

The Dark Dawn

A Short Story

***Habib Mohana**

The bountiful monsoon season was drawing to a close, and the village farmers were busy preparing their land for the winter crops. Whistling to himself, tall clove-coloured Soobha was cutting the wild grass from his land when all of a sudden a cobra bit him on the forearm. He lifted the sickle and brought it down on the snake but it slithered away into the high waving grass. Soobha shouted to a shepherd who was passing by on his donkey. The shepherd took a close look at the two deep puncture wounds and tightly tied a jute string around Soobha's forearm to limit the flow of blood and to slow the traffic of the poison to the other parts of the body.

The shepherd helped Soobha onto his donkey. They had just started out towards their village when a farmer asked the shepherd not to take Soobha there.

'In the village, a pregnant woman's voice can have a harmful effect on a person who has been bitten by a snake,' he said. 'I'll sit with Soobha under this acacia. You go and tell his family what has happened.'

So the shepherd straddled the donkey and sped towards the village, about twenty minutes away.

Soobha, his elder brother Shadu, and their children lived in a sprawling adobe house in the middle of the village of Mastan. No sooner had the bad news reached Soobha's house than his wife, sister-in-law, daughter, and nieces burst into tears. The men and women of the village crowded into their house to commiserate and give advice.

Shadu asked the mullah to gather his students in the mosque to recite the Koran and pray to God for Soobha's recovery. The village chief sent his son to Daraban Kalan on horseback to bring the hakim.

'Offering an animal sacrifice wards off evil,' Soobha's wife said to her son, Dani. Being staunch believers, Dani and some neighbours slaughtered the ox that was chomping on sorghum stalks in the corner of the house.

Carrying charpoys, pillows, lanterns, and pitchers of water, a procession of over twenty men strode towards the place where the patient rested. They placed the charpoys on a treeless plane spot and laid the patient down on one of them. It was late afternoon and the village cattle were returning from the pasturelands, leaving plumes of dust in their wake.

Redness and swelling had started to appear around the snake bite on Soobha's forearm. He was sweating profusely and had vomited several times.

The shepherd returned with a bowl of butter oil. To suck out the poison he took a draught of the oil, put his mouth on the snakebite on Soobha's forearm, and sucked and spat. He repeated this more than ten times, and then swilled his mouth out with water.

'Give him milk to drink. It will soak up the poison. Don't let him have any bread,' the shepherd advised.

The sun was setting when the village cobbler brought a brood of seven juvenile chickens in a cage made of tamarisk sticks. To suck the poison out of Soobha's arm, he put the backside of one of the chickens over the snakebite, held it there for some time, and then let it go free. One after another he used all the chickens this way. Clucking, they perched on the legs of the charpoys, and some climbed up a nearby dwarf bush.

After sunset, the village chief's son returned with the white-bearded hakim. The hakim opened a small silver box containing a zehar mohra—a snake's head that was believed to suck the poison out of the body. He took the item from the red ocher, dipped it into a bowl of milk, and placed it on the snakebite. After a minute he took it off and plopped it in the bowl of milk to release its load of poison. He repeated this process more than ten times.

'If he can survive three nights then he is out of danger,' the hakim said, then took Shadu to one side and whispered in his ear. 'Send for the drummer and tell him to beat his drum over the patient's head to stop him from sleeping, because sleep is a killer for anyone bitten by a snake. Also – I almost forgot – we'll also need the barber to make a cut.'

Shadu's elder son Ramza was sent to bring the drummer and barber. Ramza went to find them but they weren't at home.

The men sat on the charpoys around the patient, who was rolling around in pain, his face haggard and pale. Darkness fell and cloud of mosquitoes danced over the men's heads. Shadu's younger son brought dinner for the attendants and sweetened milk for the patient. The attendants spread a palm leaf mat on the ground and sat down to eat. Two chickens started clucking around the men, and Shadu slung them bread crumbs.

'Give me some bread.' Soobha requested.

'No. Bread is not good for you. It causes drowsiness. If you are hungry, drink milk,' the hakim replied.

'Give me just one morsel.'

'No.'

‘Give me just a bit of meat.’

‘We can’t. Sorry. It will kill you. Solid food brings drowsiness and drowsiness brings sleep and sleep means death for you.’

All they could give him was sweetened milk.

After night prayers the barber’s brakeless bicycle rolled up.

‘Sorry I’m late. I was in the village of Loni for circumcisions,’ he said, hands clasped.

‘We have an emergency you stupid fool,’ Shadu said, teeth bared.

The barber unstrapped the bag of his tools from the pannier of his bicycle. Like a veteran surgeon, he examined the snakebite in the light of the lanterns.

‘What a terrible thing,’ he said, and started honing his cutthroat razor on the small whetstone.

Four people pinioned the patient, and the barber cut the bite wound on the hakim’s instructions. Soobha bawled with pain. The hakim untied the jute string from around the patient’s forearm and squeezed the bitten arm hard. Black-brown blood started trickling down.

‘Let him sleep for a while, but not for long,’ the hakim said to Shadu.

He dragged a charpoy some yards away from the patient and lay down on it. To keep the patient awake, Dani, Shadu, and their neighbours took turns talking to him. If Soobha drifted off to sleep, Shadu and Dani would wake him up by pinching his arms or shoulders.

‘Please let me sleep,’ Soobha said in a weak, tearful voice. ‘My head is splitting with pain.’

‘Brother, please try to stay awake,’ Shadu said. ‘Too much sleep brings death to a person like you,’

To keep him awake, Shadu started telling a story and after a while asked, ‘Brother, are you awake? Are you listening?’

When he received no answer from his brother, he pinched him. Soobha woke up.

After midnight, pinching had no effect on Soobha, and he drifted off to sleep. Shadu brought acacia thorns and pricked his brother, but it was no use. So Shadu and Dani went into a huddle. Shadu brought out a little packet of paprika from his pocket, and with a small smooth stick applied it to the patient's eyes, which started burning.

'What is this?' Soobha cried. 'Paprika in my eyes? Don't treat me like an animal!'

'It's not paprika,' Shadu fibbed. 'It's bitter antimony. It cleans eyes and wards off sleep.'

They applied the paprika to his second eye.

Soobha cried out again. 'If you're bent on killing me, then do it in a gentle way. Don't kill me like I'm an animal.'

The night wore on. A prowling jackal closed in on the bush where the chickens were roosting. It pounced. The victim uttered a startled squawk, and the jackal scrambled away with its prize. The sudden noise pulled the hakim out of sleep. He gibbered and then drifted off again.

At long last, the call to morning prayer echoed from the village mosque. Soobha had fallen asleep. Shadu felt his brother's wrist and then lifted his hands towards the sky.

'Thank you, God. If the night has passed without an incident, please let all nights pass the same. Life is in your hands, O God. Give my brother another chance!'

In the morning, two villagers brought tea for the attendants. Shadu dipped one end of his turban sheet in water and swabbed his brother's face with it, then gave him a cup of tea. The attendants were taking morning tea when a pir with a white flowing beard arrived on a roan horse. All the villagers stood up and shook his hand. He had come from the village of Punjan Shah.

'I was in the mosque for night prayers when this sad news reached me,' the pir said, settling on the charpoy and holding the patient's hand in his soft white palm.

He recited holy verses from the Koran and blew over the dark bloody spot. He patted Soobha's back.

'You'll be alright, my son. The Master of the Blue Roof will help you. It's nothing!'

After a while he took his leave. Shadu scurried after him and thrust a one-rupee note into his delicate fingers. The pir mounted his horse and rode off, leaving a ribbon of fine dust behind him.

When he finished his tea, the hakim took a long look at the bite on Soobha's arm. Then, he peeled the man's eyelids back and examined his eyeballs.

'Have courage, Soobha!' he said. 'You have survived. You have crossed the hardest part of the journey.'

When the sun became hot, they moved the patient's charpoy into a shady toothbrush tree. Then, the men from the surrounding villages poured in to commiserate with Shadu and Dani.

In the late afternoon, the attendants returned the patient to his former spot.

'Take me home and let me die in peace there,' Soobha moaned. 'I can't see clearly. I'm sure I won't survive. Last night I saw my late father in dream, standing on a hilltop. He called to me. I know he was calling me to the other world.'

'We can't take you home. In the village, a pregnant woman's voice can have an adverse effect. We're keeping you here, for your own good.'

'Then if you can't take me home, bring my sister, my wife, my daughter Zaibu, and my nieces. I want to see them before I die.'

'Ok, we will bring them,' Shadu said.

'Uncle, we should not do it,' Dani said. 'The women would weep and cause chaos. You can't let them come here.'

His uncle didn't listen.

That afternoon, the women came with a group of other ladies. They wrapped their arms around Soobha and dissolved into tears.

Soobha said, 'I know I won't survive. The poison has reached my heart. I can feel it. I'm dying. Please forgive me if I have said or done anything wrong to any single one of you.' He clasped his shaking hands.

'Don't say that,' his sister wiped her tears with her scarf. 'You are going to be alright,'

‘Allah will give you long and healthy life,’ his wife said, passing her fingers through his dusty hair.

Soobha turned to Shadu.

‘Please, brother – accept my daughter Zaibu’s hand in marriage for your son Ramza. Ramza, I have one daughter and I want you to keep her happy. And Khero, my dear sister, I beg of you – please give your daughter to Dani in marriage. They will make a wonderful couple.’ Tears were rolling down Soobha’s pale leathery cheeks. He then turned to Shadu again. His sleepless eyes were red and puffy. ‘And after my death, my brother, take care of my wife and kids, they will be...’

‘What are you talking about, brother?’ Shadu cut in. ‘You will live to see your children marry and live happily.’

‘Please take me home. Don’t let me breathe my last in the wilderness.’

The women sat down on the bare ground around the patient’s charpoy and wept collectively.

‘Didn’t I tell you not to bring the women here? Look at them,’ Dani said to Shadu, who shooed them away.

The wailing women made their way listlessly to Mastan, looking over their shoulders from time to time.

The second night fell. To keep the mosquitos at bay, the attendants had set piles of cowpats smouldering. A cloud of smoke hung in the air. They gave Soobha milk and then allowed him to sleep for a while.

Towards night prayers, the one-eyed drummer showed up, his double-headed drum strapped to his broad back.

‘Where the hell have you been?’ Shadu yelled at him.

‘I was in Madi for a wedding. I’m terribly sorry. As soon as I got your message I headed to Mastan.’ The drummer settled down on the string bed near the patient’s head and started beating the drum to keep Soobha from sleeping. The attendants dragged their charpoy some yards away from the patient and lay down on them.

‘Please stop beating the drum. I feel as if you’re hitting my head with your drumsticks,’ Soobha said but the drummer did not listen to him.

The stars shone brilliantly in the sky. The drummer carried on beating his drum, and the patient's brain throbbed in his skull.

'Don't kill me cruelly. Take me home and let me die in peace.' Soobha moaned, but his voice was lost in the sound of the drum.

All the attendants were snoring. The drummer's hands were moving wearily, and the patient was breathing with great difficulty. Then the drummer too succumbed to sleep. Dani woke up, and he shouted at him to keep drumming.

'Let me sleep!' the man begged. 'I'm exhausted. I beat my drum continuously for three nights at a wedding in Loni.'

Dani woke Shadu and told him that the drummer had fallen asleep. Shadu stumbled to the charpoy and slapped the man across the face. The drummer sat up and started playing again.

'For God's sake, stop beating this monstrous thing,' Soobha pled. 'My head is bursting with pain and sleeplessness.'

'Don't listen to him!' Shadu ordered. 'Carry on.'

The night had deepened. The drummer's sticks were banging the drum. From Mastan came the barking of dogs, while nearby the jackals were howling hysterically. A lone chicken jumped onto the string bed beside the drummer. He hit it with his drumstick and it flapped away, squealing in panic.

After about an hour, Shadu let Soobha have some sleep. Then, he asked the drummer to play again.

'I'm awake,' Soobha muttered. 'Please don't beat the drum. Give it a break.'

'I can't,' the drummer said.

Soobha snatched one of his drumsticks and tossed it away. As soon as the drumbeat faded, Shadu woke up. 'Why have you stopped?'

'Soobha threw my drumstick away,' the drummer explained. 'I'm going to retrieve it.'

As soon as he returned, he started pounding the drum again.

‘Please stop,’ Soobha begged. ‘It’ll kill me.’

‘I can’t help you,’ the drummer replied.

Soobha lifted his hand. ‘Please! If you stop, I’ll give you these two silver rings.’

‘Never. Your life is worth more than that.’

‘I’ll give you a cow if you stop.’

‘No. I can’t do it. I can’t orphan your children. I won’t stop even if you fill this drum with cold coins.’

‘I’ll not die of snake poison, but I’ll surely die of the noise of your goddamn drum,’ Soobha put his finger into his ears.

Late into the night, the drummer was overcome by sleep. The drumsticks fell from his hands and a deep silence descended over the wilderness. Only the crickets’ *chir-chur* filled the star-bedecked night. Soobha too dropped off to sleep.

The jungle birds were heralding the dawn. A soft breeze soured eerily through the tamarisks. A red-wattled lapwing lighted near the attendants’ charpoys, then took off again with its plaintive cry of *did-he-do-it* and *pity-to-do-it*. The saffron sun peeped over the horizon, and suddenly everything was casting long shadows: trees, string beds, pitchers, and tumblers. From Mastan came a faint mix of sounds: the bleating of goats, the crowing of cockerels, and the barking of dogs. Plumes of blue smoke rose from the houses as the women prepared breakfast.

All the men lay deep asleep with their limp, sprawling limbs. Soobha’s body had turned stiff in the meanwhile. His face was a figure of anguish with a slightly open mouth, a fly drinking from its corner.

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