

# phoebe

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# FICTION

KARAN MAHAJAN  
PRIZE JUDGE

# THE RUBBER TAPPER'S KNIFE

RICHARD HERMES  
FICTION CONTEST WINNER

The metal beds of the military trucks burned the bare chests of the men who were thrown in first, men stripped to the waist, arms bound behind their backs, laid face down in rows and stacked in layers four, five, six bodies high. Malik was put in more gingerly than the others, almost kindly even, close to the top of the heap by a young soldier with a southern accent. He'd felt the drops of another brief rain. He did not need to see it to know that, outside, the concrete released its own steam.

And where was his nephew, Jaemu? Malik had called for him repeatedly since they were separated. Face down in this pile now, the cords chafing his wrists, it seemed futile to call out again. The man above him must have been unconscious, so fully limp and heavy did his weight press down on Malik, his slowly heaving ribs digging into the back of Malik's head. The truck had not yet left its place in front of the district police station, and below him bodies already pleaded for air. "I beg you," came a high-pitched, desperate voice. "The weight is too much." But there was nothing anyone could do.

Malik was almost never helpless. He was the equal of any rubber tapper in Tak Bai district; it did not matter that he was blind. But this day had unfolded as if in the restless dreams Malik sometimes had in the cool, dark corridors of the older part of the rubber grove, where he would doze with his back against the trunk of a tree, tapping knife sticky by his side, the cutting having been started well before dawn and finished before the morning grew too warm. He always

finished with extra time. Some days, as he rested and listened to the grove, the long rows all weeping together their thin white sap, the trickle of it filling up the bowls like a slow, silent lullaby, he woke with a start to a mosquito sting on his poorly wrapped neck, to the eerie dead air of midday and the jarring awareness that the bowls from the first trees would already be full, the sap congealing in the suffocating heat.

It had been that kind of day, a slow escalation to a startling unreality. He'd gone to town with Jaemu around 10 a.m. to pick up the cloth that Yaena would use to cut herself a new kurung for Eid. She had already picked out the material; he only needed to retrieve it. He regretted now his insistence that Jaemu carry it in a plastic bag when they walked to the demonstration outside the district police station rather than leaving it tied to his moto at the mosque. He hated the thought that it lay discarded in some puddle where he and Jaemu fell, or under the tire of one of these trucks. It broke Yaena's heart to lose nice things to carelessness, and he trusted Ma-daw when she said this cloth was worth the expense—he had felt between his fingertips the soft fineness of the cotton. Her description of it as a bright, swirling orange and red sounded to him like the sunsets he saw as a boy with his father when he still had his sight and they would travel to Satun to help his uncle with his catch during the month that was rainiest on their own side of the peninsula. How strange that he could often “see” such things as colors with his fingers before being told? No stranger, perhaps, than the way the rain could be so relentless in Baan Nam Bo when they departed for his uncle's on those childhood mornings, the surf so grey and churning, while just a few hours later, a hundred miles across the Kra Isthmus, the fishermen floated on a sea of

glass. Independent of that other reality back home on the Gulf, the long stem at the bow of their turquoise boat jugged up out of the Andaman into a liquid sky, a swirl of citrus and purples and blood.

Something dripped onto his head from above and made two trails through his hair, one sidelong toward his ear and one straight over the meridian of his skull, toward his forehead. At first he assumed it was sweat or water from the men who'd been soaked with water cannons or pulled out of the river, but what he felt creeping through his hair now was too thick to be water. It tickled his scalp despite the pressure squeezing him from all sides and despite the scene outside, the barking of the uniformed men and unofficial rangers for hire who had failed to persuade the demonstrators to disperse and then, panicking when the army's own tear gas blew back on them, cowered behind obstacles and shot blindly into the crowd. This was according to frantic descriptions by Jaemu, delivered while they clung to each other's shirts in their hiding place on the riverbank. Even in that chaos, Malik had insisted Jaemu tell him everything that was happening, before Malik tripped on someone lying on the ground and they slipped and fell and were separated.

It distracted him, that slow itch moving across his scalp, over the revving of other vehicles leaving the lot, over the increasingly urgent cries of the men lying piled underneath him, begging the others to try to stand up, to take some weight off the bodies at the bottom, the men higher up saying, "Brother, if I could I would stand, I would tear a hole in this canvas, but I can't move my legs"—even over all of this, the sensation on his scalp did not abate. Malik wanted to scratch it or wipe it away but with tied hands all he could do was rub the back of his head against the body above him. The satisfying friction he hoped to feel wasn't there. Instead, the man's skin was

slippery with the same blood that was crawling toward his face. He stopped immediately, the patch of baldness on the crown of his head sticky-wet now.

At the first amplified pop of the mosque's old loudspeakers, the pile of men in the truck fell silent. The activity outside halted for a moment too. The call to the late afternoon prayer meant that it was around 3:30. There was something unfamiliar in the voice of the muezzin as he sang his call—it had none of its usual melliflence, none of the vocal flourishes at the end of the Arabic words, the trilling notes and half-notes. None of the usual mix of melancholy and anticipation, the resonance of pious sacrifice. There was sorrow, but it was a muted sorrow, the syllables not drawn out extravagantly as usual but flat, perfunctory, hastened through. The voice sounded older, drier. All of this he thought in the first few syllables of the call. By the end of it he knew it was the voice of the imam, not that of Rosuemaï, the usual muezzin.

In the most sonorous voice he could muster, Malik sang out an answering prayer. Breaking the silence felt briefly energizing, as if his bones had been struck with a tuning fork. Men at the top of the pile followed, drawing the sound out until others, farther buried, joined with shortened breath. The melody was enough to make him briefly forget the sensation of the blood nearing his eyebrow. One man in particular extended the prayer after the others had finished. Even in its breathlessness, Malik thought he recognized the voice.

“Rosuemaï?”

“Yes.” He said it with no intonation of a returned question. From the distant quavering of his voice it sounded as if he were lying toward the bottom of the pile. When the prayer was over, Malik called to him, but a second guard, standing at the end of the truck

and distinguished by his deep voice, gave a command to be silent, and all the men obeyed except for Rosuemaï.

“My son,” Rosuemaï said. “Are you all right?” His voice was a thin thread. “Abidin?”

The young soldier who had helped Malik into the truck interrupted. “Elder, you cannot speak,” he said.

“I’m fine, father,” said Rosuemaï’s son, from somewhere to the left of the truck. “Where will they—” The boy’s question was cut off with a sickening thud, and another.

“Shut your mouths,” said the man with the deep voice.

Malik did not consider himself a pious man. He never saw the point of memorizing an entire book in a foreign language for the sound of the words alone, divorced as they were from his mother tongue of Jawi. He failed his exam on the Koran three times, the imam from another village frowning as Malik groped in vain for the first few words of the passage that followed the one the imam had recited in his perfect Arabic. The imams and hajis were the only ones who understood that language, and they liked it that way. When his father called him away from the ponoh to help with the planting, it was nothing more than a way to save face—he would have been sent home anyway.

Once or twice a year, when he had business in the provincial capital, he spent an afternoon at a secluded house outside the city where he and an old friend wagered on fighting cocks. He swore frequently, flirted with the girl who ran the mango stand by the convenience store when her mother wasn’t around, flirted with her mother when she was. He had never been unfaithful to Yaena in all their years of marriage, but he still thought of himself as handsome. Women at the traveling market told him so to disarm him when he

tried to bargain. Even so close to 50 he craved that attention, still let himself be taken by the arm so that he could smell the scent of women who were young enough to be his daughters. There was a reason women in villages covered their hair with scarves and wore loose fitting clothes, and kept their distance from the opposite sex until they were married. Piety is a learned thing. But no kurung could hide a woman's shapeliness, and a headscarf only framed and further accentuated the most symmetrical faces, of which he had seen many in his youth, before the sudden, sharp pains in his eyes, the aching in his temples, the otherworldly halos around electric lights and the moon. Before his corneas, too, became their own foggy silver-blue moons. No, there were devoted Muslims in this part of the world but they would never adopt the ways of Arabs, whose women cover themselves in black from head to toe. Here, life was too sweet for that.

Life was sweet, even as it was being slowly drained out of him and the rest of these men, who gave off a woody musk that reminded him, strangely, of his adolescence in the village. His thirst was a desperate vacuum in his chest. Yaena had told him to stay away from the demonstration. Standing at the end of the path, she stopped them and grabbed his arm where he sat on the back of Jaemu's moto and scolded him so that he could feel her breath on his cheek. He always smiled in the face of her exasperated tone. After all these years, it still retained its hints of tender playfulness. It still sounded to him like love. Her insistent grip on his collar was a caress.

The bodies were pressed so tightly together that he could feel one straining through another. "Uncle," the young man underneath him said, "can you shift your weight to the left?" He did what he could, but he could not bring himself to ask the man's name or where he

was from or what he had seen that afternoon. “Have you seen my nephew?” he had asked earlier to the group, but when no one had, he ceased to try to converse, choosing instead to conserve his energy. It seemed that the others were doing the same, aside from those on the bottom who drifted in and out of fits of sighing. The man on his right whispered something in his ear that he could not understand. It was soft and intimate and senseless, like a quiet hallucination.

Nothing had passed his lips that day, for it was Ramadan, but as the blood crept further down his face—across his left cheek and alongside his nose—he fixed in his mind a terrible possibility: eventually the blood would reach his lips, and opening them would mean a breaking of the obligation of the day. Though he had cheated the fast many times in his life, what was at stake for him now was something more fundamental than piety—difficult to name, but much more urgent. He felt determined not to break the fast in such a gruesome way. The blood reached his nostril and the left corner of his mouth and he drew in a long breath, as if preparing to plunge underwater. The truck lurched into gear and the whole pile briefly shifted, the sound from the engine wrapping them in a gauze of noise. At the frequent stops and starts, it was clear that the swaying of the pile gave no relief to those on the bottom; it only multiplied their suffering. They moved along country roads that Malik had long ago memorized, the blood gathering in both his nostrils and pooling between his grimly clenched lips. He could barely breathe now. He had lost his sense of time.

From his left a young man whispered, “Talk to me, old man, or I think I will die.”

He was no stranger to slaughter. He knew how to lay the cow down between two trees on Eid al-Adha and string it tight by its

horns and hoofs. Many times he helped hold the animal down, calming it during the sharpening on the whetstone, the pulling taut of the long folds of white skin under the chin. The quick back and forth of the blade, the baring of teeth, the knife slipping into the hollow pockets of the neck. The kicking legs, spilled life filtering through dry leaves and dirt.

When the salty-sweetness hit his tongue, it didn't taste like anything from a cow. It tasted opulent. His mouth watered at the sensation. It was nourishment; he wanted to vomit. Below, others already had.

"Tell me, my friend," he said, "has the sun fallen yet?"

"Why do you ask that question? Can't you see the space under the tarp?"

"I cannot," he said, his words slurred with blood. "I gather, then, that there is still light."

When they finally arrived at their destination, sometime late in the night, Malik was again helped down off the truck with some consideration by the guards, the young soldier with the southern accent and the man with the deep voice. Finding it difficult to stand, Malik put his arm around the necks of the two men. As they carried him to the edge of the bed of the truck and prepared to hand him off to others, Malik let his right palm graze against the side of the face of the man with the deep voice. He wanted to know its shape. His fingers saw a wide nose with bulbous nostrils, longer hair than a soldier, some flabbiness around the jaw and a thick mole on his cheek, out of which grew long, coarse hairs.

Malik was ordered to stand off to the side while they unloaded the rest of the men and brought them to where they would be kept. They

were counting them in groups of ten as they came off. When Malik felt sure that the truck must be nearly empty, he heard the voice of the young soldier drop in exclamation. A superior ordered someone to “Check them all for breathing.” There was a commotion, a sound like fish flapping on the bottom of a boat. Someone called for a doctor, but it was drowned out by the screams of another man. Malik was bumped from behind as several soldiers pushed past him and voices converged on the spot; then he was ushered back some distance with the others. He heard a guttural rage, a few voices urging calm, others excited, making sharp clucking noises like men corralling an angry bull. A struggle, the sounds of something hard striking flesh and a collective sucking in of air. Then, for what felt like minutes, the thickest silence, broken eventually by a few low sounds from the soldiers around him. “Ai kaek,” the man with the deep voice said, breathless.

\*

Malik sits and sleeps in a room with a cement floor. Four days and no bath.

Early one morning, the young soldier with the southern accent comes to inform Malik that he will be going home. He asks Malik if he’d like to make a call to a relative or friend. Malik follows the young soldier outside to a bench and table where there is better reception. If not for the tobacco smoke, Malik wouldn’t have known anyone else was there.

“Pardon,” Malik says, to the other person at the bench. “Can I have a cigarette?”

“A blind man detained by the military?” It is the man from the truck with the deep voice, whom he has come to think of as The

Mole. “You must be the most dangerous cripple in the world.” Rather than hand one to Malik, he tosses the pack on the table. As Malik feels for them, his fingers graze other things: a mango, a small box, a smooth stick with no bark. He puts a cigarette in his mouth and asks the man for a light. Malik sits facing outward, away from the table, while the young soldier and The Mole stand on each side.

“You’re a ranger?” Malik says.

The Mole laughs. “I’m like police. You can tell I’m not a soldier?”

Malik smiles. “Where are you from? Not here.”

“Not here,” the Mole says. There is no more talk while Malik finishes his cigarette. He thinks The Mole will walk away from the silence, but instead he lights another one.

“What happened on our truck?” Malik says.

The Mole spits and describes an unlikely scene where men on the bottom rows, chatting with relief at the prospect of being released from the trucks, suddenly go into convulsions after being freed from the weight that had been crushing them for so many hours.

Malik was taught not to be violent, but he is not a pious man.

“Is this your mango?” Malik asks The Mole. “In that case, is there a knife to peel it?” The Mole drops something heavy in his lap. It has a brushed leather sheath, fastened around the handle with a snap.

“What do you do to support yourself?” The Mole asks.

“I am a rubber tapper.”

The Mole finds this extremely amusing.

“The equal of any tapper in the district.”

Laughing, The Mole says, “What’s your secret?”

“A very sharp knife. I depend on it like my dearest friend. Or a son.” Then, he adds, gently thumbing the blade, “Yours is sharp too.”

“That is no rubber tapper’s knife,” The Mole says.

As skillfully as the woman at the mango stand, as if it is in fact his own knife, Malik cuts off the knot where the fruit meets the stem and begins to peel from there. To the other one, the soldier, he says, “How old are you, young man? And where are you from?”

“Satun,” the boy answers. He does not give his age, but his voice sounds younger than ever, and not unkind.

Malik’s fingers flutter over the edge of the fruit where the unpeeled skin meets the wet, raw flesh. It is not unlike tapping for rubber, cutting the thinnest V-shaped strip of bark from the trunk, making sure not to cut too deep for fear of hurting the tree. In this case, the liquid that drips over his wrist is sweet juice, not sap. He raises the fruit and his knife together in both hands and catches the juice running over the base of his palm in his lips.

“How many men died?” Malik asks, in no particular direction.

The young soldier does not say anything, but The Mole says, “Seventy or eighty. They were weak from fasting.” Then, The Mole exclaims, “I thought you were a Muslim! Why are you eating fruit now?”

“Has the sun already risen?” Malik asks. He knows it has.

“About twenty minutes ago,” the young soldier says. “That is what our commander says. That they were weak from fasting.”

“I have a nephew about your age,” Malik says to the soldier. “His name is Jaemu. Have you seen anyone with that name in the camp? From the way you speak, I imagine you would have been friends in another life.”

“And you are not supposed to believe in other lives,” The Mole says. “Soon I will be convinced that you are not a Muslim at all, but a proper Buddhist.”

On the flickering screen of Malik's mind, the young soldier is the one more easily convinced to bring himself nearer to Malik—more ready than The Mole to believe that Malik is hard of hearing as well as blind and thus lower himself closer to Malik's ear. He is lither and therefore more inclined to bend at the waist, to jump forward out of polite nervousness to accommodate another handicap. As he sees it in his mind's eye, then, it is a sad practicality for Malik, not justice—far from justice—that makes him choose the boy as the one to draw close enough to reach the back of his neck with one hand while driving the knife deep into his windpipe.

This is what Malik imagines, but it is not what happens. What happens is more pedestrian: he scrapes the remaining meat off the mango pit with his teeth and slowly wipes both sides of the knife on his thigh before putting it back in its sheath. The young soldier asks him if he wants to make his phone call, and he thinks of Yaena, who, Malik will learn, has already sold a small piece of their rubber plantation—a newer stand, not the older part of the grove where he likes to drift off in shade—to hire a lawyer who will help her and other families post more of their land as collateral for bail.

The following day, after two weeks apart, Yaena arrives to take him home. She comes with Jaemu, who escaped to the side of the demonstration where the women were sitting and lay behind them, covered in Yaena's new cloth, until the last soldier had left the scene.

At the funeral for Rosuamai and Abidin, the men discuss what happened on the trucks, how so many died. It is a topic of endless speculation. Some say that most of the 78 suffocated. Others insist they were executed at the camp. One young man, home from university, speaks of an “imbalance of chemicals” in the blood caused by muscles being crushed. Malik remains silent. Instead,

he asks Jaemu to be with him outside the front of the house. There, they listen to a family of singing doves making their music in the late afternoon. Jaemu asks where the birds first came from, to what place they are native, but Malik is engrossed in the shiver of a glorious thought: next Friday, he and Jaemu will go to the mosque and present themselves to the imam. “Dear Imam,” he will say. “God grant you peace. If it pleases you, we would like to learn the art of the call to prayer. I am not a pious man, but if it is God’s will, I would like to be a muezzin.”