

Sane

By Zainab Nazari

One, two, two, and two, two, four.

She counts her trees. It seems that today she intends to imitate those neighbor ladies and be useful. Then she starts talking nonsense again: What is more important than a human being? What has made us think we are special in the first place? Perhaps, as her mother says, it is because we are sensible. Well, what is sense, and what use is it to us? She keeps talking and talking and talking. She never gets tired, and by talking to herself, she also disturbs whatever little peace the others have.

She pressed her hands firmly around the little pine tree she had planted and, with her usual laziness, stretched her arm as far as she could to reach the plastic watering can a little farther away. She poured some water over the tree, then watched an ant struggling to keep from drowning. Normally, she would have rescued it with a stick, but today she simply wanted to see how hard an ant would fight to stay alive. The ant crawled out of the water and began dragging itself toward dry ground with its two front legs, as though it were half-paralyzed. She looked at it and said, "If I were you, I would have given up the moment I realized how big that puddle was. Look at you now, as if you had a lifetime to live and a world to conquer."

Then she picked up the ant and crushed it between her thumb and index finger, because she believed that living on two legs would do it no favors. She stared at the ant's body, of which now nothing remained but a memory, and said, "How does a soul even fit inside such a tiny body?"

She wiped her fingernails on the corner of her blue pirahan-tomban and began planting the fifth little tree, the ones her mother had given her so she could catch a moment's breath away from her. And her pirahan-tomban? Yes, it was not considered suitable clothing for a girl, but Mineh was different. She did not mind. She did not even mind playing with the neighborhood boys at fourteen, with her height and build. She could even let the wind blow through her head and her tangled, curly yellow hair.

She was of average height but heavily built, with shoulders higher than usual and an even more unusual face. Her mouth appeared crooked, and her hair barely reached her shoulders. Despite all this, she had managed to convince people to leave her alone. Ever since the day she had started dancing in the alley for no reason, talking loudly to herself and laughing, the neighborhood women had stopped treating her kindly. They said Mineh was either possessed by a jinn or had gone mad. Of course,

because of her appearance, she had never been accepted as a normal human being in the first place. Sometimes, she would even hold herself tightly in her own arms and kiss her own hands.

Mineh herself found it amusing that they had no understanding of being alive and happy, and interpreted it as madness. What was wrong with considering yourself a person, talking to yourself, and kissing yourself?

She gave others the right to think whatever they wanted, but not the right to act on those thoughts simply because they believed they were right. She thought that as long as their thoughts did not lead to action, they had no value.

Of all the things she remembered from her childhood, The Willoughbys cartoon was the one she understood most. She had an unpleasant sense of familiarity with it. It reminded her of herself, except that she was an only child. Perhaps her parents had been sensible enough not to risk bringing a second Mineh into the world. They loved each other and, at least, accepted Mineh as their child. In fact, they had brought her into the world because she was supposed to be a boy. They were the ones who had been most shocked when they discovered that the child they had brought into the world was not only a girl but an unhealthy girl. They named her Mineh in an attempt to make themselves love her. According to them, this unlovable creature was God's way of testing them.

She was not pleased with the way they looked at her, but she was comfortable with it. She had developed this way of thinking while listening to a neighboring woman who complained about her life to another neighbor. They spoke as though Mineh were not even there. The neighbor, exhausted by the heavy burden of housework and being a wife, glanced at Mineh in the middle of her lament and said, "In this world, you shouldn't be sensible enough to carry other people's sorrows; you should be mad enough for others to carry yours." The words stung, but for a moment, Mineh tried to think about what the woman had said and came to the conclusion that she was not entirely wrong.

Over the years, she had grown accustomed to the freedom she had without ever really thinking about it. At least in that alley, she was the only one who could say whatever she wanted, dance whenever she wanted, and wear whatever she wanted. Besides, people gave her whatever she asked for, either to earn a good deed or to get rid of her, like the mirror she had received from the neighboring woman. She did not even have to suffocate herself in a chador during the summer heat just to satisfy people. In their eyes, an empty head did not need to be covered.

She had come to the conclusion that a human being was nothing more than their thoughts, and if those thoughts did not resemble those of the society they lived in, the

person was mad.

Once again, she counts her trees: one, two, two, and two, two, four.