

Three Drops of Blood

Translated by Brian Spooner

It was yesterday they moved me to a room apart. Am I really completely cured now, as the warder promised I would be? And shall I be free in a week? Have I in fact been ill? It's a whole year now, and all that time however much I begged for a pen and paper, they refused me. I always used to think to myself of all the things I would write when I finally got hold of a pen and paper! But yesterday they brought me a pen and paper without my asking. How long I had looked forward to it! But what was the use! Since yesterday however much I think I have nothing to write. It is as though someone stops my hand, or my arm becomes numb. Now that I look carefully, after a whole page of doodling all I can read is: "Three drops of blood."

The deep blue sky, the green garden, flowers blossoming on the hill. A soft breeze carries their scent. But what's the good! I can no longer enjoy anything. All these things are good for poets and children and the kind of people who remain children till the end of their lives. I've been here a year now. At night the sound of cats keeps me awake till morning. That terrible wailing; those harsh cries. I can't stand it any longer. Then in the mornings, before I can open my eyes, that damned injection. What long days and terrible hours I have spent here. In the summer, dressed in buff shirt and trousers, we sit together in the little room under the house where it's cool, and in the winter we sit round the garden in the sun. It's a whole year now that I have been living with these crazy people. There's absolutely nothing we have in common. I am a whole world apart from them. But the moans, the silences, the oaths, the crying, and the laughing of these people will always fill my sleep with nightmares.

There is still another hour left before our evening meal. The same monotonous food—soup, rice pudding, pilaf, bread and cheese—and then no more than enough to keep us alive. Poor old Hasan. His whole ambition is to be able to eat a dish of his mother's soup with four good flat rounds of *sangak* bread. When the time comes for him to leave here, instead of a pen and paper, they should bring him a dish of that

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soup. Anyway, he's one of the lucky ones here, being short as he is, with that stupid laugh, his bull neck and bald head. His arms and hands are tough and gnarled, as though they were just made for carrying a hod of bricks. Every pore of his body, especially that stupid look of his, cries out loud that he was created just to carry bricks. If Mohammad Ali didn't stand there at lunch and dinner, Hasan would have sent us all to heaven by now.

But even Mohammad Ali belongs to this world. For they can say what they like, but this is a world of its own, quite different from the world of ordinary people. We have a doctor here, who, God bless him, just hasn't an idea. If I were him, I'd give everyone poison in their dinner one night, and then, in the morning, I'd stand in the garden with my hands on my hips and watch them carry out the corpses. When they first brought me here I had that same idea in my head. I was sure they would try to poison me. I never touched a meal until Mohammad Ali had tasted it. Then I ate. At night I used to wake up in terror, thinking they had come to kill me. How long ago and vague these memories seem now! Now, it's just the same people, the same food, the same blue room—dark blue halfway up and light blue the rest—without a break.

Two months ago one lunatic they had thrown into that cell at the bottom of the yard tore his stomach open with a piece of a broken pot. Then he pulled out his intestines and played with them. They said he had been a butcher and was used to tearing stomachs open. Then there was the one who had burst his own eye open with his fingernail. They had tied his hands behind his back. He yelled and the blood had dried around his eye. I know all these things are the warder's fault.

But they are not all like that here. Many of them, if they ever get well and are let out, will be unhappy. For instance, that Soghra Soltan on the women's side. Two or three times she tried to escape, and they caught her. She's an old woman, but she rubs her face with plaster from the wall and uses geraniums for rouge. She thinks she's a fourteen-year-old girl. If she's cured and looks in a mirror, she will have a heart attack. Worst of all is our old Taqi, who wanted to turn the world upside down, and in spite of the fact that he believes woman is the root of all evil, and that to set the world right everything female must be killed, he's fallen in love with Soghra Soltan.

All these things are our own warder's fault. He's far worse than all the lunatics put together. With that big nose and those little eyes like an opium addict's, he's always pacing to and fro under the pine tree at the bottom of the garden. Every now and then he bends down and looks at the ground under the tree. Anyone who sees him says, "What a poor harmless man to get caught up with a bunch of lunatics!" But I know him. I know that on the ground there under the tree there are three fresh drops of blood. There's a cage hanging outside his window, empty, because a cat caught his canary. But he left the cage there to bait the cats, so he could kill them.

Yesterday he chased a tabby. As soon as the animal ran up the pine tree in front of his window, he told the guard at the door to shoot it. These three drops of blood are from that cat, but when anyone asks him, he says they belong to the screech owl—that legendary Bird of Truth which is said to hang by its talons at night and continually cry the name of God until blood drips from its throat.

Queerer than all these is my neighbor Abbas. It's not two weeks yet since they brought him in. He's become very friendly with me. He thinks he's a prophet and a poet. He says everything, especially prophethood, depends on luck and the stars. Anyone who is lucky, even if he's completely ignorant, will get on. And if he's the greatest mind of his age and not lucky, he will end up like Abbas himself. He thinks he's a good musician as well. He has strung some wires across a board and thinks he has made a *tar*. He has made up a poem too, which he sings for me eight times a day. It seems it was for this poem that they brought him here. It's a queer poem—if you can call it a poem.

"Alas, once more it's evening.
The whole of the world has turned black.
For all of God's creatures it's now time to rest—
Except me whose trials and sorrows increase.

The world has no joy in its makeup.
Except death there's no cure for my woe.
But there in that corner under the pine tree,
Three drops of blood have dripped on the ground."

Yesterday we were walking up and down in the garden. Abbas was

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reciting his poem when a woman, a man and a young girl came to see him. They have been here five times so far, so I had seen them before and recognized them. The young girl had brought a bunch of flowers. She smiled at me. It was obvious she liked me. In fact, it was to see me she had come, for there's nothing attractive about Abbas' pockmarked face. But while the woman was talking to the doctor, I saw Abbas pull the girl aside and kiss her.

It's been a whole year now since anyone came to see me or bring me flowers. Last time it was Siyavosh who came to see me. Siyavosh had been my best friend. We had been neighbors. We used to go back and forth to college together every day and go over our lessons together. To amuse ourselves I used to teach Siyavosh to play the guitar. His cousin Rokhsareh, who was my fiancée, would come with us most of the time. Siyavosh wanted to marry her sister. As it happened, a month before the engagement party Siyavosh suddenly fell ill. Two or three times I went to see how he was, but they said the doctor would not let anyone talk to him. However much I insisted, they gave me the same answer, so I let it go.

I remember it quite clearly. It was just before the exams. One evening I came home, strewed my books and papers over the table, and was just going to change when a shot rang out. It sounded so close it scared me, as our house was separated from the rest of the town by a broad ditch, and I had heard there had been a robbery close by. I took the revolver from the drawer of the table and came into the yard. I listened hard. Then I went up on the roof. But I could see nothing. As I was coming back, I glanced over at Siyavosh's house and saw him standing in his yard in a shirt and underpants. I said in amazement, "Siyavosh, is that you?"

He recognized me and said, "Come down here. There's no one in."

"Did you hear that shot?"

He put his finger to his mouth and motioned for me to come down. I hurried down and went and knocked on his door. He came and opened it himself, and, keeping his head down staring at the floor asked, "Why haven't you been to see me?"

"I came two or three times to see how you were, but I was told the doctor didn't allow visitors."

"They think I'm ill, but they're wrong."

I asked him again, "Did you hear that shot?"

Without answering, he took my hand, led me under the pine tree and pointed at something. I looked closely. There were three fresh drops of blood on the ground.

Then he took me to his room and closed all the doors. I sat down. He turned the light on and came and sat opposite me by the table. His room was quite plain. It was blue—dark blue halfway up the wall and light blue the rest. On one side a *tar* stood against the wall. A few books and school papers were strewn over the table. Siyavosh opened the table drawer and took out a revolver to show me. It was one of those old revolvers with a mother-of-pearl handle. He put it in his trouser pocket.

"I had a cat, a female called Fifi. You probably saw her. She was an ordinary tabby with two big eyes like a made-up woman's. The pattern on her back was quite regular, just as though you had poured ink over a piece of gray blotting paper and folded it down the middle. When we came home from school, Fifi would run to meet me and meow, and rub herself up against me. When I sat down, she would climb over my head and shoulders and poke her nose in my face. She used to lick my forehead with her rough tongue and insist that I kiss her. Female cats seem to be more cunning, more loving and more sensitive than male cats. Besides me, Fifi was especially thick with the cook, for that was where her food came from. But she always avoided my old nurse, who was very proper and said her prayers and was annoyed by cat hairs. No doubt Fifi thought to herself that people are cleverer than cats and have kept all the tastiest pieces of food and the cosiest corners for themselves, while cats have to work so hard toadying and flattering just to get a share.

"The only time Fifi's natural instincts would flare up was when she got the bloody, mutilated head of a cockerel in her claws. She would turn into a wild thing. Her eyes would grow larger and flash. She would

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show her claws and threaten with long snorts anyone who came near her. Then, like something that would deceive its very self, she would start to play. With all the resources of her imagination she would pretend the cock's head was alive. She would pat it and chuck it with her paw, arch her back and spit at it, hide herself and spy on it, make a rush at it again, and with continuous leaps and bounds, attacks and parries, display all the skill and nimbleness of her race. When she tired of this exhibition, she ate the bloody head with the greatest appetite, and for several minutes afterwards prowled around after the rest of it. For one or two hours she completely forgot her artificial sophistication. She would not come near anyone, and she would not love or flatter anyone.

“In fact, even at the very moment when she was making a declaration of friendship, Fifi was still wild and secretive. She did not give away the secrets of her life. The house she looked on as her own. If a strange cat should happen to pass through the yard, especially if it was a female, you could hear angry hisses and long drawn-out wails for hours.

“The noise Fifi made to announce lunch, and the noise she made when she wanted to make up to someone were quite different. The cries which hunger brought from her, and her yelling in the fights, and the mewling she started when she was looking for a mate, were all quite distinct. The tone changed for each. The first was a heartrending cry, the second full of spite and malice, the third was a painful wail which the need of nature drew from her for going after her mate. But the most significant thing about Fifi were the expressions on her face. Sometimes she showed a sensitivity that was quite human, so that you had to ask yourself just what thoughts and feelings went on behind that furry head and those green mysterious eyes.

“It was last spring that it happened. The memory of it makes me shudder. You know how all animals get mad and in heat at that time and try to pair off. It's as though the spring breeze breathes a storm of madness into every living thing. It got hold of Fifi as well, for the first time, and set her whole body trembling. She mewed sadly. The toms heard and came from all around to answer her. After several fights and scrambles Fifi chose the strongest and most full-throated tom for her mate. In animals' loveplay scent is very important. That's why clean, spoiled, domesticated toms are not as attractive to the female. On the

contrary, cats perched on walls, thieving, thin, stray, hungry cats, whose skin still has the primordial smell of their breed—these are the cats that hold the females' attention. During the day and especially throughout the night, Fifi and her mate would sing their love aloud. Fifi's delicate slender body rippled and stretched voluptuously, while the body of her mate arched like a bow, and they moaned for joy. They would go on like this until the crack of dawn, when Fifi, her coat ruffled, tired and worn out, but blissfully happy, came into my room.

“Fifi's loveplay kept me awake at night. In the end it drove me mad. One day I was working at that window there, and I saw the two lovers strutting about in the garden. With that same revolver you saw, at a distance of three paces I aimed and fired. The bullet hit Fifi's mate. I think it broke his back. He made one high leap and without a sound—not even a moan—shot through the doorway and fell by the garden wall dead.

“All along his path were drops of blood. Fifi looked for him a while until she found his paw marks. Then she smelled his blood and went straight to the body. Two nights and two days she kept watch at his corpse. Now and again she would touch him with her paw, as though she were saying to him, ‘Wake up. Spring's only just begun. Why have you gone to sleep when it's time to make love? Why don't you move? Get up! Get up!’ For Fifi could not understand the idea of death and did not know her lover was dead.

“The day after, both Fifi and the body of her mate disappeared. Wherever we looked, whomever we asked, it was no use. Was Fifi angry with me? Was she dead? Had she gone to look for another lover? In that case what had happened to the body of the first one?

“One night I heard that same cat's mewling. The noise continued until morning. The following night it was the same. But in the mornings the voice stopped. The third night I picked up the revolver again. Without thinking I fired at that same pine tree in front of my window; I could see his eyes flashing in the darkness. There was a long moan and the voice stopped again. In the morning under the tree there were three drops of blood. From that night on every night until now he comes and moans with that same voice. The others sleep heavily, they

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don't hear it. I tell them and they laugh at me, but I know. I am certain that it is the voice of that same cat which I killed. From that night until now I haven't slept. Wherever I go, whichever room I sleep in, this wretched cat moans all night with that fearful voice, calling his mate.

"Today, while no one else was in, I went to that same place where the cat sits and yowls every night and aimed. I knew where he sat by the way his eyes flashed in the darkness. When I fired I heard the moan of a cat and three drops of blood fell from up there. You saw them with your own eyes. You're my witness."

Just then, the door opened and Rokhsareh and her mother came in. Rokhsareh had a bunch of flowers in her hand. I got up and greeted them, but Siyavosh smiled and said: "You know Mr. Ahmad Khan better than I. There's no need for me to introduce you. He stands witness that he saw the three drops of blood at the foot of the pine tree with his own eyes."

"Yes, I saw them."

But then Siyavosh came forward and laughed, took my revolver out of my pocket and put it on the table. "You know, he said, "Mr. Ahmad Khan not only plays the *tar* well and composes fine poems, he's also quite a marksman. In fact, he's a very good shot."

Then he nodded to me, and I got up and said: "Yes, this evening I came to get an exercise book from Siyavosh, and we spent a little while taking pot shots at the pine tree to amuse ourselves, but those three drops of blood aren't from the cat, they belong to the Bird of Truth. You know the Bird of Truth took three grains of wheat from a child, and every night moans and moans until three drops of blood drip from his throat. Or else, a cat had caught a neighbor's canary, and was shot for it, then passed by here. Now wait a minute and I'll sing you a song I've made up."

I picked up the *tar* and accompanied myself:

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At this point Rokhsareh's mother left the room annoyed. Rokhsareh raised her eyebrows and said, "He's mad." Then she took Siyavosh's hand, and both of them went out giggling, shutting the door on me. When they got into the yard under the lamp, I saw them through the window. They cuddled each other and kissed.