

## Coil of the Serpent

by

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I was halfway towards my seventh birthday when malaria claimed the life of my mother. Inhabitants of our crumbling tenement had long complained about mosquitoes breeding in an adjacent lot abandoned by failed developers. It took the death of my mother to gain the attention of health authorities, represented by half a dozen men wearing khaki uniforms and white face masks. They had canisters strapped to their backs, from which they sprayed a mist through metal prods upon the stagnant puddles and the rain water trapped in discarded food and kerosene cans.

The passing of my mother was a baffling experience, not at all as I had imagined death to be. She had been shivering in bed for days though her skin remained hot to the touch. When she stopped shivering I thought she had gone to sleep. I did not want to trouble her for dinner so I scrounged something from our food cupboard. When she failed to stir by the following evening, I tried to wake her. She smelt different, like dirty clothes, and her skin was cold. I realized something had gone terribly wrong and cried for help.

After my mother's body had been removed by ambulance attendants, neighbours gave me some rice and fish to eat, but I had no appetite. I sat around our tight little room just holding the plate of food most of that night, not knowing what to do till my father returned. I didn't know how long that might be because my father was a travelling salesman. He seldom appeared more than once every two or three weeks. No one knew how to contact him. In the event he showed up two days later.

I had little idea what kind of travelling salesman he was. He had a brown cardboard suitcase from which he brought out beads and ribbons, lipsticks and nylon stockings, ointments for pimples and powders for athlete's foot. He often boasted of making big money one day and promised my mother a splendid house across the causeway in Singapore. The fact my mother would never get to see that dream house troubled me. We had often talked about it in our room, amidst the smells of other people's food and other people's lives. She told me things would be different once we had our own house. She continued to believe in my father long after I had got tired of waiting.

"We can't live here any more, Anwar," my father said, after the funeral. "You'll need someone to look after you while I'm working."

"Can't I go with you? I can carry the suitcase. I won't disturb you."

"You'll have to start school soon. Best to stay with your mother's folks for the time being. I haven't forgotten about the house in Singapore. I'll get it for you yet. Have faith in me."

My father gave a wink and a winning smile but charm alone was no longer enough for me. I wanted to see him knuckle down to delivering what had been promised, even though my mother could no longer enjoy it.

“I’ve only seen grandpa and grandma twice,” I replied. “I don’t know them.”

Actually, I was a little afraid of my grandparents. When they touched me during those two visits, their hands felt rough and dry, like the shedded skins of reptiles. My mother’s had always been soft and warm and reassuring.

“They’ll look after you fine. They’re nice people,” my father replied, patting me on the head. “I’ll come and visit you regularly and send money.”

The next day my father packed my few belongings and bought me a slab of my favourite Cadbury’s milk chocolate. Then he took me on a four-hour bus journey away from Johore Bahru. The bus snaked through long stretches of rubber plantations, palm groves and lush green countryside and brought us to a small town a couple of miles from the fishing village of my grandparents. We did not reach the small town till well past the lunch hour and we settled for a satay meal at a roadside stall. We then took a trishaw along an unpaved road to our destination.

On arrival my father had some whispered conversation with my grandfather. I did not hear the words but there seemed to be tension in their murmured exchanges. My father eventually told me to be a good boy till his next visit and left. That was the last I saw of him.

The fishing village was small and secluded. A sparkling sea curled around one side of it and rubber plantations and virgin jungles cradled the other. It consisted of a collection of attap huts, built on stilts and with roofs thatched with leaves of nipah and coconut palms. They were airy and cool, with none of the hemmed-in smells of Johore Bahru.

My grandfather was a wizened, hollow-cheeked man of few words. He had been a clerk in government service but retired to the village to eke out his small pension. The villagers addressed him as “Haji” because he was the only one in the village to have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Most days he could be seen in his faded sarong, either smoking a long pipe on the verandah of his hut or strolling along the beaches to watch village boats land their catches. Some evenings he would read me passages from the Koran, to the accompaniment of the calls of geckos hunting for insects. The total disappearance of my father did not seem to surprise him but my abandonment gnawed inside me like a poisonous worm.

My grandmother was also wizened and sarong-clad. Instead of smoking, she chewed betel nuts which stained her uneven teeth with their reddish brown juice. She ran a provision store from the verandah of our hut. The word “store”, I came to know later, was an exaggeration because only cigarettes, Lipton’s tea and tins of sweetened condensed milk were on offer. The older women of the village gathered there to gossip.

The loving kindness of my grandparents soon put me at ease and soothed my secret disappointments. I consoled myself with the fact that instead of the chaos and foul smells around my former home I now had fresh air, sunshine, clean beaches and murmuring seas. Stretches of lush tropical grass provided hunting grounds for grasshoppers and jungle nymphs and mangrove roots, rising like cages out of the sea, made ideal playgrounds. The jungles nearby offered wild fruits for the taking, though one had to be on guard lest snakes or wild boars were encountered.

I made friends with other children, in particular with Hamid, a boy a year and a half older than myself, and his sister, Fatima, who was my age. Fatima’s smiles and her dark, twinkling

eyes reminded me of my mother. Small gangs of us ran around freely, without shirts or shoes, swimming, playing games and hunting for rambutans, mangoes, guavas and breadfruit. When we grappled during games and in mock battles on the beaches I discovered that Fatima's skin also smelt fresh and sweet like my mother's.

My grandmother told me one day that Hamid and Fatima were different because their maternal grandmother was Chinese. She was known in the village as Old Sam. I had seen plenty of Chinese in Johore Bahru but I couldn't tell the difference in the case of Old Sam. The tropical sun had toned her skin into the same colour as ours. She looked just like another old villager in her sarong, chewing betel nuts.

Hamid was expert at climbing coconut trees and, whenever anyone needed a drink, he would scamper up and knock down a couple of fresh green ones. Fatima was very energetic and could run faster than most boys her age. We formed an immediate liking for each other.

One day, while a group of us was beachcombing, I found the skull of a dog or goat. It had been bleached white by sun and sea and its empty eyes and missing teeth seemed somehow pitiful. I squatted to examine it, not daring to touch it at first. It fascinated me because it had once been part of a living creature. Now its eyes and brains had been eaten by worms. That made me think of my mother. I could not bear the thought that worms might be eating her up at that very moment!

I broke into tears. The other children gathered around and asked what the matter was, but I could not explain.

I took the skull home, not wanting to part with it and yet not knowing what I wanted to do with it. My grandfather merely yawned his disinterest when I showed it to him. My grandmother, on the other hand, immediately ordered me to get rid of it. She said it might bring bad luck. I couldn't understand why. The skull was clean and had no smell. Hamid and I eventually buried it in a patch of jungle.

On our return to the village we found a government education official had turned up. He was a fat man, with a mean mouth and unfriendly eyes. His voice sounded loud and harsh as he berated heads of families for failing to send children to school. Hamid and I were shocked that the bad luck my grandmother had warned about had turned up so soon.

There was nothing we could do about it, however. The next day we put on white shirts and rubber sandals and trudged the two miles to the different schools for boys and girls in the nearest township. We could no longer stay as a group and Fatima and I felt that separation more than the others. The shirt collar scraped against my neck and the sandals did not make for easy walking.

"You should take the opportunity to learn as much as you can," my grandfather said, when I complained about school after the first day. "If you can master English you can land a good job, perhaps a government one in the Straits Settlements. That can bring a pension in your old age."

None of us was interested in jobs or pensions, however. The moment we got home we shed our school clothes and tried to resume our old carefree ways. But somehow things were no longer the same. School had cast a pall over our lives.

One afternoon, about three weeks after school started, I was playing near Fatima's home when her grandmother, Old Sam, caught hold of my arm. "Let me have a look at you," she said, and spun me around to study my back. She let out a cry.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Instead of answering, Old Sam dragged me back to my grandparent's hut. Fatima, Hamid and the other children followed in noisy procession.

"Look!" Old Sam said to my grandmother, pointing to a spot on my back. "He's been possessed by the Flying Serpent! That cluster is the head of the serpent. If he's not attended to, he'll die. It took the life of a cousin of mine when I was a child."

"What's a Flying Serpent? Where does it come from? Is it contagious?" my grandmother asked, befuddled and alarmed.

"It's a disease known to the Chinese, not contagious," Old Sam replied. "Don't know its origins but Chinese herbalists know how to treat it. Unattended, the serpent will grow. More clusters will appear to encircle his body like a coil. When the clusters have gone round his body, he will die."

I couldn't see what Old Sam was referring to but I could feel my grandmother's rough hand touching a spot on my right shoulder. When I reached for it myself, I felt a small collection of bumps, like hives or insect bites, the size of a large coin. The spot neither hurt nor itched.

"It's nothing," I said, brusquely, not wanting to appear a sissy before the other children. But my heart raced nevertheless when I saw my grandmother turning to my grandfather with a worried look.

"Probably insect bites," my grandfather said, phlegmatically. "Put some Tiger Balm on it."

My companions all wanted to feel the bumps on my shoulder and they did so while my grandmother went to fetch the Tiger Balm. The balm felt cool and refreshing but all the while I saw Old Sam shaking her head because her advice was being ignored.

"Tiger Balm no good for Flying Serpent," Old Sam muttered.

My grandfather did not take kindly to being contradicted by an old woman. He walked away as if Old Sam's talk of Chinese herbs and a strange disease were no more than the gibberings of a shaman.

I felt nothing unusual for a couple of days. During that time Fatima stuck close to me after school and every now and then ran her fingers over the bumps and asked if I felt any pain. I gave vague replies because I enjoyed her touch.

On the third day, however, I started developing a fever. At the same time I felt a burning sensation where the head of the Flying Serpent was supposed to be. When the fever climbed the following day and the bumps on my shoulder became more painful, my grandparents took me to a government clinic. The doctor gave me some pills and some ointment.

The medicines were no help. By evening another cluster of bumps appeared on my back, about two inches away from the first. It was slightly smaller in size but just as painful. By morning, a third cluster appeared.

The clusters seemed to follow a diagonal line across my back. I became dazed with fever and pain. My grandmother, now more deeply alarmed, went to fetch Old Sam. The old lady came and shook her head.

“Must get him to a Chinese herbalist,” Old Sam urged. “You can see the serpent crossing his back. There’s no time to lose. I’ve made calculations. According to Chinese lunar calendar, Anwar was born in Year of Serpent. The Flying Serpent is very dangerous for such people. In another day or two it will encircle him and it will be too late. Take him now. I can act as interpreter.”

My grandparents still hesitated, however. My grandfather thought we should give the medicines from the clinic a chance to work.

The next day I was drifting in and out of consciousness and a fresh cluster rounded my left side. Alarming visions of the skull I had buried flashed across my mind, magnified and seemingly alive. It took on the appearance of death itself, beckoning me with a hollow and demonic laughter.

During less frightening moments, I was conscious of confused sounds and murmurings. Fragments of agitated consultations between my grandparents and pleas from Fatima entered my brain.

“Please don’t die, Anwar. If you do I won’t have anyone to play with.” Fatima kept whispering close to my ear.

That afternoon my grandparents took me into the township, accompanied by Old Sam. The sole Chinese herbalist practising there prescribed some medicine which had to be boiled for hours before drinking. He also supplied a muddy reddish paste to be applied to the bumps several times a day.

The boiled medicine tasted foul. But after three days of it, my fever subsided. The reddish paste soothed the pain and brought a comforting sensation of warmth. The clusters gradually retreated, till only the original cluster remained. Within two weeks I was feeling my old self again.

But Old Sam told my grandparents the treatment was not complete.

“The Flying Serpent has not yet been killed,” Old Sam said. “It has only been made dormant. It may revive. According to the herbalist, the head must be destroyed, by scorching it with a red hot poker. That’s the only way to prevent a recurrence.”

My grandparents, however, balked at the idea. The original cluster of bumps was allowed to remain undisturbed. Over the years, the bumps faded and protruded less but remained visible. Fortunately, I have never felt the coil of the Flying Serpent again.

It has now been fifty years since my attack and almost forty years since Fatima and I married. I have also served for thirty-five years as a government clerk and earned my pension, just as my grandfather had foreseen. During that time, I have told and re-told my encounter with the

Flying Serpent to relatives and friends. They have asked to see and feel the cluster remaining on my right shoulder. Yet none of them had heard of such a disease nor could anyone offer an explanation as to why it should afflict me.

A week ago, however, Fatima and I were asked to dinner by a former colleague whose son had just returned after qualifying as a doctor at Liverpool. My friend invited me to relate my story to his son.

After I had finished, the young doctor said, deferentially, “I haven’t much practical experience, Uncle, but it sounds like a case of shingles. Half a century ago, when you had your attack, people didn’t know much about viral infections.

“Shingles is basically a viral infection of a nerve. There is a nerve running from the right shoulder round to the front of the belly, along which an infection could manifest itself. Not all the causes of viral attacks have been identified but over-exposure to the sun can be one of them. Once infected, the virus can develop along the path of the nerve, manifest itself in the form of hives and cause a rise in body temperature. In recent years, some new medicines have been developed. There’s one called Zovirax. If used early enough, the duration of the infection can be reduced.”

“But the herbal medicines I was given seemed to have worked on me,” I said.

“Well, that might have been a coincidence. My guess is that the paste you were given contained Capsaicin. That does bring relief to skin pains. On the other hand, there’s still a lot we don’t know about herbal medicines. Chinese herbalists have been at it for a long time and they might have stumbled onto something. There’s a lot of research going on now in Singapore and in Hong Kong.”

“Can shingles be life-threatening?” I asked.

“I’ve never heard so, though I can’t rule that out completely. There might be other complications. There’s still a lot we don’t know about viruses. Normally, when a virus attack is over, the body returns to normal.”

“Then how come I still have a cluster of bumps on my right shoulder after fifty years?”

“You’ve got me there, Uncle!”

It got Fatima too. Every now and then, when I emerge from the shower, Fatima would wonder aloud why the head of the Flying Serpant remained so stubbornly stamped on my shoulder. I myself give it no mind. I regard it as a happy souvenir, of the days when I was young and almost never lived to remember how wonderful they had been.

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An abbreviated version of **Coil of the Serpent** has appeared in the **Evening Standard** in London.