

Bad Monkey

by Katrina Dessavre

The hotel sits on the highest point in Shimla: a place of cedar-scented air, an aggressive monkey population, and summer houses left by the British Raj. The owner keeps the fireplace going in every room, serves afternoon tea, and remembers when his grandfather used to smoke cigars in the sitting room.

One morning in April, as he polishes the breakfast trays that will go up to the guest rooms, he hears the soft slap of travel booklets fall to the floor and rapid steps climb the carpeted staircase. He stacks the trays and listens. A floorboard shrieks upstairs. The cook, the only one up at this hour, knows how to move through the house quietly. He hears a curtain ring fall to the floor, then nothing.

The door is open and an icy gust follows him up the staircase.

"Hello?" he whispers.

The curtains lie in a heap, too heavy to move in the wind that now ruffles the flowers. He looks outside. Light snow covers the oblong leaves of the rhododendron bushes, about envelop the house in splashes of bright scarlet.

Beyond the potted plants and paved yard, a shower of white dust disturbs a thicket of firs. He quints. First he sees the grey-brown figure bobbing up and down, then the flushed face, then the tiny fingers gripping a stack of rupees.

Before he sets off, out the door, down the flagstone path, past the abandoned tennis courts, and after the monkey who holds the week's tips, stored always under an antique butter dish, he thinks of his grandfather. He did not polish breakfast trays, or get up early, but he did employ a servant whose only job was to shoo away monkeys.

