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The Puppeteer^{*}

THE PUPPETEER STARTED TO REMOVE the white cotton bedsheet from the wooden frame. This was his makeshift screen. He hid behind it during the show dangling his puppets, decked out in colorful costumes, against a white background, which was not so white anymore. The horizon was a splash of darkening twilight colors and a tired sun was replacing its white shawl with a black coat. Most of the spectators were gone—though some kids still hung on to watch him collect his belongings, as if this too was a part of the story. The beach was littered with broken seashells, empty juice containers and cellophane bags. It was separated from the road by a three-foot-high wall that ran along the beach as far as the eye could see. For the past twenty years he had used this wall to enact his puppet stories every day from three in the afternoon until sunset. On weekends, though, it was nine in the morning till sunset. His bicycle, his screen and an old worn-out suitcase on the bike's back carrier had merged with the sand, the water and the wall as an essential part of the scenery.

The puppeteer folded the white sheet and placed it in the suitcase. He wound the strings on a reel which he had found on the beach, left by some kite flyer. This prevented the chords from getting tangled. After stowing away the reel, he started with the puppets. Yellow Queen was his favorite. He'd made her hair from black silk thread, he combed it with his fingers.

"Get some rest, you must be tired from dancing all day," he would talk to his puppets as he arranged them in the suitcase. After the Yellow Queen, he carefully laid Beloved, Darling Heart, Moonlight, and Granny in their respective places in the suitcase, but none got the same attention, care and love as Yellow Queen. She really was a breathtaking spectacle in her red velvet blouse and yellow skirt with exquisite sequin work.

He would hide behind the white screen and the puppets would dance

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to the movements of his fingers as if in a trance. His right index finger would animate the puppet, the thumb sway her head, while the middle finger moved her hips and lower part. His commentary would run in a funny mixture of poetry and prose:

“Our kingdom is here, and God is near,” he would intone, controlling the crowd of spectators in the same breath: “Step back kids, one step each, one step at a time.”

“Yellow Queen is the Rani, the rest are all her slaves.”

The show was repeated by the hour. It lasted forty minutes. By evening his fingers would become tired and the tips stopped obeying his commands. If he forced the issue he made mistakes. Simple mistakes, such as a puppet tumbling off tired fingers. But he immediately and deftly wove the fall into the story as one of its parts. Days without any mistakes made him happy. He would caress the puppets, handle them with such love and care you would think they were made of china, not rags. Today was such a day. He had performed seamlessly. When the audience broke out in applause, he felt like a proud owner.

Gathering his stuff he hopped on his bicycle and pedaled off to his hut. Two miles from the beach was the fishermen’s slum—small, crowded and squalid. After a lot of pleading he was able to obtain a hut made of mud, barely measuring twelve feet by sixteen and covered with pine boughs. He parked his bicycle in a corner and squatted on the floor. He unfolded his dinner from the handkerchief and grabbed some bread leftover from the previous day. Then he thought of something and took the Yellow Queen out of the carrying case and sat her down beside him.

“You really danced well today. What a performance! I’ll make a string of seashells for you, you’ll look even prettier,” he kept talking to her as he ate.

“No, no, I’m not going to seat Darling Heart, Beloved or Moonlight here. Don’t suggest it. They had their time, they don’t have what you have,” the puppeteer finished the non-existing argument.

He left the hut after dinner to spend an hour or so with the fishermen. If someone was able to get a bottle of country liquor, that night continued well into the wee hours of the morning. Between puffs of hookah smoke and swigs of liquor, they would settle all the social issues and take care of each other. They discussed the money extracted by the police and hoodlums. Often the discussion about these two groups was so similar it was difficult to decide which group of abusers was being talked about. They told jokes about the beach visitors. These were merry meetings, enlivened further by the puppeteer’s exuberant contributions. He returned to his hut after ten, spread a thick, coarse sheet on the char-

poy and went to sleep. After tossing and turning for a half hour, when he could not sleep, he brought the Yellow Queen out to lie down with him.

The next day was no different, but the wind was stronger than usual. He had difficulty putting the sheet on the frame. And his story wasn't moving along smoothly either. The puppets were missing his cues and making mistakes. Once when Beloved was supposed to bow to the Queen, her leg went up instead of her arm. Some in the audience laughed. The puppeteer's face turned red, but the audience couldn't see it hidden behind the screen. The whole day went like this. During every hourly performance the story somehow got derailed from the main line, and the afternoon was an absolute calamity. The wind blew the blouse off Yellow Queen, which brought such excited screams from the crowd that you couldn't hear a thing. Some were laughing, others whistling, everyone was clapping. The puppeteer had to come in front of the screen to put her blouse back on. At last the day ended. He collected his things, stuffed the puppets in his suitcase and sped away on his bicycle. He felt the audience laughter following him, he started to pedal like a crazy person, trying to leave the laughter and whistles behind. He couldn't even park the bicycle today; it just fell on the floor of his hut. He didn't bother to pick it up. He opened the suitcase and started throwing the puppets one by one until he found Yellow Queen.

"You did it deliberately to make people laugh at me. I try to lift your arm, but what comes up is your leg. If it were someone other than you she would have died of shame without her blouse. But not you, shameless slut, there's not a shred of embarrassment on your face."

The puppeteer pulled her arm with such force that the stitches gave way and it was torn from her body. For a moment he was startled. Then he kicked her with such madness that Yellow Queen flew across the hut. He didn't have dinner that night and went to bed early, feeling angry and frustrated. There was no question of going out. Abdul called him a few times from outside, but he feigned sleep.

By morning he was a little calmer. He devoted most of his attention to Moonlight today. He combed her hair and scrutinized her closely. When satisfied, he kissed her cheek and put her in the suitcase. Yellow Queen was still on the floor, in the same place she was left last night. He totally ignored her and pedaled off to the beach. Today turned out to be a good day for him. For one thing, every day brought a new group of spectators, so no one knew or remembered what had happened yesterday. Then again, all the different acts of the show went flawlessly. The puppeteer felt elated. At sunset he collected his belongings, pocketed

all the money, folded the white sheet and laid Moonlight in the case with much love and care.

“This Yellow Queen, she had become very proud and haughty. Somehow she got it into her head that no show would succeed without her. Little did she know about your talents? You were just amazing today, simply wonderful.”

The puppeteer was very happy with Moonlight. He kept talking to her all the way, teased and cajoled her. He parked his bicycle properly in a corner. He had already bought some onion, curry and bread on the way home. He put them on a plate and started eating with Moonlight by his side. After he was done eating he got up to wash the plate. Just then his eyes fell on Yellow Queen. He picked her up, dusted her, found her arm and tried to stitch it back to her shoulder. Before he could do that, her leg also fell off her body. He felt a little sad. He examined her closely, this way and that, tried as well as he could to sew back the arm and leg but, apparently, he had gone too far in his anger yesterday. He couldn't put his favorite back together. It was too late. In desperation he went out of the hut holding the shattered queen and her severed parts. It was a very small hamlet of about twenty huts in all. An old chestnut tree stood in one corner. He dug a small hole under the tree, laid Yellow Queen's arm, leg and the rest of her body in it and filled it with earth. Then he dragged himself back to his hut listlessly, feeling so out of sorts that he didn't roll out his bed. He held Moonlight tightly against his chest, afraid that she might take off, and crumbled onto his bed, sobbing, not knowing why. □

—*Translated by the author*