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(Novel – Approx. 87,000 words)

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One

It was a cold and frosty Sunday morning. The sun hadn't peeped out once in this fortnight run up to Christmas. Fourteen year old Paro kicked viciously at a loose stone and it rattled some way up the road leading into Somerville village, before coming to a halt at the root of a tall downy birch. Paro had no eyes for the beautiful tree with its hairy shoots and leaf stalks, its tooth edged leaves and its fertilized catkins bursting into winged seeds. Her thick black eyebrows were knitted together in anger and her head felt close to bursting. For a moment she stopped and tucking her riding hat under her arm, balanced herself on one foot to ease the gaiter buckle that had been chafing at her left calf the whole morning, then continued walking homewards, her jodhpurs going clop, clop on the metal road.

Past old Mr. Robertson's tucked-down-the-river-side cottage with the thick, dark, glossy leaved holly fencing which he and his wife had planted in the belief that it would protect the property against lightning strikes, sickness and witchcraft. It had provided Christmas

décor for the neighbourhood but not protection for the couple. Within months his wife had died of undetected cancer. Now he lived alone, and wandered the English country side every day with his drawing easel and a packet of sandwiches, sketching rare flowers and shrubs which most people never noticed.

Sometimes Paro would stop to admire Mr. Robertson's sketches. Today she just walked past without even turning her head towards his house. Past Blueberry Lane where blueberry smells had long been smothered by the nose tingling smells of roasted red chilli and asafoetida and the mouth watering aroma of home made pickles and pappads from the closely huddled hobnobbing homes of the large Indian community of Somerville village.

Through the veil of the thick straight black hair falling over her eyes, Paro could see Patel Auntie in her garden, one hand holding her cell to her ear, the other gesticulating in excitement. All the village gossip if it did not originate from her, travelled through her along with the packets of methi theplas she supplied to those who were too busy playing rummy to cook their own. Both theplas and gossip did roaring business. Paro hurried on, past the old church towards Johns, the village store.

Suddenly she stopped dead in her track...

Mayhem. Shattered glass on the road side... broken panes. Strewn groceries... coffee dust coated, ketchup stained newspaper bundles scattered. Christmas trinkets - silver stars yellow and slimy with broken eggs... milk cartons burst... crushed geranium tumbling out of their green plastic pots... The book basket John always left out for anyone to help himself or to replenish, upturned. Trampled books... pierced can of orange enamel paint leaking slowly on to the kerbside...

Paro stood shocked, immobilized.

Just three hours ago when she had left for Harriet's Riding School, Somerville had been its usual peaceful self. The turmoil had all been inside her alone. As she had walked up to the intersection waiting to be picked up she had been seething with anger at her best friends Peter and Mansi. Peter in fact, had had the guts to call her early that morning.

"Did you go with your parents to the Indian do at London last evening?" He asked in a tight, abrupt voice.

"How was the barbeque last night?" Paro countered.

"Answer me Paro. Did you go to London with your parents?"

"No, I didn't," Paro said shortly. "How does it matter? You obviously had a great time."

He was quiet for a moment, then asked

"Why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why didn't you go? You had told Mansi you were going."

She exploded.

"Since when have I to give you explanations of why I do things and why I don't! You or your girlfriend Mansi for that matter!"

"What did you say?"

"What you heard! Look I'm getting late for riding, okay?"

"Yeah sure! Go ahead. Go on."

Paro banged the phone down. Obviously he was not coming riding. He must have other plans – with other friends, friends who cracked silly jokes and dressed up as if they were going for a fashion parade.

“Peter rang up to say he won’t be coming – his dad has asked his help to clean up their garage,” Charles from the neighbouring village said as she got into his car. Charles, Peter and Paro normally went riding together. Their parents took turns to drop them at Harriet’s Riding School.

She stared out of the window.

“Excuses!” She snorted.

“Why would he make excuses?”

She continued to stare out of the window.

Charles looked at her puzzled.

“Hey what’s up with you?”

“Forget it, will you?” she snapped.

For a while he watched her ferret the inside of her right thumb against the corner of her ring finger nail then he shrugged and left her alone.

At Harriet’s Paro went straight to Sir Lancelot’s stall. All she wanted to do was to go cantering wildly out. Before she could even start saddling him, Harriet, the tall, muscular, horse faced owner cum riding instructor was by her side.

“What do you think you are doing?” She asked her voice like the small sharp whip that never left her hand. “No riding for you today. Go groom Betty and then Sir Lancelot.”

Paro opened her mouth to protest then quickly shut it. No one argued with Harriet. Ever.

Pursing her lips she strode towards Betty who now occupied the stall that had always been Maharaja’s.

Picking up the first dandy that came to her hand Paro started brushing Betty's coat with sharp, short, angry strokes. Betty squirmed, pawed and tried to twist away. Paro looked at her in exasperation then she sighed.

"Okay, okay! I'm sorry! I'm really sorry!" She murmured. How could she have taken out her anger on poor Betty?

'When choosing which body brush to use, take into account the level of sensitivity of your horse. If your horse has a thin, short coat, a very stiff brush will go straight to his skin and feel like a rasp! On the other hand, if he has a slightly longer and very thick coat, a soft brush will just bounce off his natural thatching and do nothing to remove the dirt lurking beneath.' How could she have ignored the basics of grooming that Harriet had drilled into their heads - this about the brush and also that following a routine helps relax and soothe the horse?

Detangle the tail first...

Paro picked up a plastic knob-end bristle brush, took Betty's tail in her left hand and ran her right hand down toward the bottom until only a couple of inches remained below her hand, then holding the tail hair against her thigh, began gently using the brush to separate the ends of the hair till she was able to comb easily through these few inches. She moved her left hand a little further up the tail combing through the bottom six inches tail hair till she could remove it from her leg and comb through it hanging in the air.

As she continued working her way up Betty's tail, she was thinking of Maharaja, the highly intelligent and sensitive, chestnut coloured Highland pony with a thick brown flowing mane that had been his grandfather's gift to Peter on his twelfth birthday. Harriet had offered to house him and look after him and Maharaja had soon become an adored

favourite. Two years later he had died of recurring colic that every time left him restlessly pawing the ground or rolling on it in an effort to disperse the pain. The vet was called. He diagnosed a malignant tumour in the intestine. Peter had been heart broken. By the time Paro had got Betty's whole tail tangle free, swept out the dirt from her skin with a soft body brush, removed the residual whitish, greasy scurf with a finishing brush, and repeated the same procedure with Sir Lancelot, she herself was feeling soothed and relaxed. Harriet came up, nodded approvingly and signalled that she could now ride out. Of all her students Peter and Paro were the only ones who were allowed to ride alone out of the riding school.

Sensing where she wanted to go, without much guidance Sir Lancelot trotted up the bridle path to the left of Bishop's View till they reached the highest point on the hill, the P2 or Peter-Paro View as Peter had named it when they were kids. Two chestnut trees, with their bark split with age into wide spiralling grooves stood on either side of the small patch of flat. When they had first discovered the place, five years ago, Peter had smuggled up two old tyres and rigged them up on the stout lower branches. Paro grinned as she remembered how they would try to swing hard towards each other so that they could touch toes. In autumn they would vie with the squirrels to pick up the nuts fallen out of their prickly, leathery casings and Peter, three years older than her, would show off his superior knowledge... "Did you know Roman soldiers lived on sweet chestnut porridge?"

She tethered Sir Lancelot to one of trees and while he grazed, stood silently watching the breathtaking view of the green, undulating English countryside. Softly, without warning, snow flakes started falling. Wafting, gently alighting on the branches of the two old trees,

on the quietly grazing Sir Lancelot, on her riding hat, her outstretched hands... Paro smiled. This was their own secret, beautiful place – this was where Peter and she had talked so often of their dream of starting a riding school together when they grew up... and where according to Mansi, Peter had brought Mansi...

The thought made her head ache with a dull, angry throbbing. Abruptly she got up, mounted Sir Lancelot and returned.

Her throat felt sore and scratchy, as if she was going to come down with fever and her head still throbbed as she stood in the village square, immobilized, staring in shock at the mayhem outside John's store...

Suddenly she heard Mansi's voice.

"Paro! Omigod Paro!"

Mansi was running towards her, her dyed-blond hair gleaming in the half light. With her was another blonde haired girl in jeans – undoubtedly one of her gang of 'Blondsies', Paro thought with a grimace.

Only a year ago Mansi, a year younger than her, had been happy hanging around in ordinary jeans and tees, her bespectacled nose buried in books. But within a month of entering Barnesville High, she had totally changed. Thrilled that she had been invited to be part of Eleanor Davis's close knit gang of blond haired, blue-eyed girls - Jennifer Crewe or Jensie; Patricia Firth or Patsie and Eleanor Davis or Elsie - all of whom sported long blond, silky straight hair, were perpetually on some diet or the other, and wore only Habitual jeans and silk blouses with low necks, Mansi had added an 'e' at the end of her name and now spelt it 'Mansie' and dyed her hair blonde to match theirs. She could however, do nothing about the colour of her black eyes. She fretted over it all the more

because her elder sister, in a throw back to their father's north-west Indian ancestry, had green-blue eyes. She fretted too, about her breast size and the fact that she had yet to start her period.

“Oh that Mansi,” Paro's mom, eyeing her own daughter's well developed glands with maternal pride, had exclaimed once. “She's driving her mother crazy worrying about her breast size. For God's sake it will happen when it will happen. You can't rush such things, can you?”

Although Paro's father actually had more in common with Peter's cricket crazy father, because their ancestors had lived, once upon a time, in the same village near Lahore in the once upon a time united India, there was a special bond between Mansi's and Paro's families. In fact their mothers had a strong resemblance – the same thick, black, glossy hair, the same large, limpid black eyes – but there the similarities ended. Her own mother was a perfectionist. Even though she was a vet and worked full time at the Crescent Vet Clinic, any time she got a chance she would spend hours dusting and polishing, cleaning each little crevice in the carved furniture in their living room. Mansi's mom spent most mornings playing rummy – their house was always cluttered and spilling over with things so that when you walked you had to be careful you didn't accidentally drop something. Her two daughters were left pretty much to their own devices.

As Mansi came nearer, Paro could see that the blonde girl with her was Elsie and close on their heels were Kaustav and Ojas. Osh-Kosh as the eleven-year old Soota twins were known, were always hanging around Mansi. They must have all been having lattes at the Starbucks outlet, opened recently on the road to Branson. The thought of Branson

brought back all her anger. That was where Peter and Mansi had gone for the barbeque last night. Paro thrust her lower lip out pugnaciously.

“Omigod, Paro!” Elsie’s blue eyes were wide and her right hand fluttered near her chest.

“Where have you like been?”

“Have you heard about the rape?” Mansi exclaimed breathlessly, her fair face flushed, the wings of her pert little nose flaring with the exertion of having run all the way down the road.

“Rape? What on earth are you talking about?” Paro asked irritated at the identical way both of them were twirling the long strings of pearls wound around their necks. With distaste she eyed their Chanel eye liner and mascara, their Kiss Me glossed lips and their new set of finger nails acquired specifically for yesterday’s barbeque. Standing beside them in jodhpurs, smelling of horse shit, she was feeling ungainly and gawky.

“There’s been a rape, Paro! A rape!” Mansi exclaimed.

“Here! In our village!” Osh and Kosh whispered in one voice.

“You’re crazy!” Paro glared angrily at Mansi. “Do you even know the meaning of the word rape?”

Mansi looked pained. She sniffed delicately.

“Puh-lease! How old do you think I am? Rape is a forceful penetration of...”

“Stop it!” Paro cried. “You’re sick – simply sick! What’s been happening here?”

“See, last night this girl was seen coming out of John’s,” Mansi waved her hands delicately. “Her clothes were torn and she was like literally sobbing her heart out.”

Paro stared at them.

“How do you know she was raped?” She snapped.

“Paro!” Mansi cried. “Just look at your thumb. You’ve been scratching at it again. It’s so raw and red. How many times has your mom told you...?”

“You leave my thumb alone, okay?” Paro cried putting her hand behind her. “Just answer me. How can you guys be so sure the girl was raped, hunh?”

“At that time of the night - what else could it be?”

“She could be crying for any reason - maybe she hadn’t gone to Johns at all! Maybe... oh anything!”

“With a skirt blouse open in front? We can swear it was torn!” Kosh interrupted turning to Osh for support.

Paro made an impatient sound

“It was torn!” Osh nodded vigorously in confirmation.

“With a torn blouse you think it wasn’t rape –at least an attempt to rape?” Elsie asked.

“And it was an Indian girl,” she added. “Dark skin, dark hair tied in a knot...”

Mansi giggled.

“And to think we used to think John was queer!”

Paro made a disgusted clucking sound with her tongue.

“How can you think that of John?” She said sharply. “How can you spread such rumours?

Does anyone know for sure? Why didn’t the girl make a noise? Why hasn’t she spoken up?”

“Don’t be silly!” Cried Mansi. “Who would want to speak of it? Who would want to own up to such a thing? Take it from me – it’s confirmed...”

“The whole village was here. Ask any of the boys,” Elsie waved a hand at the mess outside John’s.

“Ask Kiki,” said Osh-Kosh wide-eyed. “Kiki and his gang will tell you...”

“John? What did John say?”

“John refused to own up – what else would you expect from him? But everyone agrees.

Even Peter who tried to cool tempers, was in the end...”

“Where’s Peter?”

Now they were all talking together and her head was bursting. Paro put her hand to her head.

“Please!” She cried. “Can someone tell me clearly what happened?”

“See we had gone to the barbeque – Peter and I – you were to go to London, remember?

On our return...”

Paro’s black eyes glinted.

“We were supposed to go together to the barbeque,” she thought angrily, “and you...”

“We were in the car with Peter – we saw the girl,” said Osh. “Michelle and Barbara were with us in the car too. We all saw her.”

“We’re the ones who rang up Kiki,” Kosh added proudly.

“At six in the morning...”

“We couldn’t sleep thinking about it. We had to tell someone, and Kiki...”

Kiki had gone into action immediately. Within an hour the whole village and its neighbourhood knew that an Indian girl had been dishonoured and everyone was gathering at Johns to confront him. It was time to teach the Brits that you couldn’t fool around with an Indian!

“You should have seen the crowds that gathered. Almost everyone was there... from the neighbouring village too.”

“The boys were right in front. You should have seen them haranguing John. Peter tried...”

“Where’s Peter?”

“First they just bombarded John with questions... What were you doing last night? Who visited the shop last night?”

“And John was all the time like, ‘I don’t remember... I don’t know...’”

“Then they started manhandling him.”

“He really got pushed around... ‘How can you not remember? How many people visited you last night?’”

“Soon it turned ugly.”

“See, there were these boys from outside - Kiki’s friends from Leicester - and they were willing to go to any length to make John confess. Peter tried to...”

“Where is Peter? Mansi?”

“By now they started vandalising the shop,” Kosh cried. “It was like crazy. They...”

“Mostly it was the outside boys who did that,” Osh said.

Kosh nodded.

“They pulled down things from the shelves. Smashed stuff, opened cartons, spilled them all over - and all the time John didn’t do a thing. He just let the mob loot the shop and...”

Elsie tucked straying blond hair behind her ears.

“Mansie and I could see everything from the Starbucks windows,” she said. “Everyone was just so, so angry.”

“You’ve been at Starbucks all the time?”

Elsie nodded.

“But we were right here where the action was,” Kosh said proudly. “All the time – it was pretty scary actually. Almost as if everyone had been waiting for something like this, raring to take revenge for so many things...”

“All the stuff people talk about in their drawing rooms – it was just like tumbling out in the open. You should have heard the things they were saying...”

“Like airport security...”

“The way they treat the Indian docs.”

“Like police always targets the Asian community – they blame us for anything that happens – now let’s see what the police have to say.”

“Of course Peter’s dad, that pigeon-chested Mr. Clapton and some of the others tried to cool tempers,” Mansi said. “And in the midst of it all poor Peter...”

Paro grabbed Mansi’s wrist.

“Where is Peter? What’s happened to Peter?”

“We’re trying to tell you...”

“Tell me now!”

“See Peter was trying to calm things down and...”

“The police came,” Elsie said. “John has been taken in for questioning. He has not yet returned home.”

“Kiki and some others were also rounded up.”

Paro tightened her hold on Mansi’s wrist. Her voice was shrill now.

“Mansi I asked you where is Peter?”

“Peter? Didn’t I tell you that Peter is hurt... that was before the police came.”

“He was trying to reason with the boys,” said Kosh, “and that just angered Kiki more.

They started arguing.”

“Kiki pushed him,” Elsie said, “and Peter sort of lost balance and fell on the metal spikes of the low fencing around John’s.”

“He has been taken to London,” Mansi said. “To a London hospital..”

“John called for the ambulance,” Osh added.

“Peter is hurt!” Paro cried. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We’ve just told you, haven’t we?” Mansi said.

Paro brushed her aside.

“London? Did you say they’ve taken him to London?”

Mansi nodded.

Abruptly Paro turned away. She was almost running now, trying desperately to get on to her Mom’s cell, as she ran up the slope into Bishop’s Close towards her house. Her parents had been one of the first Indians to buy property in Somerville village that is why they lived a little away from the other Indian families who came later and bought property close to each other, clustered much lower down in the village.

She was still trying to hit the buttons on her cell phone as with her left hand she inserted the key into the lock and pushed with her knee to open the door. She wriggled out of her jacket, pulled off her jodhpurs and shoved both into the shoe cupboard, forcing the door shut. Her mother could sort it out when she returned.

In the kitchen on an open shelf above the grocery cupboard, was her mom’s pantheon of Gods and Goddesses where every morning, after her bath she would light a lamp. Every time Paro came into the house she would wiggle her fingers in a perfunctory ‘Hi!’ at the

sandalwood Krishna statue that had pride of place in the centre. Today as she walked past the shelf towards the refrigerator she glared at the statue.

“You expect me to say Hi to you?” She muttered. “Call yourself God? How can you let such things happen... maybe you get a perverse pleasure out of troubling human beings, hunh?”

On the refrigerator was a stick-it note from her mom.

‘Aloo paranthas inside! Love you – see you soon. Mom’

She crushed the note and flung it on the ground. Food was the last thing on her mind and the thought of paranthas in particular made her want to puke. Why did her mom persist in trying to feed her paranthas when she knew very well she preferred a simple sandwich any day?

Opening a Pepsi can, she drained it.

Just then her cell rang.

“Paro, were you trying to call, beta? Have you reached home? How did the riding go? I left some paranthas in...”

“Mom! Where have you been? For God’s sake I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for ages!”

“What’s the...”

“Mom listen there’s been a riot here. Peter is hurt – he’s been taken to a hospital in London. I don’t know which one.”

“I’ll find out and...”

“No, mom I’m coming to London.”

“I’m glad – you can attend Banjo’s Biryani Bash in the evening... you’ll enjoy it. You know how lavish his annual affair is. This year there’s going to be a Dandiya after...”

“Mom I’m not talking about the stupid Biryani Bash... I don’t care... but if anything happens to Peter... I’ll never forgive myself.”

“Don’t be silly, beta. How could you help it if he got hurt in a riot?”

“Mom, I...”

“You can’t take responsibility for everything, can you? Look Paro he’ll be okay... In the meantime I’ll call up the Rahejas to pick you up. They’re coming in today, leaving at three I think.”

“That’ll be too late! I can’t wait that long!” Paro wailed.

Her mother sighed into the phone.

“Always so impatient! Okay, why don’t you call up Raheja aunty and...?”

Paro disconnected.

“Aunty could we leave early? Now?”

“Now? The earliest we can leave is after an hour.”

Two hours later Paro was wailing to her mom again.

“We’re still on M1! Some horses on the loose – traffic is held up. How can people be so irresponsible?”

“Don’t worry, beta. Peter is in excellent hands. They took him to St. Marks. At first they suspected a perforated intestine but it’s not...”

“Kiki pushed him mom! Mansi told me Kiki pushed him onto a metal spike. Suppose his intestines are damaged... or any of his internal organs... sometimes it doesn’t show immediately... he could bleed to death! I remember reading about a woman who was

involved in an accident. An intestinal rupture was not diagnosed by emergency. A week later when she went to the hospital complaining of pain, they operated but by that time the infection had spread and she died, mom! She...

“Stop it! Get a hold on your imagination, child. Peter is being attended to by the best doctors.”

But Paro could not get a hold on her imagination. By the time they reached London, she was convinced Peter was on his deathbed.

At the hospital she was not allowed to see Peter but his mom patted her hand and said he'd be fine.

“It's not as serious as they had suspected. He'll be out in two days. You go for the Biryani Bash and the Dandiya dance. You know Peter would have loved to go if he was okay. You can describe it all to him later.”

It was true, Paro thought as they entered the gates of the modernised old Victorian House set in one and a half acres of sprawling lush south facing gardens, that was now incongruously called Banjo's Den. Here balding old Dr. Sharad Bannerjee, Banjo to his friends, held his annual Biryani Bash for all his British and Indian friends and their families. Peter would have loved it. He loved anything Indian – inherited it from his great grand father.

An officer in the British army, his great grand father had been posted in India and Peter still remembered sitting on his knee and listening to wild, exotic tales about the country. They said he had married an Indian woman – an Indian princess some said. One day he returned home with an eight-year old son - Peter's grand father - and enough jewels to buy property. His Scottish parents never forgave him for bringing home a half breed with

wild ways. According to them the only good thing the boy did was to bring home a sweet English wife when he grew up. Together they started a Pub in Somerville village. Peter's grand mother ran the Pub and it was said her Indian curry was something to die for! She had got the recipe from her father in law who had got it from his Indian Princess.

Peter still owned his great grand father's solar topee and still loved to hear tales of India. He could sit for hours listening to Paro's father talk of peacocks and dancing monkeys and kite flying and crisp syrupy sweet jalebis, served on leaf platters.

"I can't understand why anyone would leave all that lovely Indian sunshine to come and live with this dreary British weather," he would sigh.

He would have loved all this glam and glitter, Paro thought as she stood hesitantly at the garden entrance, aware for the first time that she had come in a pair of old jeans and a non descript tee. Around her everyone was shimmering in silk and glittering with jewels. Kiki's mom was there waving her diamond ringed fingers.

"Really! If you haven't been for this Masala Cruise," she was telling the motley group around her, "you haven't lived. It's out of this world. Really! They take you across the Panama Canal – and the food – authentic tandoori, original dal makhani! And dancing everyday with Jasbir Jassi himself singing 'Dil le gai Kudi Punjab di...'"

Her fat, protruding bottom wiggled as she did a little jig.

Lanky, bony faced Rimi Talwar who ran a placement service, picked her long teeth with the visiting card a young hopeful had given her minutes before.

"Did you hear about the rape in Leicester?" She asked sucking at her teeth to dislodge a stubborn food particle.

"Somerville."

“Yes. Yes. Same thing... just imagine the audacity of this British store keeper. I believe there was riot of sorts and some people, including our boys, were rounded up for questioning.”

“My Kiki was there. Right up there in front,” Kiki’s mom nodded proudly. “He can’t bear to see injustice you see – he has to speak up - even if it puts his own life in jeopardy!”

“One of the British boys was hurt I believe. Had to be brought to a London hospital...”

“Accident,” Kiki’s mom said shortly. “Peter admitted to the police that it was just an accident and no one was to blame. The boys have all been let off by the police.”

Paro turned away. She saw her father in a group.

“Hey guys,” he was announcing with gay enthusiasm. “Mehta’s daughter is engaged!”

There was a round of congratulations. The girl’s father looked down sheepishly.

“It’s not like that yaar,” he whispered. “She is marrying a white guy.”

Just then he got a call from India.

“Yes, yes, it’s true. Haan ji. Haan ji Beji, it is true! Very soon – we will bring them to see you very soon,” He yelled into his cell phone.

Paro winced. Why did they all do that? The moment there was a call from India, they raised their voices as if they wanted to be heard across the oceans without the aid of telephony. Why? Her father did it all the time when he talked to his business associates back home.

She turned her back on their loud mouthed chatter. Very soon they’d be cracking dirty jokes in Hindi and spluttering with smothered laughter. Or sentimentally hugging each other, bleary eyed and overcome with emotions at some remembered scene of some old Bollywood tearjerker.

Paro's eyes swept the crowds trying to locate her mother.

Old Banjo uncle had outdone himself this time. He had imported chefs all the way from India and the aroma of goat meat slowly simmering in milk and saffron, cardamom and almonds, wafted through the air. An admiring crowd watched as one of them twirled dough in the air, till it fell onto the back of his hands as a perfectly shaped naan which he plastered on to the walls of charcoal oven.

The chaat stall was surrounded by chattering ladies.

"I don't like these gloves-shoves, yaar," one of them mumbled. "Real taste comes when the chaat wala stirs the spicy water with his bare arms."

The chaat wala grinned and obliged. They giggled as he came up with the chickpea, potato and chutney laced spicy-water laden balls and with a flourish, put them one by one in each one of their leaf plates.

Just then Paro spotted her mom in a group from Somerville. Kiki's mom was shepherding her son towards the group.

"Everyone wants to meet you son," she said waving at an empty chair. "You were really brave today. I mean the way you took the initiative today – very commendable. Really!"

"Yes, yes!" Fat Mrs. Patel nodded. She waved the cottage cheese filled chilly pakora like a flag. "These are nice," she murmured between bites. "Almost as good as mine."

"Not really," said dark skinned, Mrs. Krishnamurthy, her diamond studded nose ring glinting. "Not half as good as the snacks you make for your kitty party."

Mrs. Patel nodded in gracious acknowledgement.

His mother stood behind him as Kiki, short and squat, eased himself into the empty chair and stretched one leg out.

“The first thing we have to do,” he said slowly and thoughtfully, his looking-London-seeing-Paris eyes small and sharp in his dark pock marked face, “is to find out who the poor girl is.”

He shifted slightly, dug into his pocket and brought out a Hershey’s Kiss dark chocolate, removed the wrapper, and popped it into his mouth.

Mrs Patel nodded emphatically.

“Point is,” she said, “who are the tall girls in Somerville?”

“And who are the girls who wear a chignon?” Someone added.

Kiki passed his hand over his hair, as if he drawing attention to his smouldering looks.

“It’s a pity we have to go to Switzerland, tomorrow,” his mom sighed. “I hate to miss out on anything happening in Somerville.”

“Varma’s daughter!” someone snapped her fingers. “She is tall and she wears a chignon”

Mrs. Patel sighed.

“I had warned her mother even earlier when she started going for all those theatre workshops with that new Bengali teacher who took up residence in the village three months ago.”

“The Varmas are not here!” Someone demurred. “Went on a holiday two weeks ago.”

“Your Lila is always in and out of John’s, isn’t she?” Mrs. Patel turned a suspicious eye on Mrs. Krishnamurthy.

“Lila?” Mrs. Krishnamurthy protested. “Lila is five feet nothing!”

“So what?” Mrs. Patel retorted. “Did the boys who saw the girl coming out of Johns put a measuring tape to the girl they saw?”

“It doesn’t matter who the poor girl is,” Kiki’s mother intervened in a placating voice.

“What matters is that we put our collective foot down and let this country know that some things we will just not tolerate and rape – my God never!”

“Paro!” Her mother saw her just then and got up to hug her.

Paro brushed her aside. Her face was flushed.

“How can you keep calling it a rape?” She snapped angrily.

“Paro, beta...,” her mom tried to put a calming hand on her arm.

“Even the police let John off... Why can’t you guys just leave this whole issue alone?”

Paro glared belligerently around.

“Paro did you bring my silver sandals, beta?” Her mom said trying desperately to change the topic.

“What? No. I couldn’t find them. How can you guys...”

“Did you look properly beta? I’ve talked so much of them – everyone wanted to see the new sandals that...”

“I told you I looked for it everywhere, didn’t I?” Paro snapped at her mom and then turned to Kiki who was saying in a soft dark deliberate voice.

“Sure John has been let off for now but the issue is not dead. We will not let it die. Wait till we get proof – no way John can be allowed to get away with a rape.”

Paro clenched her fists.

“Stop it! Stop it!” She cried her voice thin and shrill. “How can you keep calling it a rape? How can you know for sure?”

“Besides,” she added flinging her thick black hair out of her face, “if the girl involved wanted your help she would have asked, wouldn’t she? And suppose the girl had voluntarily gone to John. It’s a free world. Who can stop her?”

Everyone stared at her.

Kiki closed his eyes as he let the dark chocolate roll in his mouth. He sighed.

“An Indian girl?” he asked his voice smooth like dark chocolate. “If an Indian girl – a Hindu girl - has voluntarily gone to a Brit store keeper we will find out who she is and kill her. No way will we let go of this quietly.”

Paro glared at him. Belligerently she put her hand on her hip and cried

“And you are the keeper of morals of the Indian community, are you? You, who...”

Her mother pushed back her chair. With one hand she propelled Paro away, the other hand she placed on her forehead.

“Oh my God! Paro! You are burning with fever...”

“I want to go home,” Paro cried petulantly. “I told you I didn’t want to come to this stupid party.”

On the drive back her mother scolded her.

“What was the need to start arguing with that Kiki!”

“If they want to find out whether there is any truth in the rumour... let them!” Her father added in exasperation. “How does it matter to us this way or that?”

Paro stared at them then shrugged.

“Oh leave me alone – stop picking on me!”

Back home, her body burning with fever, Paro slept fitfully. The refrain in her brain stayed - hot and feverish... Kiki's words... "We will kill her... No way will we let go of this quietly."

Monday morning. Paro was alone in the house. Her father had gone to work and her mother had been called to attend to an emergency in the Clinic.

Before going she checked Paro's temperature.

"Not so high, thank God. Will you be okay?" She looked worriedly at her. "Call me if it rises again. Luckily it's Stella's day today. She can check on you when she comes in to clean up."

Mansi called up after her mother had left.

"I rang up three-four times earlier. Your mom keeps saying you are not well – what's wrong with you? I can't believe you can remain cooped up in your room when there's so much excitement in the village. We're all meeting to talk about this rape case and..."

"Look! I'm running temperature," Paro said shortly. "In any case I have no interest in this stupid so-called rape case of yours."

"Okay," Mansi's voice was unbelieving. "If you're better, come. It's noon now. In another three hours everyone is meeting at..."

Paro clicked herself out.

Mansi didn't call again. Stella came and went. It grew quiet in the house.

Like a grave, Paro thought deliriously. A tomb. In memory of the dead. The murdered.

Murdered for revenge. For dishonour avenged.

Suppose...

Her fever started rising again... again Kiki's refrain in her brain... "We will kill her... No way will we let go of this quietly."

Suppose...

"Shut up Paro! Shut up!" Paro silent screamed at herself. "Get a hold on your negative imagination."

Restlessly she thrashed about in bed. Lost and alone, so very alone...

"God!" She whimpered to herself.

"Why don't you try speaking to God about all this?"

Paro opened one eye and peered out. That was Beji's voice... Mansi's grandmother. She put her head under the duvet again. Beji had gone back to India with Mansi's elder sister to find a groom for her.

But Beji's voice persisted.

"Hey Bhagwan! Raksha karna sabki, Please..."

Beji's constant refrain. How she and Mansi used to laugh at the way Beji, would every few minutes, appeal to God to protect everyone! Please!

"You speak to him as if he is real," Paro had asked her once.

Beji had looked shocked.

"Of course he is real child... how can you doubt that?"

"And his name is Kanhayia?" Paro had sniggered. "Come off it Beji... you really think we are kids!"

"But he is real," Beji had insisted. "More real than you and me, child. You can call him by any name... what's in a name?"

"And he has an e-mail id and a telephone line maybe?"

Paro had winked at Mansi and Mansi had winked back. Beji saw them and smiled.

“You can laugh if you like but when you need him He will come. Communicate with Him whichever way you like – if you call upon Him genuinely, with all your heart, He will respond.”

“How do I communicate with him? Where do I get his telephone number – his e-mail id?” Paro had persisted with her joke.

And Mansi’s grandmother had replied in all seriousness, “When you really need him, he will find a way to tell you.”

Paro closed her eyes and repeated. “Hey Bhagwan! Raksha karna. Please! I need your help. I desperately need your help.”

Nothing happened.

Paro squeezed her eyes tighter and prayed harder. Nothing happened – there was no answering voice.

“So where are you God?” Paro croaked her lips hot and dry with the fever. “Now that I need you, why don’t you respond? Where do I get your number, hunh? Do I call the Vodafone Helpline? Will they give me your number?”

Nothing happened.

Only the window pane rattled. It grew dark outside. A storm was building up.

Two

“Dear...” typed Satya Sharma.

‘It looks like you are writing a letter,’ said the paperclip.

Impatiently Satya zapped it.

“Dear Blind Woman’s son”, she wanted to write because that was the way she had always thought of Bimal Bose, her boss. All these years she had never really forgiven him for having allowed his mother to die alone in an Old Home. For her he remained and would always remain the Blind Woman’s son.

“Dear Sir”, she wrote instead.

Suddenly she stiffened. Stomach knotted, eyes squeezed tight she held her breath waiting for the sharp pang of pain in her lower back to pass. She balled up her fists and put them between her back and the Amron executive chair back rest that the Blind Woman’s son had one day quietly ordered for her.

Breathe deep, breathe deep, she intoned to herself. It was no use. The misshapen wings of her nostrils remained immobile. The pain would not let her breathe.

Softly she groaned to herself. One day this pain would kill her. If only she could have brought some of her home made balm. Its spreading warmth would have brought her some relief but she couldn’t. She could never bring it to office. The strong pungent smell would spread through the office highlighting the fact that at seventy four, she was a total

misfit in this bustling all glass and chrome and vitrified marble tiled Call Centre with fourteen hundred smart young people working 24x365, handling multifarious back office tasks - operating a help desk, responding to credit card enquiries, preparing invoices, pay rolls, cheques, reconciling daily accounts, writing medical transcriptions, processing applications, billings and collections. A total misfit... she should have resigned years ago.

The pang passed and settled into a dull throbbing that was somehow more bearable. She stared at the computer screen. How do you write a letter of resignation that is more like writing a death sentence for yourself?

“You just write it Satya Sharma,” she told herself grimly. “You do it because you just have to. Period. And you know that.”

For a long time she had known. When five years ago she had forgotten to inform the Blind Woman’s son of two very important appointments because of which he lost a major contract he had not said a word but she had known. When Manoj, a bright young MBA had been appointed ostensibly to help her out she had known.

Then a week ago, she was in his office and the Blind Woman’s son said hesitantly,

“Mrs. Sharma, I’d like to say something if you don’t mind.”

In the early years he had tried calling her Amma a few times but she had snubbed him with an acidic Mrs. Sharma, please! Since then it had always been Mrs. Sharma.

“Mrs. Sharma,” he said gently. “I know what an effort it is for you to come to office. Please feel free to take as many days off as you need - once your arthritis is better you can become regular again. Manoj can handle things here and please don’t ever worry about your salary. It will...”

“Thank you,” she said stiffly. “I’ll consider it.”

He was good to her - had been all these fourteen years she had worked with him. And she had always been rude and unforgiving, from the first moment she saw him...

The blind woman had just died. Satya had been morosely nursing a cup of coffee in the Old Home when she heard the hearse drive up.

A Honda came to a halt just behind it. A chauffeur alighted and held the door open. Satya saw a young couple step out and walk towards the blind woman’s room.

She left her half finished cup on the bench. Straightening her bent back she clasped her hands behind her and started walking towards the blind woman’s room.

“Leela ji’s son...”

The attendant who was putting the blind woman’s pitifully few belongings into an air bag, pointed to the fair and handsome clean-shaven young man.

The young man nodded.

“I’ve come to take my mother,” he said.

Diamonds at her throat and a rare toosh shawl around her shoulders, his wife stood next to him with a bored expression.

Satya’s scorching glance raked through both of them.

“You mean you’ve come to take her dead body,” she said. “Your living mother you never had time for.”

The young man opened his mouth to protest.

She stopped him with an imperious hand.

“You’ve come to assuage your own guilt,” she said sharply. “She doesn’t need you any more. She doesn’t need anyone.”

His eyes were grief stricken as he glanced quickly up at her and then down again.

His wife stepped between them.

“Please...” she said. “There’s no need for all this. We know what we have to do.”

“Oh you do, do you?”

She had rained acidic words on both of them. After they had gone taking the blind woman’s body in the hearse, she had been smitten with remorse. What right did she have to...?

The next time she met him was more than two years later. She was still in the Old Home – for the second time. This time Rahul, her son had left her there for good and in her heart there was nothing but bitterness and anger.

Someone came to her room and said she was wanted in the office. The blind woman’s son had come to meet her.

“I need your help,” he said softly.

She glared at him.

“And how, pray, can an old woman like me help anyone?”

With downcast eyes he told her his wife had divorced him and taken most of his money.

He wanted to start a small BPO - had to start from scratch. He needed a person he could trust.

The moment he looked up she snapped at him.

“You want to appraise me? Don’t worry! The merchandise is okay. Brain still sharp. Eyes too. No glaucoma, no cataract. All bodily functions fine. Tendency toward arthritis – stiff back – nothing that will come in the way of work really. What are you going to pay me?”

He mumbled a sum.

She doubled it.

“Plus a driver and car,” she added. “Loyalty and integrity don’t come cheap.”

He agreed.

“Where will I live?”

“You can continue living here if you like.”

“No. You buy me a one-room apartment. I will make fifty percent down payment. The rest you deduct in instalments from my salary.”

Silently she thanked God that Rahul had left her some money when he sold her house.

He agreed.

They say after five years in call centres you are finished. The two big Bs – boredom and burnout get you. They didn’t know a thing of the boredom and burnout of being old and alone and unloved. Day in and day out. 24 x 365. Compared to that, the two Big Bs of a call centre look like twin gateways to heaven...

The smell of strong black coffee assailed her nostrils. It was Deepak, one of the team leaders taking a break at the vending machine. He was talking animatedly to another team leader. His face contorted, he seemed angry about something.

Satya frowned. She stretched her legs to see whether her knees were jammed, got up slowly testing her tiny feet to see if they would take the weight of her stout body, straightened her stiff back as best as she could, put her hands behind her back and walked out with deliberate steadiness.

It was Monday – six thirty in the evening and the place seemed like a beehive of drones working in their cells.

She could hear Deepak see the frustrated contours of his face.

“Bull shit, yaar, pure bull shit!” He hissed. “Customer is King! I’d like to lay my hand on the mother fucker who said that! I swear I would. Ask him to do a stint as an Indian cyber coolie. Here in Gurgaon. He’d change his mind about fucking customer monarchy fucking bloody fast. Who gave the fucking customer the right to pelt bull shit at us, hunh? Why should we just keep taking it and taking it and taking it...”

He banged his fist against the wall next to the coffee machine and the snake-stack of paper cups rolled off the top. Angrily he picked it up and banged it back.

“What kind of fucking monarchy is this anyway?” He scowled. “Every bloody minute you have a new king swearing at you...”

Satya sighed.

There are aspects of the job that never change and it really wasn’t funny any more. On the one hand were the agents who couldn’t help even if they wanted to simply because they just didn’t have the authority to take a decision and on the other hand angry customers screaming that they wanted to speak to someone who knows what they’re doing, someone with more fucking authority god damn you!

The trauma of being at the receiving end of the abuse never changed. Yet the illusion persisted. Call Centres were fun places to work in - college campus ambience, glass and chrome buildings full of jazzy computers, trendy smart colleagues with snazzy titles.

Night shifts. Long hours in cabs. Parties. Expensive food in Gurgaon malls.

Like moths the young come flapping in and are trapped in a golden prison where even your name is not your own. A Prerna becomes Polly and a Deepak Dave. Don’t move from your desk! You can’t afford to miss a call - you need to answer hundred and fifty a day. No shirking. Call Monitoring listens in and records your every call and the ACD

maximises efficiency by determining which agent extension to send an incoming call to and simultaneous sending a message to the T-server indicating the call is going to the specified extension.

The stress mounts...

In deference to Satya, Deepak moved away from the coffee machine. She murmured thanks, filled a cup and balancing it carefully, started walking back.

Prerna was crying. Three months old in the company, she was the newest voice agent in Deepak's team.

Anu handed her a tissue.

Six months into marriage and a staple diet of Choley Bhaturey at Haldiram's in the City Centre Mall where she and her husband, a manager in another call centre met whenever they could, Anu Khurana had transformed from a slim young girl in jeans and tees to a fat young woman in sequined tinsel half crepe shalwar suits.

Prerna blew her nose and said,

"I just kept on repeating 'If you continue talking like this I will disconnect the call', like I was told to, but the guy just wouldn't let up. He – he called me a..."

"Do you know any swear words?" Anu asked.

"What?"

"Hindi swear words..."

Prerna's eyes widened. She shook her head.

"Learn them. Then you can abuse the spoilt brat Kings who are our customers and if you do it in a polite tone they'll think you are trying to solve their problem. You can have the last laugh."

Prerna smiled tentatively.

At the next console Shyamolee took off her head set. She was nineteen when she got married. Her husband was a teacher in a government school. They lived with his old parents in a two room apartment in a seventy year old building in a congested part of Old Delhi. She earned more than her father in law ever earned in his forty years of government service, and more than her husband could ever hope to earn. When their first child was a year old Shyamolee moved her husband and child out of the old house and kept a maid. Now she could cut her hair, wear trousers and eat non-vegetarian food without her in-laws disapproving glances.

“Too much static, yaar!” She cried now. “They need to call the Systems guys. Where’s Deepak?”

She looked at Prerna’s tear streaked face.

“You’ve been here what – six months?” She asked. “What you need is a holiday. The pace here can get you – especially in the first few months. Hundred and fifty calls a day. No weekends off because clients of water and gas companies get queries at weekends too... anyone would need a break, yaar!”

Prerna looked aghast.

“Holiday?” She cried. “All I need is a steady paying job! If you had an eighth standard pass father like mine who is only capable of running a copier machine and a mother who married at fifteen and...”

She shook her head emphatically. “Holidays are a luxury I can’t afford.”

Anu nodded.

“We can understand but no one wants a break down, do we? And it’s not as if there is a dearth of alternative jobs.”

“None at all,” confirmed Shyamolee, fumbling in her handbag for her compact and lipstick. “You can find them in the internet, in the newspapers, through friends – anywhere yaar.”

She refurbished her lips and compressed them together to spread the lipstick evenly.

“I’ve changed jobs so many times. Once my child was ill and I had to take time off. My team leader said okay, but when I came back it was like ‘Who allowed you to take holiday?’ I just left.”

Things had changed, Satya thought, as back at her desk she sipped the strong, black coffee she had poured herself. The people who were joining were different, bolder somehow. She shrugged. Another few days and she would not be part of this office anyway...

Below the ‘Dear Sir’, on the computer screen she typed

‘Due to unavoidable personal reasons...’

True, she snorted to herself. So very true! Old age is totally unavoidable and so very personal!

‘...I am unable,’ she continued typing, ‘to continue with the efficient discharge of my duties.’

Hypocrite! She told herself. Efficient discharge of duties you discontinued ages ago.

‘I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for...’

And how pray do you thank a boss who has done so much for you, more than the son of your loins ever did?

‘...your invaluable support and understanding during the past fourteen years that I have worked with you.’

Satya leaned heavily back on the surgical back rest.

In the first few years she too had been of invaluable help to the Blind Woman’s son. If only she could have continued to help him, especially since things were changing and the going was bound to become more difficult day by day. Till now call centre employees had been the more risk-averse type, the type who quietly accepted supervision but of late they had begun questioning their own docility.

Like old people, Satya thought suddenly. Scared to take the risk of being alone, accepting the dictates of their children, bartering docility for the sake of their children’s company. Somehow the equation never worked out. The little love that you craved as the bottom line never showed up. Your children never ever...

Familiar flap-flap. Huge vulture wing flapping negative thoughts darkened her mind.

She shook her crowded head. Not here... not in office she wouldn’t let them. Here she could turn her back on them, distract her mind with other things. It was at home she was vulnerable. Within the four walls of her house she had nothing to fight them with.

She dropped her coffee cup in the bin and hands clasped behind her back started pacing the room.

She could hear the laughter from outside. Perna had obviously forgotten her tears and was laughing with everyone.

“Hey guys,” Shyamolee was saying, “let me tell you something funny! In the last one hour I’ve received five crank calls at the Vodafone Help Desk. Someone wants to know God’s telephone number. How do you handle this one?” She giggled.

“Politely tell them God doesn’t have a phone line?” Prerna ventured.

“I did,” Shyamolee nodded. “I did precisely that but the girl keeps persisting. Sounds like she’s drunk maybe...”

“Stupid spoilt brats fuck up their lives and then they want help,” snapped Anu.

“Don’t forget they’re bloody kings!” said Deepak who had just come up.

“So fuck the kings and queens – fuck this fucking job, yaar,” Shayamolee retorted. “I’m solid bored yaar! Let’s do something! There’s too much static, yaar Deepak. Call the Systems guys.”

“I would have – fucked the job, I mean,” Anu laughed. “Only I need this one. Pawan wants to start a BPO of our own so we’re like saving up like mad.”

“I’ve already informed the Systems guys,” Deepak said. “Hey Anu, does your husband need a dream team leader?”

Satya listened to their laughter and their bantering. There was no answering laughter inside her, no joy, no happiness. Only a deep, deep sadness that weighed down the corners of her mouth pinched her nostrils and furrowed her brow.

‘Please consider this as my letter of resignation,’ she typed slowly. ‘It is requested that I may please be relieved of my duties w.e.f. December 31...’

December 31. Just three weeks to go and she could lie in bed as long as she wanted...

She would not have to pretend anymore - not hide the fact that under her soft silk shalwar it was the firm support of the knee caps that kept her going, that under her kamiz was the back support that...

Suddenly she panicked.

Just three weeks to go – then she would be alone. 24x365. Alone with her aches and pains in the day and the rat nibbling nightmares at night.

She gave the print command and signed the letter without reading it.

The ways of fate are strange indeed, she was thinking as she slowly wrote the name of the Blind Woman's son on an envelope. Sometimes the son of your loins can forsake you and a stranger can treat you like a mother. But now it was time to break the ties with the son her son had never been.

Time to move on. Or time to accept the inability to move at all, she thought with a wry smile. Already it was becoming a pain to get out of bed in the mornings. She had to literally force herself to...

Satya started.

“Now what do I do?” Shyamolee was wailing.

That girl! So loud mouthed and dramatic! Couldn't she tone down her reactions a bit?

“Oh shit, shit, shit!” Shyamolee cried. “What do I do now? I've got to get home quickly.

My child is hurt and...”

There was silence for a moment then Anu said.

“Why can't you ask the COW to take over your duty for a while?”

“The COW?” Prerna asked wide eyed. “Does she know how to take calls?”

“Of course she does! She's been in this call centre for more than a decade – been a voice agent and handled every possible task around here. She's the oldest employee here, yaar.

She worked with him when the boss started off with just six people. Haven't you seen how he trusts her implicitly?”

“Really? I’ve always wondered why she’s here. I mean she – she’s so old. And that big black mole on her nose and that scar on her brow... I mean...”

“She’s not so bad really,” Anu said softly. “A bit of a COW but...”

COW! Crusty Old Woman! Satya knew they called her that behind her back and it had never bothered her much but today it hurt. It really hurt. How had it happened, she wondered? How had she come to be a COW? She who had been ‘such a lovable child’, ‘such a gentle girl’, ‘such a caring, helpful lady’. How had she become a Crusty Old Woman?

She stared at the pink, yellow, blue, green star turn into a ball bouncing across the computer screen, a cube, a star and ball again. She shifted her gaze and stared out of the window.

How and when had she transformed into a COW?

