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**Crimes without reason**Quleen Kaur Bijral

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The morning's heat was growing beyond mercy. Disappointing as it was, there was a mirage on the road, on the roof of my car, and by the horizon itself. Nothing was spared in the wake of the heat: the animals, the fallen leaves, the grass and the blank-faced skies. A moment in the sun was as prickly as the sensation of hot iron on a wet piece of cloth. I could hear the searing hot wind, called the *loo* in Hindi, wilfully burning my skin to break out in a sweat. The day could be so scorching, why the weather man with the bow tie and the weather woman with the fancy waist belt didn't say anything? At times like these, something as paltry as the weather news begs credence over street fights here or there. It certainly does!

Outside, the heat kept radiating from every metal on earth while inside the building where I worked as a typist, the heat waves twirled and curled in the face of the feeble fan and the emaciated air conditioners of the yore. Every cabin in the office was a picture of a tin roof during a hot day of the hottest summer. Excessive as it was, there was the bottled smell of perspiration and its tell-tale blot on every pit and hole of human body. Women who had long hair were able to hide the sweat blobs by covering the obscene patches on their dress while men who didn't have any black purdah, either had their sleeves rolled up or wore shorts which were officially frowned upon. As for me, I didn't care for any purdah or a rolled-up shirt; rather I decided to leave straightaway. Not caring to stick around anymore in that pitcher of dry air and summer, I, with my dignity intact, walked out! Whether it got me fired or slated for a harsh penalty, I didn't care any less.

At the office, most of the white-collared employees like me were not trying to prove anything. Even when like a demi-god, we were pushing a heavy boulder up a cliff and then throwing it down to restart all over again. We did it as it was a job with a salary which incentivised us to deliberately grow fat, kill the spirits and turn every day of the life prosaic. Besides that, the bonus at the end of the year was another carrot on the stick to accept the year-round spanking and eat the carrot at the end of it all. So the job didn't bother as much nor did the yelling, browbeating and debasing that came along with it. It was the routine which irked. More like the weight of the boulder didn't matter more than the humdrum routine of picking and throwing it off the cliff. Like a broken record. Taking the same route, the same weight. In the same world and on the same mountain. The sheer monotony of it; the dreariness would get to most of us. There were no surprises or adventure or a change of scene even. The early man with his hunting and his cave drawings had more fun than any of us did. Of course I had accepted that I had to work like a mule but the life expectancy of my mortality couldn't just agree to such bleakness.

I didn't have the immortality to scale the mountain but had to wade through some meagre mortal years! Would I be human in the next life, that was not guaranteed as well. Some fifty years to live and I do that lifting of a freakish stone up a cliff, when I could just let it roll back over my body and be done with its cycle. Bold and piquantly philosophical as my thoughts were, every year during a heat boom, I would wallow in self-reproach and then aggressively try to protest by not sticking around at the office after lunch. I could have quit; but then that would be exchanging one mountain for another. So, when the clock struck half past noon; I found it convenient to leave after lunch than quit.

An hour after one past fifteen, I was still on the road when my car broke down. It was a plain long stretch of a road. On either of its sides, there was a boulevard of freshly cut grass, no trees and a few dots of bushes here and there. Long road with no view despite the clean slate of a drawing board given to it, the drive was equally painstaking like the flash and bolt of heated loo out and about everywhere. In the middle of it all when my car broke down, only a person who did meditation could have remained sane. I didn't, so I vented out my ire by brashly hitting the steering wheel. Honking the car most atrociously; kicking the tires till the toes on my feet hurt with perverse pleasure. Scalded, I then lifted the bonnet to check the engine and it opened up in a thud. After which a puff of smoke from inside the engine slapped me on the face. What caused it, I didn't know. And just when I thought it was the reason of my car's breakdown, I saw the four upstanding tires of my car punctured; all of them!

I checked the front. The ones in the back. Each and every one of them was hurriedly soaking out of air. It looked intentional as all of them puncturing was too coincidental to be unintentional. Though it was brusquely unclear as to what broke the car, the tires or the engine, if I had to choose, it seemed the engine gave up even before the puncture could have stopped the car. As I kept groping the car to inspect what I could, out of nowhere and all of a sudden I heard a shadow behind me. It was a shadow more like a man's and not some ink of sweat creeping on my skin. It was certainly a certain shadow of a certain man. Stunned by dread, I then heard it breathing down my neck. It was not the loo but a certain man's shadow. Too close for comfort. Before the starved curiosity in me faced him upfront, I repressed its childlikeness and ran with my skirt between my legs. I ran aimlessly through the misty woods of the empty wasteland of grass and bushes. I could have stayed on the road, for some passer-by to help me but I didn't. Instead, very conveniently, rather eagerly I ran and found myself running through the woods.

While running I didn't scream "Anyone there? Help me! Hello?" It would have been utterly futile as most of the world was marooned in the compartmentalised and economically small cabins to hunt in the woods. Besides, I also didn't want anyone of those sober lots interrupting us in the first place. Some mysterious man was for once in my dull lifetime making the holy soul in me shudder, why would I then want to reject

the ecstasy of it! If the mysterious man wanted my life, I didn't want anyone else's blood on his hands; just mine to flow like the oceanic rivers of majesty.

So I ran while the heart in me caught the thorns of the flowers. Its strings listened to the eerie music of the wood's green depths. It cut me; the shape-shifting mist which had covered the woods in a cemetery-like aroma of death. Did I bleed; it was not the month, but I did as the heart in me was for the first time beating the blood of life! I could feel the eyes in my orbits; the hair on my head flowing away from my body; sweat drying up in the wind of the chase; lungs breaking out; and my chest heaving in every direction to come out and be brazen. I kissed the logs that held my fall. The branches in the air which almost strangled me. The steep and low ground on which I rolled to a certain injury. Amidst the dewy grass of the heavens, angelic insects of the deep, and sinking mud of underworlds, I was a human running with a double chin, spare tire, flabby arms and flat feet. I was being chased to try, try and try those sluggish, stagnant and sleeping instincts, which had lain dead inside my will. Murdered inside my body. Forgotten from my memory! The more the calf muscles on my legs contracted, and the triceps swung about, I was a sight better than a horse galloping or a dragon blowing fire out of its nostrils. I didn't want the world of the cabins and the office lifts anywhere near. It was my day, after a long day of being a cursed mule of a cliff.

The man was chasing me. Who was it, I purposefully didn't look back to see. Afraid that he might vanish, I simply kept running while seeped in the heat of the moment. From all appearances the man didn't seem to bother about my speed; that I might outsprint him. In the hurried panic that I was, I could have overrun villages after villages. Still, the man didn't need to fret over it as he was not alone. He had a vicious pet with him which did his vicious bidding so well, that he didn't need to rush himself. Though I had not exactly seen him or his pet, but the vengeance of the chase was too distinct to be a lie. It was certain like the dead cat or like living encased in the box.

Keenly, the man had planned to go after me. I was running through the woods; right where he wanted me. His pet was obeying to the last letter his hush, attack and growl commands. How effortlessly his premeditated plan was manifesting itself. At my bidding. On my dead body. In the middle of a green death trap. Obviously I wanted it. Chased by the man or his pet; it was all the same, an ecstasy. Still, the philosophy of my mind kept pestering if I deserved it at all.

I had not harmed anyone, not even those who certainly deserved it. And there were many who deserved that I hit them in the eye. Hang up on them. Poison their food. Urinate in their tea. I wanted to do it all; but I didn't. Sane as I was and even moral and god-fearing, I was able to restrain myself, even fussily so. It was certain then, that I didn't deserve running through the woods no matter how much I wanted it. Besides, I was no victim either. Had never been. Without stepping on anyone's shoes, I had developed a wall that no one knew me enough to draw a graffiti on my car or pull at

my plaits. I was a nobody. Unseen. Unheard. Aloof. Then why all of sudden would someone go into so much trouble to rigorously plan my insufferable pain?

The very thought that I happened to be at the wrong place wrong time, perturbed me even more intensely. That was no reasonable cause to suffer running through the woods. Bad timing? Just that? No revenge? No victimization? Just because I was available? The man had set the trap for anyone who would pass; to puncture just anyone's tires. He didn't care to give it a good reason. Have we really lost sense, leaning and logic to commit horrendous crimes without a reason? I was just a useless passer-by caught in his net even when he was not hungry for a fish. I was not of any consequence! The essence of my life, useless. Its flesh, expendable just like that. I was intensely perturbed. More like violated as I ran through the woods while the man and his pet kept growling their way to have at me.

Had I done him harm in any previous birth for which he was chasing me? I was paying for something I didn't even know I deserved! How illogical was that? I was being chased for no reason! Mulling over it, it felt like an air bubble coursing through my veins; the irate pain of its rage. Hyperventilating, wheezing and sweating profusely, I could feel my heartbeat breaking its strings one at a time. Even before the man had caught me, I knew I would die while thinking. As pathetic as it already was, I didn't want to die while doing something that really mattered; for once in my dull lifetime. Years of sitting in the chair didn't kill me, but running for some minutes was going to; I was wrecked by despair and sorry agony.

So I climbed a tree. As my lower portion was heavy, it was a liability. Such a liability that before I had reached the top, the pet bit my bottom. It hurt as it made it difficult for me to perch safely on the tree top. I couldn't even sit anymore. So I sat on the edge of my bottom as it was wide and I could sit by its brim. Then I looked down. I had been running for too long that my feet had lost the flimsy sandals. They were bloody and smelly. I look down again. The leaves below me were dripping with my blood. A few drops only, as I didn't bleed much. Then I looked down again. I heard the pet growling. There was no man near him. We had run too far that the man wasn't able to catch up besides he also didn't want to. He had sent his hound to maim me before he could finish me.

I looked at the pet. It looked like an ordinary dog with violence-training. He was trained to hunt people like me it seemed. The way it snarled, this much was clear. Hunger didn't provoke him; it was his training. There were two who chased me in the beginning. At that moment there was only one. Seeing the dog alone, I didn't wish to sit on my hands. Besides, it was only a dog without his master. It was alone. It was vulnerable. It was just a dog. So I broke a branch which was easy to find and break. I stepped a little down and began to pierce the dog with it. I poked at it viciously. The thing was so trained that despite the vileness of my act, it stayed than retreating. Despite my attacking him, it continued to come at me. Like a dreary routine. As marvellous as his trained subservience was, it worked in my favour. I kept poking at it. With the



needles and pins on the branch. It was a sad sight to hurt him as it was not exactly his fault. The dog didn't even know it was being wrong. Pathetic. Wretched. It was just an animal arduously trained to be a sadist. Still, I kept poking while the dog kept crying its sequinned tears and squeamish whining. Finally, at long last it bled out its last gasp. When it was certain the dog was done for, I climbed down. From up-close it looked more like a rat; puny, bloody and disgusting like a rat of the sewers. Not even of the woods; but the sewers. As it lay dead, dog or a rat, I greedily waited for the man to show up. Still high with the adrenaline in my blood, I couldn't just drop the chase in a heartbeat. I waited while snorkelling to find him, and when that didn't help, I went deep. Curious, afraid and dejected, I cautiously traced the steps back to the road while ensuring to take the route where I could find him. In minute or so I found myself on the road again. In a minute.

Nothing followed me. No man. It was heartbreakingly strange; even apocalyptic. Who did the dog follow? Who was its master? I had heard him breathing down my neck. I had heard him. Killed his dog or a rat. There was no man?

The mere insinuation of it rattled my teeth to cut my tongue. Even the pruned nails on my fingers cut into my palms. Bleeding and in pain, I remained immobile by the car.

Its hood was open; the way I had left it. Though my mind drove me, I refused to look at the tires. I couldn't. Disturbed and most of all ashamed at finding no man anywhere near or far, my mind didn't feel right anymore. It couldn't hold its entrails in. So I puked. Nervously. I puked at the philosophy of the event. There had to be one as all of it was beyond my understanding.

There was no hunt? The chase? Running through the forest? The dog and its blood? The premeditated attempt at my life? Otherwise why would I run through the woods?

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**BIO-NOTE**

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Quleen Kaur Bijral is a writer, journalist, musician and an avid lawn tennis player. She also is a freelance columnist at *Daily Excelsior* and *The Greater Kashmir*. Recently she had her novel titled “The Witch Some Witch” published by Partridge India, a Penguin company. Academically, Quleen clinched First Position in her Masters, and lately was conferred Ph.D. degree for her research work on the works of Mahasweta Devi.

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