

HASAN MANZAR

The Drizzle

IT WAS BULAN PUASA, and Miss Kamariya, daughter of Muhammad Yusuf, was observing the fast.

She was ironing Madame's and the children's clothes in quiet absorption. Behind her in the bathroom, at the tiled washbasin, Minachi, the Hindu Tamil girl, was squeezing the washing in Surf suds. She, too, was quiet. The children had already gone to school, Madame, to shop, the master of the house, to work; only the little girl was around, but she was playing outside in the yard. The house was filled with an eerie silence.

When Minachi emerged from the bathroom with the washing, beads of perspiration glistened on her dark, beautiful face, which she tried to wipe against her shoulder. Although they had stopped talking to each other two days ago, Minachi, passing Kamariya, stopped briefly and asked, "Any news of the locket?"

Kamariya's hand, which had started to move unusually fast at Minachi's approach, suddenly went slack. She, too, raised a shoulder to wipe the sweat off her tawny face.

The air felt confined and stuffy. Outside, the clouds seemed to have crowded into a part of the sky and gotten stuck. Through the window one saw the leaves of banana and *kathal*, without a stir.

Kamariya raised her head and, staring hard into Minachi's eyes, said, "No, none at all! But I have asked *bomoh* to help in this matter."

Minachi wanted to lower her eyes; instead, she picked up courage and asked, "Oh, and what does he say?"

A few soapsuds remained on her elbow, and water was dripping from

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the washing.

Kamariya thought deeply and said, "Just that he will use a spell to find the thief, and then he'll punish him."

Minachi's face turned blank. She went on to hang the washing outside on the clothesline.

But Kamariya continued, just so Minachi would take note: "I've also written to my father, and he has promised to have *Bachaan Yasin* done at our house in Kedah. By the time *Sura Yasin* is completely recited, the thief's condition will begin to deteriorate."

Minachi was quite young, about fourteen or fifteen years old, scarcely the age at which to know the art of suppressing excitement. She walked back and stood right beside Kamariya and asked, "What is this *Sura Yasin*? And how does one go about setting up this *Bachaan*?"

Kamariya explained: "My father is very learned in religious knowledge. He will recite the 36th chapter of the Qur'an. The imam of our village mosque and thirty-eight other people, altogether forty of them, will recite the 36th chapter. And you, *dhobi*, just you watch, the thief simply won't be able to get away in the face of all these men doing the *Bachaan*."

Kamariya's last sentence betrayed bitterness and distance. Never before had she addressed this Tamil Hindu girl as *dhobi*, having only used *adek*, "little sister."

Minachi wanted to say something but she choked on her words.

Kamariya concluded: "*Bachaan Yasin* never fails to have effect, *dhobi*, no matter how big the theft. And for a piddling theft, like this one—the local *bomoh* is good enough for that. He says he will take care of it himself: use his magic and track down the thief."

Coming out of the house, Minachi picked up her bicycle, wrapped her sari tightly around her legs, got on the saddle and said as she rode away, "*Chi Kamariya*, I'm done for the day and I am leaving now."

Minachi had never before addressed Kamariya as *Chi Kamariya*, "Miss Kamariya," but only as *kakak*—the respectful way of addressing someone who was like an elder sister.

Kamariya went on ironing quietly.

Bulan Puasa was coming to an end; and Kamariya had already received permission from Madame to take a few days off to celebrate the festival of *Hari Raya Puasa* in her village with her family. She was planning to fast the last two or three days with the others at her home. No matter with how much deference and affection the people here at Madame's treated her, the unbounded joy of *subur* and *baka puasa* that

she experienced in her own village had no parallel here. Here, fasting was merely an act of worship; there, among her own, to wake up for the wee meal before dawn, when it was still quite dark outside, and the assault of the children on the sweets at *baka puasa*, transformed it into something more than worship. Add to that the joy of *Id* itself: new clothes and cosmetics which she would bring with her from the city and which would set the hearts of the village girls ablaze with the desire to seek their fortunes in some big city—to leave their small, quiet world surrounded by rice paddies and coconut palms and step into another, limitless world into which Kamariya, Bint Muhammad Yusuf, had gone empty handed and from which she returned every time loaded down with all kinds of fancy things.

But these past few days the thought of returning home came to her with a shock, as if she were taking a step and finding nothing solid underfoot.

Where was the locket? And where was the chain? Both were made of gold; she had bought them after tremendous sacrifices. A few days ago she could not have imagined returning to Kedah without them. But today, it seemed that the gold chain which had earlier adorned her neck had now somehow slipped down, around her feet, and was keeping her from going home.

She had last seen the locket and the chain just four days ago. After taking a bath, she had put the necklace on and examined herself in the mirror. The locket was substantially heavy and beautifully carved, the chain was delicate and supple; the piece gave her neck and bosom a look of resplendence.

After that, as far as she could remember, Kamariya had put it back in the drawer and had carefully hidden it under the scarves, over which she had scattered a few makeup articles, imitation rings and hairpins.

But the very next day, early in the afternoon—when Kamariya had given the little girl her bath, fed her and put her to sleep, while Madame was taking a nap upstairs and the whole house was plunged into silence—she had an impulse to look at the necklace again.

Quietly she removed her hand from under the sleeping girl's head, got up from the bed without making the slightest sound and tiptoed all the way to the table. She even opened her own drawer as quietly as if she were stealing from it. But within a couple of minutes she flung caution to the winds and began madly rummaging in the drawer. She went over every article many times. Then she turned on the light to look more carefully, but the light woke up the girl, who sat up in bed. Kamariya was

looking inside the folds of the scarves. Then she felt around her neck and bosom. The little girl asked, "What's the matter, Kamariya?"

Kamariya held the girl by her shoulders and asked her in English in a voice full of entreaty, "Baby, you see my locket?"

The girl shook her head and joined Kamariya in her search.

By evening Kamariya had abandoned all hope of finding the locket. The desire to go home for *Id* had all but died. It somehow seemed utterly meaningless to go home now, without her cherished asset—the greatest reward of her thrift and economy. By now everyone in the village would have come to know that not only had Kamariya again become prosperous but that she was also actively collecting things for her marriage. She imagined the shame of having to get off the bus at her village with a bare neck and was consumed by sorrow at the loss.

When, finally, Madame found out about the matter, it was as though an earthquake had rocked the house.

Who had access to the part of the house occupied by Kamariya? A Tamil milkman; but he would hand in the milk bottle from outside and leave. The man who delivered the bread, then? Well, he, too, never set foot inside the house and did business through the kitchen window. The maidservant who worked in the opposite house? Not she, either; she hadn't been seen around lately—and even if she had been around, she was a Malay Muslim like Kamariya, and Malay Muslims are known for their impeccable honesty.

That left only one person—

"Minachi!"

Although Madame was quite guarded about voicing her mistrust of Minachi, Kamariya, already skeptical about the Tamil girl, now felt confirmed in her suspicions. That Minachi was a Ceylonese Tamil and, what is worse, a non-Muslim, and a Hindu to boot, was already half the crime in Kamariya's eyes.

That petty theft plunged Minachi into the bottomless pit of ignominy.

The next morning Kamariya saw Minachi come in through the door at her usual time, but she didn't react at all.

Minachi parked her bicycle outside the kitchen in the shade of the wall and came in wiping her sweat.

Kamariya had thought that Minachi, afraid that she might be caught, wouldn't show up that day. Her showing up convinced Kamariya that she was a habitual thief.

The two exchanged a few words. after which Minachi picked up the

dirty laundry and went into the bathroom.

A little later, Kamariya, too, came into the bathroom, and she began snooping around and rummaging. Minachi asked, "What are you looking for?"

Kamariya fixed her gaze upon Minachi's face and answered, "I've lost something."

But Minachi's face didn't change color, nor did her hands falter.

After some time she asked, "Any luck!"

"No," Kamariya replied on her way out of the bathroom. Then, suddenly, she volunteered: "My locket and gold chain are missing since yesterday. Even Madame knows about it."

Her last sentence sounded like a threat.

In the bathroom Minachi's hands went about their business, without the slightest pause.

After a brief interval Kamariya reappeared in the bathroom, once again riveted her gaze on Minachi's face, and said, "But the master of the house still doesn't know about it."

This was the second—and bigger—threat.

Her work done, Minachi silently left the house and without so much as looking at Kamariya picked up her bicycle and rode away.

Minachi's displeasure was beyond Kamariya's understanding; and the failure of the threat—"But the master still doesn't know about it"—to produce any effect meant that she had lost the necklace beyond all hope of recovery.

After this encounter Minachi plummeted so far in the esteem of the entire household that she had to be constantly watched by someone as long as she worked in the house. Madame herself, one of the boys or the girls, Kamariya, even the little girl—someone or the other always managed to be near her as long as she remained inside; and when she finally left the compound, a meticulous count would begin of the washing left to dry on the clothesline. The children would examine the banana, *kathal* and *chempedak* trees—who knew, she might have picked a few on her way out.

It was then that Madame suddenly remembered the blouse which had disappeared six months ago. It had certainly not been lost at the cleaners; rather it was lost somewhere at home, possibly in her own bedroom. The amazing thing, though, was that Minachi was not even allowed in Madame's bedroom. Often one also noticed a few fruits missing from the trees, and every now and then a few coconuts disappeared from the garage, where they had been stored away, but nobody paid any attention

to that.

The incident of the theft of Kamariya's locket was a spotlight which fell directly on Minachi and made her stand apart from the other characters around her. But, interestingly enough, instead of appearing embarrassed, she seemed more lighthearted than ever.

Now after two days' silence, Minachi had asked Kamariya about the locket and, having been threatened with *bomoh*, the Malay medicine man, and *Bachaan Yasin*, she had quietly wrapped her sari tightly around her legs, hopped on the saddle of her bicycle and ridden out of the compound.

All day long Kamariya remained in her room, and she cried intermittently. She mourned the loss of her necklace but deeply regretted having told lies during the month of fasting. That she had asked *bomoh* for help and that she had written to her father to hold the *Bachaan Yasin* were both untrue; she had merely used them as a threat. Then, there was a third "sin"—falsely accusing someone—which was diminishing the reward of her fast.

At sundown, as she put a dried date in her mouth to break the fast, Kamariya ardently prayed for the recovery of her necklace—because prayer at such an auspicious time never failed, like *Bachaan Yasin*, to have effect—and later tried to absolve herself of the sin: "After all," she reasoned, "I didn't openly accuse Minachi of stealing; my words, therefore, cannot be considered an accusation."

It started to rain after *iftar* and continued throughout the night.

When she got up in the morning, the sky was covered with low hanging clouds, which meant that one could expect it to drizzle throughout the day.

Minachi arrived at work unusually early, her face free of the tension of the past few days. She left her bike outside against the window and rushed in, and said, in between gulps of breath, "*Kakak*, I bet you didn't sleep well last night?"

"On the contrary, *adek*, I slept very well," Kamariya replied in a composed voice. "What's lost is lost. Worry isn't going to bring it back. So why worry?"

Minachi sat down beside her on a stool, as though to catch her breath. Then, after a few moments, she asked, "Can I help you search for the locket?"

Kamariya remained silent. The mental agony in which she had spent the last four days—the painful image of returning home without the necklace, the loss of an object bought with hard-earned money, and the

sin of falsely accusing a person—all these seemed to have been washed away by that *iftar* prayer.

Minachi said impatiently, “Last evening I went to the temple; at night I had a dream in which the spirits of my ancestors spoke to me. I could not make out their faces but could easily identify each of them by their voices. They told me, ‘Daughter, don’t worry. The locket and the chain have gone nowhere; they are still in the house, somewhere in *amah*’s own room. So go and help her find them.’ ”

Kamariya’s face, which up to this point revealed only boredom, lit up with hope.

“*Kakak*, may I help you find it?” Minachi said, and without waiting for the answer she began to walk to Kamariya’s room.

Kamariya followed her into the room. A short while later the little girl also joined the two in their “game.”

They went meticulously through everything in the room. They searched for the necklace in the table drawers and the folds of every item of clothing. Once the little girl surprised them, with “It’s there!” And an impatient Kamariya swiftly turned to her and asked earnestly, “Where, baby?”

The girl pointed at the ventilator shaft close to the ceiling and said, “There! My doll! You see it, don’t you?”

Both Kamariya and Minachi laughed. The girl had in fact found her lost doll stuck in the grille of the ventilator shaft.

In the meantime, Minachi began to search through Kamariya’s bed. “Right inside *amah*’s room—those voices told me,” she said.

Kamariya was now beginning to have confidence in Minachi’s “voices.” It seemed her earnest prayer at *iftar* was being answered by the voices Minachi had heard in her dream following her visit to the temple.

Just then something fell smack on the floor from under the mattress. When the little girl crawled under the bed and emerged with it, lo and behold, the necklace, which had kept Kamariya sleepless for the past four or five days and had so preoccupied her mind that she could not even single-mindedly devote herself to worship, glittered in her hand.

Raindrops were dripping on the roof.

Kamariya was weeping silently. And Minachi, on her way out, observed, “It’s sopping wet today. The washing won’t dry. If I wash it and leave it wet, it will start to smell in a day. So tell Madame that I will come and take care of it tomorrow.”

“All right, *adek*, I go tell Madame,” Kamariya said in English with mixed feelings of suspicion and joy.

Three days later Kamariya, daughter of Muhammad Yusuf, left for her village some 350 miles away in Kedah near Baling and surrounded by rice paddies and coconut palms.

Minachi was at best being tolerated at Madame's now. Everyone thought the dream incident was a mere hoax and Minachi's search for the missing necklace an elaborate ruse which she had herself contrived. After all, it was conceivable that she had somehow sneaked into the house quite early in the morning while everyone was still asleep and, after stashing the necklace under Kamariya's mattress, had left undetected. Likewise, it was also possible that she had the necklace in her hand all along. At the right moment, she had slipped her hand under the mattress and dropped the necklace on the floor with the skill of a juggler.

This was also Kamariya's opinion before leaving for her *kampung*. She had searched her bed many times. It just wasn't possible that the necklace had lain there undetected all this while.

At any rate, Minachi's presence in the house was now like a part of the body which could neither be severed nor put to any practical use. Each item was meticulously counted before she was given the washing and, once again, after she had left for the day; and someone had to keep an eye on her as long as she remained on the premises.

The tenth day after *Id*, Kamariya returned from her village late in the evening. She was feeling rather tired from the long bus ride. At home, everyone gathered around her. The little girl came and sat in her lap. Kamariya patted the girl's cheeks and asked her mother in English, "Baby no take much *susu* daily, Madame?"

"Plenty, Kamariya," Madame replied lovingly.

Ignoring Madame's answer, Kamariya asked the girl, "No *mandi* today, Baby?"

The girl wrapped herself around Kamariya and said, "I do *mandi* with you now Kamariya."

Everyone laughed at the girl's sudden indifference to everyone else. Without her *amah*, she had felt out of sorts all these days.

Kamariya opened her traveling bag, took out the gifts, and began distributing them: fruits such as *manggis* and *rambutan* were for all; the oldest girl got a necklace of oyster shells; the other two girls, each, a pair of straw slippers; the boy, a straw hat; and Madame and her husband, some other gifts.

Then, putting a packet back into the bag, Kamariya asked, "Minachi come Madame?"

"Yes," Madame replied, shaking her head. "But I am thinking of

firing her. Now that you are back, do look for another washing girl.”

“Why Madame?” Kamariya asked, astonished. “I have brought a present for her, too.”

“Because she is a thief. She is not a good girl.”

“No, Madame, Minachi no thief. She is a good girl.” Kamariya’s face was perfectly calm.

“Then who is the thief?” Madame asked.

Kamariya remained silent.

“Just who stole the locket?” Madame asked with bitterness.

“Minachi, of course,” Kamariya replied in a drained voice.

“And she is not a thief? She is a good girl?” Madame asked, thoroughly fed up. “You are a strange girl yourself, Kamariya.”

Kamariya thought quietly for a while and then said in a halting voice, “She did steal, but how can she become a bad girl by just one such act? She still has fear in her heart.”

She continued, “I had neither asked *bomoh* nor written to my father for help. Then again, *Bachaan Yasin* works only when the thief is a Muslim and is aware that the 36th chapter of the Qur’ān is being recited by a group of forty people. But Minachi is a Hindu; how do you expect the pious formula to have any effect at all on a Hindu?” Kamariya broke into ringing laughter. “When I told my brother about it, he laughed. I said to him, ‘If Minachi were a Muslim and a Malay, I would have gotten you married to her.’ He said, ‘If she were a Muslim and a Malay, you would not have suspected her of theft in the first place.’ ”

Madame laughed embarrassedly and said, “But she is a thief. We thought you would hate her for that.”

Kamariya fell into thought: Yes, why didn’t she hate Minachi? Or, maybe she had hated her, just for a while, and no longer did. Why?

The little girl, huddled in her lap, was playing with her shirt buttons, opening them and closing them again. Madame’s older son and daughter were tense with expectation waiting to hear Kamariya’s reply.

A gust of fresh air, bearing news of imminent rain, came in through the window and left the curtains rustling in its wake.

When Kamariya tried to answer Madame’s question, her mind thought its own thoughts, and words which were not in her mind spilled out from her mouth:

“It’s true, Madame, people can be thieves, too; after all Minachi is a person. It is perhaps less surprising that she stole, rather it is more surprising that the mere threat of *bomoh* scared her off. I have seen people who, in spite of knowing the whole Qur’ān by heart, still don’t feel at all

the fear of God.”

But the answer to the question, echoing in Kamariya’s mind, appeared—like the first stretch of land slowly emerging from a flood tide—like a refreshing truth with which, she realized with a pleasant surprise, she had been unfamiliar until now.

“Hatred is no different than love,” she said, “you have it, and then again, after a while, you don’t.”

The words, “Close the windows, Kamariya,” jogged her out of her reverie.

Madame and children were shutting the doors and windows. Kamariya heard Madame say, “Kamariya, what you say is beyond me.”

The next morning, when Minachi walked in, Madame whispered to Kamariya, “Keep an eye on her and give her clothes to wash only after you have counted them first.” Kamariya looked at Madame in a strange way, as though feeling sorry for her lack of understanding, and said, “Why, Madame? That go break her heart.”

Once again Kamariya surprised herself. The thought that had occurred to her mind as she uttered these words was so completely different: “Madame, you no find ever no new thought in you?”

Then, releasing her arrested breath, she thought, “Perhaps, Madame and I are made of different clays.”

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon

MALAY AND OTHER WORDS USED IN THE TEXT

Bulan: month; *Puasa*: fast, fasting (here, the Muslim month of fasting: Ramazan).

kathal (Hindi): jack fruit.

bomoh: Malay medicine man.

Bachaan (from *bacha*: to read) *Yasin*: reading/recitation of the 36th chapter of the Qur’ān.

Sura (Arabic for designating a chapter of the Qur’ān) *Yasin*: The Chapter of Yasin.

dhobi (Hindi): a washerman or washerwoman.

adek: a younger brother or sister (pronounced without the final *k*).

Chi: Miss; Mrs.

kakak: elder sister (pronounced without the final *k*).

Bint (Arabic): daughter (of).

Hari Raya Puasa: *Id al-Fitr*, the Muslim festival which comes at the end of the month of fasting, Ramazan.

subur (Arabic): the meal, taken in the wee hours of the morning, which commences the Muslim fast.

buka (to open; take off) *puasa* (fast): the meal at sundown with which the daylong fast is terminated, for which the usual word in the Subcontinent is *iftar*.

Id: (see under *Hari Raya Puasa*).

chempedak: jack fruit.

iftar: (see under *buka puasa*).

amah: maidservant.

kampong: village.

susu: milk.

mandi: bath; to bathe.

manggis: mangosteen.

rambutan: same as *manggis*.