

Mehreen Ahmed

Collector's Item

Bones remembered. They read like an open story book. Of creatures, of habits, of cultures; if bones were to be reconstructed, and retraced, a narrative of a forgotten race could emerge like a dancing dream. In my deep sleep who I dream't was no more predictable or consequential than my skin-deep complexion. Just as well, The face I dream't last night was inconsequential and unpredictable. Yet, I dream't of someone in my unconscious, subterranean self; I dream't a hobbit slam a door to my face in not so subtle ways.

I know this hobbit, I've known him for years. Who often chided me, laughed at my button nose and the dark tone of my skin. Until one day, I literally stepped on his toes for being churlish. He was in the throes of a maddening mid-life crisis, and I, in my sweet twenties. I grumbled, I was grim, his grimy comments tormented me; he told me that I had a pig-nose, that I was the black baby of this fair-skinned family, without any hope of ever securing a husband. *Who would marry me?* Thankfully, I wasn't the black sheep, because I had the graciousness to repeatedly forgive him for his rudeness. I was better than him. He was such a tease!

Well-groomed, the hobbit harboured a desire to become king. He was our neighbour's grandson. Growing up, he pulled my pigtails an awful lot. I never took him seriously, particularly his waywardness affected me. I realised that but I was also helpless to avoid him because he would be everywhere—by the lake, barking up the same or the wrong tree, too, sometimes which I also did, in the forests, the mountains peaks, the old haunts as it were; as though he could read my mind. As though he timed me and he knew exactly where to find me.

Liked him? I did not for calling me black, button-nosed creature of the night. But what could I do? When I tried telling an adult, they ignored me, laughed it away, calling me a button-nosed *Krishna* as well—the dark girl. I heard it so often being called the ‘dark beauty,’ the ‘dark night,’ even ‘dark knight,’ that the word “dark” sunk into me like a stinging fly as a telltale sign of the adults grinning at me like Cheshire.

The suspicions began to stir my sensibilities; a confusion arose within me as to the use of that adjective: elevated me sometimes as one who possessed exuberant “dark beauty” or lowly condescension to “dark ugly.” Nice try. But my fortitude and optimism quelled such misgivings, and gave me the strength to rise above such double-edged sarcasms/compliments, apportioned by the adults.

I stood tall, lifted my brows and held a button-nose high as I went about my way, bracing myself from any negativity seeping into me. I was a beacon of resilience. I began to laugh with them. My family fed me well, took me to the best forests, told me the best fantasies about our elves and fairies. I listened to the best flute music and vocals. My cave-room was full of rarest forest flowers, and gifts of precious gems, rubies, lapis lazuly, and diamonds glittered, everywhere I looked. My family taught me well, to be fearless and proud.

The hobbit spent an awful lot of time with my family and me. His mind soaking up all the toxicity around my looks. While I had a clear plan as to what I wanted in life, he had none, and often floundered in the most wicked dreams. When he teased me about my looks, I also played along laughing and gave back some in banter; fruitless and impervious as he was to a purposeless life. While I wanted to be a healer, he? Well, king of *terra nallius*. For he was just that—king of nobody who only excelled in churlish behaviour.

No wait, not entirely. He did have some interests. Because one afternoon, I walked over to his grandfather’s big cave next door, I entered, not a soul was in or around. I entered a library full of all kinds of dead species, birds, insects. Some rare butterflies, also, dreadfully pinned against the cave skirt walls. Stuffed animals of hunted tigers, speared lion heads, and curved elephant tusks. Grandfather and Great, Great, Grandfathers spared no

animals in all the jungles as they went about their infamous hunting and gathering ruse without compunction. They literally looted the nearby forests, and left nothing for other hobbits.

Looking at these, I wondered what else they collected. I ventured upstairs to the other rooms. Trespassing? Sure it was, but I have been walking these great halls forever, too, never this far though, not even the library, always closed. The hobbit's bedroom doors were ajar, just when I heard footsteps at the entrance downstairs. He entered with a folded bark under his arm. I retreated deeper into the dark walls.

He ascended the jagged stairs, two rapid steps at a time, and went into his room. The door was still wide open. I heard dropping noise. I peeked from behind him and saw some bones rolling out of the bark as it unfolded. Were they hobbit or animal bones I had no idea? I came out of my hiding, and descending the stairs, I fast paced through the mountain passes, back into our cave next door. It was my deep secret, I discreetly held within myself until I decided to find out more. I was taught to be fearless and free.

It was crazy. Why would no body be present when I was in there? Was this deliberate? I went to their cave many times, but never did I see anything like it. Did they actually want me to see those objects? I always thought they were great hunters and travellers. Whose mother died at childbirth. Whose father and grandfather raised him to be a hobbit of the world, sent him across several seas to learn more about life? Who grew up in a family without bonding to any female, who, in his spare time came to our place; a joyful cave teeming with my aunts, uncles, cousins, mum and dad with whom he bonded. Of course, me.

The hobbit never cared to speak much about anything. He was a vapid soul, an empty shell unaffected by these bones he collected. Bones belonging to those who would routinely tried to find gold in throw-away rocks after a clean dig of the hobbit owned goldmine grounds. Where such hobbits living in abject poverty would hammer away on these empty rocks in the hope of leftover gold dust; until death claimed their souls; their bodies lay amok. No gold was ever found, or ever meant to be found in those hard rocks, except their bones.

Hard rocks. The fanciful hobbit goldmine, a deadly cesspool of exploitation where other hobbits worked themselves to death in the hope of more meat and food through the deadly hours of the dark, hot mines; honing skills for more gold out of the rocks; blood being vamped, bones being chewed until their teeth clenched, muscles relaxed, and the dwarf bodies lay pale and petrified. Bones, brought home, stripped off any traces of soft tissues, or faintest skin colour.

Down to the bare bones. Our hobbit friend suddenly died. Where they were collected and preserved in a bone library of all kinds of Neanderthal, Homo Floresiensis, Australopithecus, Paranthropus, and the earliest-known Homo Erectus skeletons; his bones, even in extinction, proved to be infinite; every inch fossilised in the purest, solid form, his tales locked in. Unlike others, I didn't have a single bad bone my mother always said. It's all in the bone. The rest were fantasies, lost in a vapour of ice.