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B A H R A M Z A I M I

3

SHORT

STORIES

Bahram Zaimi

3 short stories

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Аннотация

This book comprises three short stories. However, all are fiction but related to some facts in their areas. In “SHAWNEE,” the soil preserving the blood of its warriors cries out for vengeance. “THE BUG SHOW” is about a court case of how everyone tries to benefit from it. “PANDA” is alienation when one tries to find the time and place to which he belongs.

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Bahram Zaimi

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Shawnee

'Danny, you can't understand. Enjoy the sofa alone and watch your TV. That was what she told me before leaving me', Daniel Boon was remembering while watching TV on a mute mode. 'TV characters in mute mode, seem like a bunch of stupid. They say something soundless like fish, they respond excited, sometimes thoughtful as though they can think. For seconds, the clowns are entertaining, then boring the whole day. We know whatever they do had been written beforehand in a plot, just mimics; but what else we have to forget the monotonous loop of life. I turn the volume up to hear their words, the stupidity is intolerable. What have I missed? It is not Eve; she makes questions, asks and wants. And this new notion in her mind, the day and night repetition, the Prairie, what is that?'

He put the TV on a pause; the stupid mute characters on the TV looked stupider. He stared at them for a moment then as if, remembered something; not due to the standstill figures on TV, but the silence of the two-day pause in his routine. The tranquillity in the air, an open window, the rustling of green, orange, and yellow of a lonely tree outside, in this last month of autumn. Something has been missing for a long time; he had always sensed it, never paid attention.

He jumped on his feet and ran to the basement door, opened it. The tired sunset hardly reached its rays to first few steps of a stair going down, the rest out of reach, hidden. No lamp for the stairs, and not any down there. He stands for a moment, *'She had been afraid to climb down, the wobbling wooden stairs, no handrail at sides to hold, slender treads even for her small feet, high rises, going down shaky into the darkness. It was my hideout until she overcame the fear and added the basement to her territory of inference. TV is now my last resort.'* He went down the stairs waited for his eyes to accustom to the darkness. A shadow at the end wall, a chest drawer, he approached. He stood before it, the bottom drawer, opened it, a dim shine came out, a big metal box. He took it out; though heavy, the well-built man carried it with one hand up the stairs.

He placed the box on the sofa with care and sat by it. There was dust on the lid; he rubbed it, the light particles danced around his nose in the lazy sun of the cold evening. He exhaled, couldn't them get all. A feather was neatly glued in the middle of the lid, a souvenir. A real feather, which had fallen off a golden eagle, in a harsh struggle to catch and lift up a mountain goat. He had been witnessing the scene, once the eagle locked its sharp claws into the flesh; there was no way for the young goat to get loose. He found the brown feather and kept it as a sign from ancient gods. He turned the combination lock, pulled the shackle, took out the lock, pulled up the latch, and rolled up the lid open.

An array of beauties: gold, silver, ivory, woods of Damascus, birch, and Scandinavian handles with blades of steel and titanium. Tens of knives and daggers in variation, each expert for a job. He put the box on his laps, picked up one by one with the admiration of a memory of each; decorated the sofa with them at his sides. Then put the empty box at his foot. The silent companions gave him a few moments of glee; the standstill stupid characters on TV looked funny again. Yet, the good old dust could not fill his void; the guests could not keep his faint smile.

He went back to the basement right to the chest of drawers, closed the bottom drawer, crouched on the floor, and stretched his hand on the dusty floor into the narrow space under the chest. His arm stretched in full under the gap, his fingers started a search for a precious touch. Not smooth, not soft, they fumbled in wander until sensed. The hand came out in full. He sat on the floor stretched out his legs, look at the wrapped gift on his laps. An old sackcloth woven with coarse strings, brown, random reddish stains on it. A wooden piece was stuck out the rag. He smiled, stood up, took it upstairs; put the rag on the sofa; placed all the knives back into the box; unwrapped the rag.

A Kentucky knife, a wooden handle made out of a sacred tree, a sharp but coarse iron blade that had seen inside bellies in many battles; on which dried bloodstains mingled with rust.

He tried to rub clean the blade with the rag as much as he could. He raised the knife to see the polish in the blade, the sun before going down, sent its blessing upon it to shine. He placed the knife at his side on the sofa; turned off the TV, leaned back, rest the nape of his neck on the sofa's top. He stared at the ceiling; let the chill of a breeze, the favour of the old tree outside, stray under his thin shirt. The open window had something else. The wind of autumn from an ancient graveyard, circled around the branches of the tree. Rustling leaves whispered the spell of life to the old warrior of Kentucky.

“Long time no see, Jonny”

“I had forgotten my real name. Hello Shawnee, my old friend, my warrior knife,” Danny replied.

“It’s a long time, isn’t it, Jonny?”

“Yes, Shawnee, a long time.”

“What happened? I thought you’ve forgotten me, Jonny.”

“I don’t know.”

“We had a good time together, Jonny, didn’t we?”

“Yes, Shawnee, we had.”

“It was like yesterday, in that old forest of Kentucky that we met each other, in the restricted area where campers had never seen for hundreds of years.”

“Yes, Shawnee, I remember.”

“The old sassafras tree, tilted, not by wind but for a reason many years ago.”

“Yes, Shawnee, I remember.”

“I was there for hundreds of years, in pride.”

“Yes, Shawnee, I remember.”

“You saw how I stuck the bastard to the tree, kept him there until the rotten flesh fell off the bones. How delightful was when my grinds were sawing his bones alive. His skeleton laid down on of the slanted trunk, motionless, arms suspended at his sides, waving bones squeaking in the wind of autumn, concurred with the rustling of the leaves of the holy tree.”

“Yes, Shawnee, I remember.”

“Do you remember when you saw me, first afraid, then came close. I saw you, a teenager with a slim body but eyes of a warrior. You came close, touched my wooden handle, trembling. I gave you the warmth; you grabbed my handle tight, took me out the wood and bones; the skeleton fell down on the soil shattered. You were staring at me while the cold rain of autumn started washing my blade; amazed by the shines of green, orange and yellow of ample leaves on me. I was looking at you, a great master, later a true friend. Do you remember, Jonny?”

“Yes, Shawnee, I remember.”

“Jonny was the name I found right for you when I heard you were singing the Bitter Tears in the autumn rain.”

“Yes, Shawnee, I remember.”

“You were living in Lexington; you were on a camping trip with your classmates of Lafayette high school. You were in ninth grade, starting your first year there. We went together to your high school the next week, a big green yard, a huge building,

and beautiful female classmates. Though you could enjoy none, a fourteen-years-old weakling bullied almost every weekday. Do you remember your big classmate? The fat boy in the school. You hated him. What was his name?”

“Billy”

“Yes, that was his name, Billy. One sunny day, he was leaning to the lone tree in front of the school building. We wondered why he had not left the school; the last class had been ended an hour before. We had a habit to sit at the corner of the front stairs, watch the greens, and talk to each other. You got curious and suggested going and seeing him. I liked the idea and told you, ‘Why not, let’s go’. We reached him; the yellow grass was still wet of the last night rain, the smell of damp clay. The idiot had forgotten to leave the school; he was leaning to the tree, taking a nap after stuffing his worthless belly with filthy food. A dirty fold of a big hamburger on his pants, pieces of crumbs mixed with red ketchup around his lips had made his ugly face uglier. The pig had coined a name in the high for his bullies. Your face got red, you pressed your lips together, and one move, a flash of silver light swayed in the air; the idiot’s left ear dropped by the tree. Your palm and fingers were squeezing me on the wooden handle; a tiny drop of blood on my tip was about to fall. The fat garbage jumped on his feet, his stupid eyes had been widened, colour of horseshit; his open mouth, the pieces of meat and lettuce in the gaps of his yellow teeth. Your calm look on

him, right at his brown pupils, ‘Sorry, I guess you’ve dropped something.’ How did you come up with the sentence, it was so funny.”

“I don’t know, Shawnee, it just came to my mind,” Danny said while smiling and the smile turned to laugh. They both laughed.

“The idiot jerked his left hand pressed it on the wound; I guess the stupid knew the pain was from a missing thing. He crouched down, snatched the ear off the ground, and ran away; his big ass was wobbling; a girl could run better. He had never again bothered you neither anybody else. It was from that time when every student in the Lafayette high knew who was the boss. The skinny boy became a strong twelfth-grade, the students in the corridor silenced when saw us entering with frowns, they gave way, no sound but the murmurs of the girls from behind.”

“Yes, Shawnee, I remember.”

“Soon fell a nightmare on the calm city of Lexington, us. Dark alleys were terrifying, our domain was extending. Quick and sharp, no reason needs a warrior in the occupied land. Soft bellies, deep cuts, broken ribs out the skin; the thrust of the long blade from one side shine of the tip from another side; the smell of blood in the air, red trails on the streets, the lord was in the city.”

Danny’s lips were quivering, he was feeling the warm blood running through his veins, “Yes, Shawnee, we had blood in us.”

“But then something happened. The new arrivals as they nowadays name them: Colourful, red and yellow, a variety of ivory, expensive woods and many other types, blades of steel and titanium. You know Jonny, I admire the progress, they were really much better than I in every aspect: easy to handle, lightweight, good balance and much sharper. I was dumped aside, forgotten, I am not complaining, Jonny, I understand.”

“And my bad days have begun. I have got lost, Shawnee,”
Sadness in his voice.

“That’s the way it happens every time, dear friend.”

“So what is that?”

“Somewhere between the line; the man looks back and says if it is the same path, how I am lost in my way? There is nothing wrong with the path; the line comes from his past, stretches out to future. He sits on the shoulder of the road, perplexed. He has forgotten why chose the road. Then there is no road, but an illusion.”

“Yes, Shawnee, no passion” He leaned forward, place his hands on his forehead and murmured, “I forgot my real name was Jonny, the man who used to sing Bitter Tears. Now I am nothing but Danny.”

“What are you saying? Your real name is Jonny.”

“When I was six, I asked my father why you named me Daniel. He said, ‘because it is the name that I hate. I named you Daniel before you were born when I found out your mother was

pregnant to hate you more.’ We were living in a small town close to Bonnesborough.”

“Who was your father?”

“Somebody who hated his surname, Boone, whenever looked into a mirror. On night very late, he woke me up in my room; two glares of blue upon me. ‘Get up, it is the time.’ He sat on my bed, he was wearing only underwear, red stains of blood; in his hand, his favourite, a large sharp knife, blood was dripping on my white sheet. ‘I have cut your mother’s head off, now it is your turn’, he said. He took my hand; I was in my birthday gift pyjamas. I always loved when he held my small hand, when mine disappeared in his warmth. Head down, looking at his bare feet, I followed every step of his toward the bathroom. He opened the door, turned on the lamp; the light bounced the big mirror, shined the white tiles on the walls. I was obedient as long as he held me warm. He freed my hand to place his at the nape of my neck. I was a little taller than the white china sink, the flange of the drain was brass, and the black stopper wasn’t there. He pushed my neck against the edge, my head bent in; I liked the smell of the china when it was clean. He pushed, my neck sat on the edge of the sink, it was cold. A moment passed, he took his hand off my head, a narrow stream of red was going to reach the brass. I raised my head; he was staring into the mirror, a cut on his neck. A bitter smile, and then the knife went deeper, slowly and very slowly. He smiled at the suffering of the

man in the mirror. The red streams were joining on the brass, dripping sounds was whirling out the drain. He lowered his hand in suspension, the smeary knife touched his hip, the fresh blood stained his underwear. The smell of blood in my mouth, my wish, to hold his hand, as long as warm. The red found a new way to flow; his neck was supplying it all the way down his fingers. They dropped some on the floor white tiles, some on my birthday pyjamas. My feet on the tiles weren't cold anymore. The crystals overflowed my eyes, taste of brine at sides of my lips; the man's suffering was not ended. The knife dropped, I took his hand, still warm. He died standing, with his cold stare into the mirror. The blue glares died down."

Danny stopped, gave time until the vibration in his voice died down. The old tree hushed its quivering leaves to listen. Shawnee in grave silence. Danny leaned back, his eyes followed the cracks on the ceiling, continued, "His hand cold, I left it free in idle suspension, went out of the bathroom, heading my parent's bedroom at the end of the corridor. I pushed open the crack of the door. The light was still on. I stood at the bed by the footboard, her bare feet in front of me, blood of the neck on the pink pillow. She was lying on her back, not familiar was she to me, when rest headless. I turned on my heel, looking for the face. Found it on the toilet table. Her pale face in reflection of the mirror; the blonde hair at the back of the lonely head. The eyes were watching the head in wonder, what was the reason for the

murder.”

“Keme”

“What is that?” Danny looked at Shawnee.

“I named your father, Brave.”

“Why?”

“The soft soil.”

“Soft soil?”

“They say soft soil is thirsty. It sends a message, reminding the massacre is unfinished. Reminding the diseases to pure soil, smallpox, and syphilis. The soft soil keeps the footprints of the warriors, fills them with hatred and vengeance.”

“I betrayed you, Shawnee. The punishment was that Jonny reduced to Danny.”

“Nobody calls you Danny.”

“She says.”

“She calls you, Danny? I thought you’ve hated the name.”

“Still I hate it; I let her say so I hate more. You know I have left Lexington, the city of my school days, and moved to Lafayette. She moved too, the girl from my high school time. Apparently, I had done something, which seemed to her heroic. You know girls; they see something and when alone in bed make dreams out of it.”

“You see Jonny, now that you brought the subject; well...,” Shawnee did not continue.

“Yes? Shawnee,” Danny wiggled on the sofa straightened his back. “What do you want to tell me? I trust you and your opinion matters to me; you know it.”

“Jonny, I am not a man to interfere with people’s personal life. I know my boundaries and respect privacy, but it was that you were in the basement and I was there. She came down; I could recognize her from the way she came down, shaky, unstable, two feet on a tread once at a time. Then some argument, loud, I did not expect. The words were pouring out her mouth so easily.”

“You are right, Shawnee. She has been kind of out of control recently. It is that dream of hers.”

“Prairie; and what was that. She was repeating the word on and on.”

“I don’t know. It was like that she woke up one morning with a dream, ‘Prairie’, but forgot the picture. From that time on, I hear a repetition of the word. She believes there should be something in the dream that her mind is such hooked on it. I told her two days ago that I was fed up with her absurd illusions.”

There was a moment of silence between two friends, and then Shawnee said, “Jonny, those years that I have been wrapped in a piece of old rag, rusting and getting blunt, gave me time to think. I don’t feel belong to this world anymore. Meaningless words are replacing men’s passion. Walls of bricks and concrete are blocking the sun. Stupid cars go wherever the roads show them. Alas, the sound of gallops in the grassland, ravages

of angry men.”

“What do you want to say? Shawnee.”

“My time has been passed, Jonny. I want to go back. Can you do it, Jonny?”

Danny thought; he had a thousand words to say but none of them with a tone of passion. He said, “I understand, Shawnee.”

“Give me back my tree, Jonny.”

“I’ll do.”

“And a favor.”

“I’ll do, my friend.”

“Then, let’s go there three of us, for the final farewell.”

“She has been back to her father’s, in her place of birth, Lexington, close to the forest.” He dialled Eve’s.

“Hi, Eve.”

“Is this you? Danny. I knew you will call.” A shaky feminine voice on the other side of the phone, mixed with tears. “I knew it, I knew it, Danny, we are meant for one another. I saw it again, the dream, tonight. I wonder why the images don’t stay in my mind. Maybe, I shouldn’t name it, by the time I name it, all were washed away. Don’t make fun of me, trust me the Prairie is true.” The tears reached her lips; a rill of salt was dripping on her phone. “I want to come back, Danny.”

“I come to you, want to show you something.”

“Really Danny, so it’s true, you couldn’t stand it without me, could you? Oh, Danny.”

“It would take about four hours or so, I’ll be there in the

morning.”

“It is hours past midnight, are you sure? You might get sleepy.”

He hung up. He stood on his feet, looked at the Shawnee for a few seconds then went up the stairs. Still had his favorite clothing as a young, it was wrapped in a white quilt with a green and blue eight-sided star, in the middle of the star, a black and white eagle. Natural handmade leather pants with an orange ribbon around the waist, patterns of brown bears all around. A lightweight leather poncho and deer-leathered moccasin boots. He took off his t-shirt and jeans; put them on. Still, there was something left in the unwrapped quilt, a leather casing with two bands at top and bottom. It was dusty; he didn't wipe the sacred soil; one band around the orange ribbon, the other around his left thigh. He watched himself into the mirror, a warrior all in brown. He went down the stairs, at the sofa, bent and took long Kentucky knife with his two hands. “The shine will come back, I promise you, my friend,” he said to the silent friend. “Don't worry, I remember so many times of plunges in flesh.”

Danny took the car key and went out the door. The old black truck was there across the street. He sat in, the old Ford started revving. Soon the car left the small Lafayette, the highway was vacant. He rolled down the window, Shawnee was quiet, cold breeze of fall was caressing his face. The warmth of the old knife on his thigh, the retrospect of battles from hundreds of years ago,

as if he was there. *‘Perhaps that is the reason why father did not kill me; he heard the message of soft soil.’*

It was early in the morning when he stopped the car in front of Eve’s father house. She was out before honking the horn, smile on her face. She was wearing a simple white color chemise made from thin, flowing material, elbow-length sleeves, V-necked at the top and a purple cashmere shawl as a headdress to covering down the faint lines of her small breasts, with the help of long golden hair. The purple skirt was down to her ankles to show her new white shoes. The dress was in complete harmony with her; elegant body in a delicate dress, a soul as such in her. “Hi, Danny I am so happy, you came...,” Danny interrupted before she could finish, afraid if caught up with the endless narration of her dream.

“Jump in; I want to show you my childhood hideout.”

In the car her face at him, he drove more than an hour until they reached his town of childhood. “We must walk into the forest from here,” he said ignoring her questioning face. As her dress showed, she wasn’t ready for the expedition. She followed him with no complaint; silently. Every now and then the long dress entangled with shrubs. Thorns of bushes stuck to her long dress, taking her back, afraid of her path. One snatched her favorite shawl, a memento. He was fast in the move, she could hardly catch up with him. Her new shoes were ruined, brown

sticky clay made it heavy. Her thin skin, an easy meal for forest mosquitoes, a mouthful bite for black flies. One hour passed, the only beauty left on her was the golden hair.

“This is a restricted area in the forest,” She warned the man in fast pace, pointing to a sign. The next hour was tiresome, her body structure wasn’t meant for such a hike; no path on the ground and the bushes were getting denser and nastier. Danny stopped below a thorn tree, raised the branch for her to pass. In contrast to the whole route covered with plants, a large vacant area appeared. An old huge sassafras tree was slanting in the middle of the area. Sun could not see the ground, no plant dared to grow around. Years have passed yet standing in pride high; bones on the ground, a healed cut on the trunk.

“We reached,” pointing to the tree, he said. She got relieved that the ordeal had ended. He stepped forward toward the tree, she followed her. Shawnee was silent. He guided her to lean her back on the slope of the trunk. She wiggled her back to find a smooth texture on the rugged wood, rested, waiting. Looking at Danny’s mouth what would say, wetted her lips; her eyes dark blue in the dull light. He put his right foot sideways on the pair of her shoes shifting his weight on them. Her muddy shoes were pressed down into the soft clay. She felt pain but her interpretation was passion. He placed his left leg against the side of the tree trunk and pressed; her torso caught locked between

his heavy built chest and the trunk. She clung to his belt trying vainly to push him back; not enough air could she breathe. He put his left hand on her lips, pressed them hard; her nostrils could get air mixed with the smell of his hand.

Danny drew out the knife with his right hand, placed the tip on soft belly of hers. One push, the blade pierced into the softness. The pain came as a would-be loud scream but the vocal cord agony had no way out. No sound but the muffled shower of blood in her body. “My rust is washing out, the warmth remembers me the past. My old friend, give me another push,” Shawnee broke the silence. Resisting the caresses of flavoured air escaped from her lungs; he turned his face to inhale the dust of the leaves.

“One more push, Jonny, let my grinds feel the bones.”

Danny, took back his body off her, then there was a sudden hurl of his weight forward; the acceleration went into his hand, the pressure on the handle, pushed the knife in strong. Extreme pain, translation of forbidden scream into red streams of pity out her nostrils. The grinds sawed the vertebra passed through the spinal cord; a shower of the crystal fluid bathed the blade. The fluid emptied the pain out; darkness came before her eyes; no sense left, freedom from the cruel world.

“The liquid of her spine is washing the blood off my blade, brings my shine back. Jonny, my tip has touched the bark, the wood reminds me my past. Another push, give me your last

strike, send me into the wood, let my blade feels the sap, my tip the heartwood.”

Danny took out the knife out her belly; drew back his body, pressed his left thigh to the side of the trunk, tightened his grip around the handle as if the claws of an eagle on flesh; a sudden thrust on the knife into the opening of the wound. The long knife passed all that had cut before to reach bark, sap and rest in the heartwood. The blade calmed in the river of life inside the tree.

“I had forgotten the taste of the holy water inside, it brings me the message of the soil to my soul; reminiscence of a long time ago battles. Farewell Jonny, my true friend.” Shawnee silenced then.

Danny took his foot off hers and stood in front of Eve, took his hand off her mouth, her lips were bruised brown. He looked into her blue eyes; they were glassy. The sun changed its position to find a passage to reach her through the ample of leaves. Some lucky rays found their way through the green and orange; sat on her gold hair to get colour. Glittered the eyes with the gold of hair, reached the gold of soul down there. The heavenly shine opened the gate of dreamland where you can see your soul, if pure, if innocent.

An opening formed in dark clouds, a scenery lit up before her view. *‘What is this, am I dreaming again?’* In a cottage far

away, watching through window, out there grassland, pungent of forgotten dreams. *'Something is moving in the tall grass; he is a boy running, hair of black. Oh, he is my son, Danny the junior; I named him after his father. He is twelve-years-old now, so strong, he takes after his father. And, there he is another one, my second son, Jonny. How painful I delivered him, but all the pain was worth it. Nine-years-old now, runs as fast as his brother. They are playing with their father in the grass. The oval ball goes so high in the air, Jonny gets that and runs. There is some movement in the field, something like golden hair. Oh, she is Lisa my four-year-old daughter. She can hardly see his brothers through the grass. Whoever has the ball, she runs after him. My beauty thinks she is part of the play. She falls down, tries to stand up as fast as possible, lest his brothers see her fallen. She runs this side after Jonny; Junior gets the ball, she runs that side. Poor girl has taken the game so seriously.'* The aroma of apples, smothered in butter, cream, and cinnamon, with a background of fresh baked crust. She turns to the oven, *'The apple pie is ready,'* She takes the big pie out, remembering his second son advice, *'Mummy I want the crust hard but not too hard and I want the apples inside soft but not too soft, above them all, I want it fresh and hot. As always is Lisa's job, she seconds his brothers, she repeats, mostly the last part.'*

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