his rickshaw that was parked close by. He ducked into the rickshaw, turned the ignition key and was about to blast away when she dragged him out of the rickshaw. She landed the cudgel on his fat drearier. She dug into the side pocket of his shirt, and pulled out a wad of notes. She took her consultancy fee and returned the remainder to the rickshaw driver.

Everyday a little after sunrise a middle-aged fruit peddler passed by Zenat's place. He had a huge twig platter strapped to the carrier of his repainted bicycle, the platter was topped with oranges or guavas or bananas. Often he made a stopover over at her shack, saluted her amiably and requested her to pray for the good sale of his fruit and she always assured him that his fruits would sell like hot cake. Upon hearing this, the peddler grinned broadly and offered her a guava or an orange or a banana and went his way. One day while showing his palm to her, the fruit peddler asked, 'what do the lines on my palm say?'

'Well many times I have told you that your palm lines are amazing. They omen well,' Zenat replied.

'See closely whether your name is scribbled on my palm?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, is there any possibility of you becoming mine,' he lowered his voice to a romantic whisper.

'Don't talk nonsense!' her full lips curled up in an unsuccessful attempt to muffle a smile.

'I have given my heart to you, you have plundered it. I can't wait to marry you. Be my wife, please.'

With his fruit platter empty, towards the afternoon the peddler retraced his steps. He propped his bicycle against the dwarf boundary wall of the hospital and plopped down on a saggy charpoy in the café near the palm reader's place. He would order tea for himself and send one cup to his inamorata through the waiter. Reclining on the scruffy pillow he would pull on an unfiltered cigarette and the besotted lovers would communicate on the hotline of love-thirsty eyes.

The cold wet roads lay deserted and the foggy night was nippy, the elephantine beggar knocked at the palmist's kiosk door. Rubbing her eyes Zenat unlocked and pushed the squeaky door open. The caller told her that he was having an excruciating pain in his paunch. She lit the grimy lantern, and let her neighbour in. The caller sat down on her charpoy and she offered him a pinch of ground roots. He slung the powder into his mouth and washed it down with a glass of water. Suddenly the caller clinched his hostess and stamped a big wet kiss on her leathery cheek. He then madly started fondling her and she gave him a mighty smack in the chops. He pawed her down on the string bed and the randy hands groped for the drawstring of her pajama. They wrestled and the kiosk quaked and creaked. She reached out to a small tin, unscrewed the lid and dusted paprika into his eyes. The love-hungry beggar scrambled out of the kiosk, gibbering like a gelada. She restrained herself from chasing him instead she fell to crying, though she was not crying sort. She tumbled into her bed, the dark night spooked her, and sleep eluded her. Tears coursing down her cheeks, she thought about her childhood, her parents, her first marriage, her second marriage, and then third one. Near dawn she fell asleep but her sleep was pockmarked by nightmares.

In the morning she grabbed her shiny bludgeon, and yanked open the door of her shack. Her unslept hooded eyes searched the beggar but he was nowhere to be seen. Seething

ire deprived her of sleep for some nights and she kept waiting for the molester but he never returned to his residence and soon a vagabond moved into his shack.

One October afternoon the fruit peddler sat Zenat on the carrier of her bicycle and took her on a guided tour of the city. Then every afternoon they went for a ride. They would promenade in the parks, visit the riverside, and on Fridays go to the cinema. Often he bought her trinkets and before nightfall he would drop her at her shack.

Once or twice in a week the peddler would steal into his inamorata's kiosk at night and stay the night there. Before the sunup, he would straddle his bicycle, bowl down to the vegetable market, buy fruit, and hawk in the streets. Their steamy affair was in second year when one night the wife of the fruit seller sniffed him out at the palmist's kiosk. She pounced at her husband like an angry puma, also the girlfriend showed no mercy to her live-in lover. Between them the two women thrashed the fruit seller black and blue. At last he managed to abscond and the furious wife fell on the fortuneteller and tugged at her raven hair but the fortuneteller tussled her down to the ground and slapped her across the face.

Zenat remained crest fallen for some days but slowly her life returned to normal.

A little less than a year a spluttering three-wheeler rickshaw pulled over by her kiosk and Faizo, her husband got down from it. He squatted down before her and requested her to go with him. 'Now I own a small mud house, in the shanty town. Now instead of the truck I drive the rickshaw, and I will return home before sunset,' he said but glum Zenat did not respond.

'I will never misbehave with you. As a husband I will never be negligent of my duties. Please give me a chance, just one chance,' he continued.

Zenat remained silent and thoughtful and then said, 'I will let you know about my final decision, tomorrow.'

Next morning the fruit peddler meekly approached her kiosk, Zenat glared at him, 'will you listen to me for a while,' he requested.

'No.' Zenat growled.

'Listen please, my wife has divorced me. She sued me in the court and now we have parted ways. I wish if you could accept my proposal. Though I had been dishonest to you but now I am... I have a one-roomed house in the city. It has a tiled toilet and a tiny kitchen. I will be good to you and keep you happy.'

Zenat looked up and saw Faizo hovering around her shack. By gestures he indicated to her that she was to send her client away. He then dramatically pointed to his rickshaw and conveyed to her by gestures that he wanted to seat her in his rickshaw and take her to her new home.

Zenat felt suspended in the air, the passersby swam before her eyes and Zenat blacked out.

BIO-NOTE

Habib Mohana was born in 1969 in Daraban Kalan, a town in the district of Dera Imsail Khan, Pakistan. He is an assistant professor of English at government degree college No 3, D. I. Khan. He writes fiction in English, Urdu and Saraiki, his mother tongue. He has four books under his belt, one in Urdu and three in Saraiki. His Saraiki novel forms part of the syllabus for the MA in Saraiki at Zikria University Multan. His short stories in English have appeared in literary journals of America, India, UK, Canada, China and South Africa. In 2010 and 2014 his Saraiki books won the Khawaja Ghulam Farid Award from the Pakistan Academy of Letters. His book of short stories in Urdu, titled ADHORI NEEND, won the Abaseen award from the Government of KPK. He is currently seeking a publisher for his novel The Village Café.

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