

THE FORTUNE-TELLER

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Rendered into English
from Urdu by
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As the bullock cart negotiated a curve, a vast graveyard greeted them. “Here,” said the old fortune-teller, “we have reached our destination.” And he started singing.

Reshman had been hearing that song ever since her childhood. Whenever her father shifted to another village, he always sang the same song on seeing a graveyard. She very well knew that he does not sing that song for those who are lying dead but started humming because of the proximity of habitation.

Why does every village have a graveyard on its outskirts? She just could not understand. She tried to give it a deep thought and yet failed to find the answer. And when the mind freezes the lips tend to open. And so it happened with her. “Why does every village start with a graveyard?” she asked her father.

“Oh, you kid,” he said, “you always ask strange questions. I’ve never given it a thought”.

“And how would you,” cut in her mother, “the crazy lines of the palms don’t allow you time for anything else.”

Her mother had always something bitter to say. Every word from her lips was full of poison. At times Reshman had the feeling that a snake had assumed the garb of a woman in the shape of her mother.

At times, she disliked her father as well for making a fool of others through his palmistry. He would give the foreboding of wealth to one and the tiding of a happy marriage to the other. Yet, his own family had no share of either of these things – there was no happy augury for them. The lips which made others roll over with pleasant expectations was like a venomous sword for his own kin. Reshman felt it had slashed her all over. She so much wanted to understand the attitudes of her parents. Both appeared so disgusted with each other. Why don’t they separate and go their own ways? What is binding them together? She would often think, she would try to solve the riddle, but in vain. A timid girl, she reconciled to her fate, and allowed the time to keep slowly slipping out of her grasp.

Besides several things that she did not like about her parents there was one which she disliked the most. That was the frequent change of abodes, moving from one village to another. Her father was a happy at entering a new village as he was at leaving the previous one. Oh, how long would all this continue? She was completely disgusted.

During her childhood, whenever she sat in a bullock cart its jolts gave her the feel of a cradle. But then, when the jolts started to crack her limbs, she always recalled a story heard a long, long, time earlier. It went like this:

“There was an extremely poor man. However hard he worked, he only got two pice for his labour. Ultimately he went to Prophet Moses and asked, “Why am I not paid according to the labour I put in? The Prophet posed the same question to God. Back came the reply. Only that much has been destined for him. When the reply was conveyed to him, the poor man decided to go to some place which was not under the control of God. Taking his wife along, he moved from place to place asking, “Whose land is this?” At every place came the reply, “This is God’s”. After protracted ramblings he reached a place and asked the same question, “Whose land is this?” Back came the reply, “This is of such and such a king.” The man immediately settled down there. Soon he was not only blessed with a son but became very well off. He was extremely happy. After quite some time, Prophet Moses happened to come that way. Tell your God that I have come out of his territory and am now very happy, said the man to Moses. When the Prophet told him that even that land belonged to God and what he was now earning was not destined for him but for his son, he was completely baffled....”

It came to Reshman’s mind that it was probably to earn a livelihood that her father had to move from one village to another and that he could also be looking for a place where God did not exist. But then, the poor man of the story got something which was destined for his son but her father had received no share from the destiny of his daughter – why?

Finding her glum, her father asked as to what was bothering her. “Father,” she said, “why do you harness the bullocks every second day and set out on a journey? When would all these ramblings end? How long, after all, will we be pushed around like this?”

The moment she uttered these words her mother looked towards her father like a cobra ready to attack. Simultaneously, the father turned towards her with fire in his eyes. The scenario was not very unfamiliar for Rehman. She always got upset in such situations but also played her part to bring about a “ceasefire” she quickly said, “pray that this village brings us good luck.”

And that was probably the moment of acceptance, for Rehman’s prayer was accepted forthwith. The place not only proved agreeable for them but in a short while her father gained immense popularity and his work flourished. Very soon they shifted from a thatched hut to a solid house of their own. The palmist had a special room constructed for the convenience of his visiting clients as also to impress them.

There was a crowd of young men at his house everyday, one requesting him to foretell when he would get married and the other when would he succeed in securing the hand of his beloved. Overhearing their questions, Reshman would shake all over She was fully conscious of her youth and beauty.

But if there was one person totally unaware of her blooming youth, it was the old fortune-teller. One day her mother burst out. “How long will you keep predicting good matches for other people’s daughter,” she said, “have you ever thought of your own daughter?” That was the first time the old man lowered his head. “God will arrange something for her as well,” he said meekly. “I hear there’s a proposal from the Chaudhry of the neighbouring village for the daughter of our Chaudhry?” said the old-lady. “So what’s there to be surprised about,” said the old man, “Proposal from the Chaudhry will naturally come to another Chaudhry. It won’t come to us, would it?”. The old lady swallowed this bitter pill as well. “Yes, you are right,” she said

falteringly, “don’t know whether a proposal from some prince or a nobleman or a Chaudhry would ever come for our daughter or not”. “Don’t you worry,” said the fortuneteller, “all would be well.” “But why don’t you make a horoscope of your daughter,” said the wife, “why don’t you check her stars?” “Yes, I’ll do that tomorrow on return from the Chaudhry’s he said. “wake me up early in the morning.”

The next morning old man woke up on his own sniffing the smell of pure ghee parathas. It was the second time after his marriage that his wife was preparing them with the utmost affection. After breakfast, he picked up his slate, his astronomical tables and all other relevant papers, stuffed them into his bag and left the house in his bullock cart.

Returning home in the evening, he was humming the song which he always sang when he was happy. The Chaudhry had not only given him bags of sugar and wheat but also a lot of cash. As the bullock cart drew up at the door and his wife heard him sing, she was positive that he had made some very happy prediction for the Chaudhry’s daughter. But, she thought, what would he foretell about his own daughter who had crossed the barriers of all predictions and eloped with the Chaudhry of a neighbouring village!