



A SHORT STORY

# A BEAUTIFUL BOY

MONICA BHIDE

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# **A Beautiful Boy**

by

**Monica Bhide**

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Here was the new modern India Leena had seen so many times on satellite TV at her home in Washington, DC. Each time the Indian MTV generation showed up on the screen, Leena's *dadi*, her father's mom, rolled her eyes. "See these girls, do they have no shame? They wear no clothes! I just don't understand how their parents allow them to dress like this. Even girls in America do not dress like this!" Once the rant started, Dadi would get a glint in her eyes and her voice would get louder. "*Beta*, our generation, now we knew how to dress to, you know, to be attractive for the men. Our flowing silk *dupattas* in all their colors, our graceful saris . . . Poets have written beautiful verses on our clothes. Now look, look at this girl, look at that, that bandage she is wearing across her chest . . . what can a poet say about that?? Hey, *Bhagwan*!"

And here Leena was, live and in person in India—a newer, younger, hipper India, seemingly so comfortable in its new skin. Leena stood in the middle of Mumbai's new airport, mesmerized at the larger-than-life images of Bollywood heroes staring down at her. The peacock motif seemed to be everywhere. "You know, the new airport is designed by the guys who designed the Burj Khalifa in Dubai," her sister, Tania, had told her while also doing some serious begging. "You are just going for a break, right? And you don't know anyone there. I could come with you and we could backpack through the back alleys of India . . . Let me come with you? Please? It will be fun!" Tania could be very persuasive. But Dadi had put her foot down. "Tania, what if you go and I fall down the stairs? I will be like that commercial you make fun of: *I have fallen and I cannot get up!* She needs a break. Let her go alone to Mumbai."

Now at Mumbai airport, Leena noticed each ear had a cell phone. Even the lanky, greasy-haired porter helping her with her bags had a cell phone in his hand. "Taxi?" he had asked and she had nodded.

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Everyone everywhere looked purposeful, so connected to the rest of the Universe. Everyone had someone to talk to, someone to connect with. AT&T's "reach out and touch someone" plan surely must have originated here, she thought. A city struggling for a new identity, with a colorful past that competed with an even more colorful future, for a present that did not know which way to go and so turned toward a tomorrow that promised it all.

She felt out of place, suddenly even more conscious of her hair that had barely grown back in. She tried to straighten out her faded jeans and old t-shirt in a feeble attempt to feel presentable. Dressing up had never been one of her passions; that honor went to her younger sister, Tania. Perfect all the time. Even when she got out of bed in the mornings, she looked flawlessly groomed. Leena remembered a summer they spent in Myrtle Beach. It was 110 degrees. No one ventured outside; instead they all decided to go to the indoor pool in the hotel. Tania went for a walk—fully clothed, of course, and fully made up. She returned an hour later with a generously built young man on her arm, and glowing through the sweat beads on her forehead. Leena, in a tattered old swimsuit, was sweating puddles. *Tania would fit right in here in Mumbai. Maybe I should have let her come,* Leena thought.

Her beeping cell phone interrupted her thoughts.

"Beta, there? Suhani coming to pick you up. You know, Suhani, your relative."

Dadi's texting was short and to the point as she worried about how much money each word cost her.

"Walking to parking lot, Dadi. Girls here do have clothes on," Leena texted back. Of course, she had no idea what Suhani looked like but asking Dadi that would be like asking someone to describe the Universe in two sentences or less.

"Love you, Beta. God bless you. And don't lie."

Leena just kept in step behind the porter who whizzed passed throngs of people with trolleys full of bags and tired children.

In mere minutes, they had left the airport building and its air smelling of weary passengers and were outside. India took over: a light breeze wafting with pungent smells of cigarette smoke, car emissions, and soft smells of the earth. Leena smelled perfumes ranging from Dior to Chanel to Dadi's favorite, Charlie, as the well-dressed whizzed past her into the sea of arms of waiting relatives. Grandmothers in saris welcomed the young in *salwaar kameezes*, skirts, shorts, and short shorts. The sea of people grew and receded as waves. They knew precisely where to stand to greet their visitor and how to break away from the crowd at the right time to head in the direction of the parking lot. Policemen in khaki outfits wandered around, trying to look purposeful and important. As she looked ahead, she could see scores of young men dressed in khaki squatting on the sidewalk beside their black and yellow cabs waiting patiently for passengers.

*If you were Suhani, where would you wait?*, Leena thought to herself as she fruitlessly scanned the area for a face she did not know.

"Madam, where you going?" the porter stopped talking on his phone for a second and asked Leena.

She fumbled in her purse for the address to her Dadi's relatives as she continued to walk down the pathway out of the airport to the taxi stand.

Then she saw him: a middle-aged man standing at the end of the pathway with a small white board that read "Leena Fresher." "Fresher" made her smile; no one had called her that before but who else could he be looking for. She hesitated for a second. Dadi had mentioned a girl, Suhani, but this was no Suhani.

“Wait, wait, please can you stop,” she called out to the porter who was rushing toward a taxi with an open door. The porter stopped and turned around, “What happened, madam? Why no go?”

“Just wait, I have someone here. Please wait.”

“Hi, I am Leena Frasher,” she smiled weakly at the man holding the board. “You are here for me? I thought Suhani was coming.”

“Hi. I am Vinit. You know—your grandma’s sister’s daughter’s son!! Also known as Suhani’s husband! Welcome to *amchi Mumbai*! Hot and happening! Of course someone would come to get you—haven’t you heard of Indian hospitality? Also my wife would have killed me if I hadn’t!” grinned Vinit.

He threw the cigarette he was smoking on the ground and stubbed it out with his expensive-looking leather moccasins. She hesitated for a minute—he seemed genuine enough.

“It is nice to meet you,” she smiled. He moved forward to take her well-worn bag from the gangly porter who was busy yapping on his mobile phone and then handed him a brightly colored note in return.

“Just one suitcase? Short visit?”

“Yes, short visit. It is sure hot here,” Leena said as the breeze disappeared and the humid weather of Mumbai embraced her, causing her to feel a touch giddy. She wasn’t as strong as she used to be. She had run marathons but now a single mile caused her to fall with exhaustion.

“Yes, that is why I call it hot and happening! The hot part you are experiencing and you can see the happening part,” he laughed out loud and pointed to the gaggles of young

women in outfits that barely covered anything and cigarette smoke that covered everything.

“Yes, I can see a lot,” she laughed with him.

Leena followed him to his car, taking in all the sights and sounds of the bustling metropolis. The city was wide awake and there were scores of people everywhere walking, talking, in automobiles, motorcycles, cycles, trucks . . . all busy.

“How far do you live? How long does it take?” she asked as he drove out of the airport.

“Depends on the traffic. If it’s a light night we should get there in about a half hour. I can take the scenic route if you are not too tired?” he said and then suddenly jammed the brakes. “Damn these movie stars—do you know Ganesha? He is standing there with his entourage. It is a juice stall that is favored by celebs. Mostly these guys just send their servants or drivers. But sometimes they come and then we get stuck in traffic!”

Leena looked out and barely made out the man’s face as he and his troupe got back in the car and drove away. “Isn’t he a member of parliament now?” she asked.

“Aren’t they all! I am impressed you knew that!!”

“Dadi watches a lot of Indian channels and keeps me updated on these things, regardless of whether I want to hear them or not. She loves Bollywood and all things Bollywood. I know she misses Mumbai. I wish I could have brought her with me but now, at 85, it is hard for her to travel.”

“Yes, the flights are long, aren’t they? We put a man on the moon and yet cannot invent a plane that crosses oceans in a few hours. Well, I guess the Concorde did that but now it is gone,” he continued to chat as he drove.

Leena could see the Arabian Sea in the distance. The roads were buzzing with activity and in spots people were crowded around carts that were selling something.

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“What do you do in the States, Leena? Leena, did you fall asleep on me? Come on now, I am not that boring.”

“Wow, this place is amazing. Oh, sorry, I work for a small company and handle their accounts . . . It is really so nice of you all to pick me up and host me, I mean you all barely know me, thank you . . . “ she mumbled.

“Oh, no formality, please. We are family and besides, your Dadi took great care of us when we were kids. We are family!” he said.

When Dadi suggested Leena stay with some unknown relative, Leena had balked at the India-ness of it. “You want me to show up at the doorstep of strangers and ask if I can stay for a few weeks in exchange for nothing, just for being related to them?” “Yes, that is how it is done. You are related by blood. They will welcome you,” Dadi had said, beaming with pride, as she sipped her hot chocolate laced with cardamom. The argument had continued for three weeks and judging by the fact that Leena was sitting in Vinit’s car in Mumbai, it was clear who had won.

“What . . . what do you do, Vinit?” Leena inquired.

“Me? I try to look important!” he said disarmingly.

She smiled for the fourth time since meeting him. A record for her.

“I write. I am working on, as Suhani will tell you, yet another unpublishable piece, a true work of genius that only I can see. I keep telling her, just wait—all this practice looking important will pay off someday. I write now. Someday I will be a writer!

“But forget about my unrecognized genius. This is your first time here, right, Leena? Well, there is so much to see and do and so many places to eat. Do you like Italian? There is a great Italian place right there. And oh—do you like the famed Mumbai Burger? Your man, Anthony Bourdain, called our simple *vada pau* a ‘Mumbai burger’ and it hasn’t tasted the

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same since.” He kept talking, not really waiting for her answers. Leena’s thoughts of home began to come back and take over. Had Dadi already told him why Leena had really come to Mumbai? She felt the tears welling.

“So, my dear, do tell me, what brings you to Mumbai?” he asked, as if sensing her thoughts.

Either he did not know or was good at pretending.

“Just a short vacation. I, I needed a change. I hope it is not too much of an imposition.”

“Don’t be silly, it is entirely our pleasure. And speaking of pleasure . . . we are almost home! Oh, and this must be Suhani,” he answered his phone and told his wife they were on their way and would be arriving in a few minutes.

Vinit and his family lived in a two-bedroom apartment in the highly utilitarian area of Mahim. The suburb smelled of everyday life with all its sweetness and all its bitterness. The crowds thinned as he navigated his car into smaller roadways and alleys. The quiet building was the side of a long, main road lined with other small towers and tiny bungalows.

Vinit pulled up to the small building and a night watchman opened the main gate. “Every building here has a watchman so that the riffraff don’t come in and sleep on the stairs like in that *Death of Vishnu* book. Good book, but I don’t want to come home to my flat at two in the morning to see a Vishnu on my steps,” he grinned. Leena knew the book, written by a local college professor in Maryland, was a huge success. She owned an autographed copy.

“Is your book going to be like the *Vishnu* book?” she asked as he deftly parked the small Maruti car in a spot that seemed too small for even a motorcycle.

“Don’t get me started on my writing right now or Suhani will not let us into the house.”

They walked up the stairs to the apartment on the third floor. After the loud noises at the airport, this building was peaceful. A golden haze from a single bulb fell on the stairs of the building.

Suddenly a door opened and a petite, pony-tailed woman dressed in black jogging pants and a black t-shirt that read BEBE smiled at them.

“Welcome. Welcome. I am Suhani. I am so glad Vinit did not scare you enough to take the same flight back to the US. How was your flight? You look just like your father!”

She extended a hand and pulled Leena inside and gave her a big hug.

Vinit brought in Leena’s bag and placed it by the side of the door.

A bronze soldier statue sat at the left side of the entrance. The sparsely furnished room sparkled under the tube lights. Leena guessed that she had entered what her Dadi told her was called a drawing room or main hall in Indian homes. The room held two small white futon-like couches, a center table with an emerald-green vase full of fresh flowers, and a large picture window that was dark as night. Playful touches were everywhere—a small doll wearing an ethnic skirt and holding a book was next to the flowers. The walls were full of shelves backed with lighted mirrors. The large bowls on the shelves attracted Leena’s eye. They glittered with stones of various kinds. A local newscast appeared to flicker on the flat-screen TV mounted on the center wall of the room. The room was chilly as the AC on full blast attempted to battle the heat of the season.

The house was a home.

Leena moved toward the futon, her legs ached, and her back throbbed. Her exhaustion drained her tiny reserves of strength and energy.

Just as she was about to sit down, Suhani piped up, “Oh wait, don’t settle down yet. We have to go back out. Did you not hear the news? The water of the Arabian Sea has become sweet! Everyone is headed that way, including many of the celebs. Come on, we have to go and see what is going on.”

Both Leena and Vinit looked at her, totally puzzled. Suhani took the TV off mute and pointed to the screen.

“What? You guys did not notice the crowds on your way here? Look, it is on TV. *News Today* is reporting that the ocean water has become sweet. Look at the crowds. See . . . people are drinking it. Look, look,” she said. There were swarms of people standing on the beaches, using their cupped hands to drink the ocean water. A young reporter was sticking her microphone into random faces asking them if the water really was sweet. The camera then panned over to a holy man, wearing a saffron robe and large beads, declaring God was coming back to earth as He had made the salt water sweet.

Vinit walked over to her and took the remote from her hand and muted the sound again.

“Suhani, the people drinking that water are going to get sick. That sea water is so polluted with sewage and garbage. This sounds like a load of crap. I cannot believe you want to go there?!”

“Indians must have a more benevolent God,” said Leena quietly.

“Yes, that and a full-time propaganda machine called twenty-four-hour news,” he remarked, and gave his wife a sharp look.

“I guess you are right. I am just being silly about the whole thing,” Suhani said responding to the look her husband gave her.

Then reluctantly she turned the TV off.

“I am so sorry to be rude, Leena. Welcome, welcome. Come and sit with me. I am so glad to meet you. Sorry, I just got carried away. Oh, you look exhausted. What will you have to drink—*keya peyoge?* I am so sorry, do you understand Hindi? Here I am ready to drag you back out after such a long flight. I am so sorry.” The questions Suhani asked had no requirements for answers, just like her husband’s chatter earlier. As abruptly as she had sat down, she stood up and disappeared into the depth of the house and returned instantly with a cold bottle of spring water.

“I know people who come from the States worry about the water here. It isn’t so bad but on your first few days, drink this. Of course, if you would prefer to try the sweet sea water, we can go there now.”

They all laughed.

Leena gulped it greedily, the cool liquid providing much needed relief.

“How is your Dadi? I spoke to her this morning. She sounds rather frail now.”

Suhani wanted to know as Vinit disappeared into one of the inner rooms.

“She is fine. She remembers you a lot. Thanks so much for letting me visit. The past few weeks have been . . .,” Leena responded.

“It is our pleasure Leena. Your Dadi told me that your cancer is now in remission. Don’t even think about all that now. Stay as long as you need. Mumbai is a great place to recover—it is a city with a life of its own and its fun spirit will take you in and never let go. You will meet Avni tomorrow,” said Suhani getting up off the couch.

“Who is Avni? Pretty name. Does it mean something special?”

“It means ‘the earth.’ I should have named her Agni, the fire. She is my devil child. Looks like a movie star and thinks she can rule the world,” Suhani’s eyes twinkled as she

gracefully picked up Leena's handbag and moved it into the tiny room that seemed to be the guest room, laundry room, reading room, and general storage room all in one.

"Good night," Vinit popped his head in. "Just rest. We will have lots of time to catch up tomorrow."

Twenty hours on the plane was twenty hours too many. Leena debated taking a shower but in the end the inviting bed won. Sleep had not been her friend. Yet tonight it hugged her like a forbidden lover, soothing her, holding her, and inviting her to relinquish all control and just slip into its pleasurable arms.

"You are the meanest mother EVER," screamed a young voice. The sound jolted Leena out of her deep sleep.

She could hear heated female voices outside her door and the sounds of an incessantly ringing doorbell, followed by distinct voices speaking various languages.

"You are committing adultery," Suhani was screaming.

"It is called fornication, mother. It is only adultery when people are married."

Ah, so this was Avni.

*Dadi would have a coronary, Leena thought, if I ever spoke to her like this. Suhani was right, Avni should have been Agni, the fire.*

"You and dad tried swinging, didn't you? Don't bother denying it. I heard you talk about it with my own ears. If you can do it and it's not adultery, why are you getting mad at me for going out with Salil? I love him. We want to get married. I am seventeen. You cannot tell me what to do."

“We are *not* swingers, Avni. Don’t talk nonsense. You are such a devil, sometimes, child. I just don’t know what to do with you.” A few doors banged and then there was silence.

Unsure of what to do next, Leena sat on the bed for some time. The room had only one small window, but it quickly filled the room with the bright Mumbai sun. She opened her bag and decided the easiest, most painless thing would be to brush her teeth and shower. And then decide what to do for her two totally unplanned weeks in Mumbai.

Suhani was waiting with breakfast at the small breakfast table in the living room when Leena emerged from the bathroom. “I made you some toast. Hope that is okay? Do you like instant coffee or shall I make you some tea? Tea? Great. *Bai*, this way, this way . . . please clean this side,” the instructions for Leena and the cleaning lady coming all together.

“So what happened to the sweet sea water?” Leena asked recalling the crazy night. “Ah, that, well apparently there is a scientific explanation . . . something about too much rain, I did not hear the whole thing. I sort of lost interest in it once they said it is not a miracle. Here is the paper if you want to read it,” Suhani smiled, her dimpled smile reminding Leena of her own mother. It had a peaceful yet very playful quality about it.

“I just want to let you know that you are welcome to stay as long as you wish. Here in Mumbai the space is tight but our hearts are big! I know everyone says that but I mean it. Stay as long as you like, okay? Vinit told me that you were thanking him and all. No need for such formality. This is your home, okay?” Suhani leaned over and kissed Leena on the forehead.

Leena felt her body relax and her breathing became quiet and steady. Perhaps her Dadi was right. A new place would do her good.

She greedily gobbled down the toast and the ginger tea.

“So when do I get to meet Avni, Suhani?” Leena asked with a big smile on her face. She couldn’t wait to meet the young firecracker.

“Oh, she left this morning in one of her moods. You will meet her at dinner this evening, assuming she decides to grace us with her presence. She is like that. Oh these teenagers. All my hair will turn white before she hits eighteen,” Suhani said, and disappeared into the kitchen with yet another servant, and then came out and went into the guest room, giving the cleaning lady detailed instructions on how to sweep, where to sweep and where not to sweep . . . all in one breath.

Leena placed her plate and cup into the tiny steel sink in the kitchen and began to rinse it.

“Don’t drink that tap water or you will get sick,” boomed Suhani’s voice from the other room, “I have placed bottled water for you in the fridge.” Leena smiled—all moms somehow manage to give the illusion of knowing it all at the same time, and being everywhere at the same time.

She walked into the living room and looked outside the window onto the awakening streets of Mumbai outside. Young people vividly dressed in Indian clothing, young women with their dark, long hair in braids, were walking with books in hand toward a college building located a stone’s throw from the apartment. Buses were zooming. Cars of every shape and size alongside bicycles, scooters, bullock carts, pedestrians, and motorcycles zipped up and down. A man selling vegetables from a pushcart appeared to be arguing heatedly on his phone and also with a lady picking vegetables from his cart. The discussion was loud yet neither seemed fazed.



Across the street, Leena saw a young lady standing by a window in a building. The woman was picking something off a plate that she was holding and throwing it onto the street.

“We Indians love to do that,” Vinit said as he came up behind her, “Throw our trash on the street. See, she is picking out stones from her rice. She won’t throw it in a trashcan but out on the road. You will see her later, throwing her whole garbage out the same window. Pathetic, really.”

“You are too funny. You know, I remember my mother would do this and Papa always teased her because he said there were no stones in the rice in the US but she continued to do it for years,” replied Leena.

“Do you know what you would like to do today? You can come with me if you like or if you are still jet lagging you can nap, or if you want to go to the happening part of Mumbai you can go with Suhani to her kitty party today,” Vinit said.

“Where are you heading? But also, what is a kitty party?” she asked.

“Oh, come with me to my kitty, I will introduce you to my friends! We all pool in money in a kitty and get together, over a lunch of course, to see who wins the kitty for the month! I am in several of them. Come, come, the girls will love to meet you!” Suhani joined in the discussion from the kitchen.

Leena looked questioningly at Vinit.

“Forget her kitty, come with me. I am writing love stories about temple prostitutes,” he winked.

“Temple prostitutes? How was that possible? Temples have prostitutes? You are teasing me because I don’t know India well?” Leena said.

“See—this is what I tell Suhani constantly. This is India: for every logical thing, the exact opposite will also be true! It is a big world out there and letting it in will let you open your soul a bit.

“You see, I am working on a story about *devadasis*—the Temple Dancers. They are also called the servants of Gods—they were trained dancers who danced simply for themselves in temples. It was an amazing and beautiful tradition. They had patrons and they lived well. But then, it all changed. Sadly, they became prostitutes when hard times hit, it all started when the colonizers came . . .,” he explained.

“Stop, Vinit, you will bore her to death with all your history. Let her be,” Suhani shouted from the kitchen.

“Come with me. I am going to a temple in Borivali where a devadasi, a temple dancer, from Karnataka has taken refuge. I will show you.”

Suhani came out of the kitchen, “I heard all that. Leena, you don’t have to go if you don’t want to. Vinit, it is her first day in Mumbai—how about we take her to Gate of India or show her the sights and sounds of the city instead of your decrepit structures? He loves to spend all this time at that broken-down building that once *used to be* a temple. He and his crazy friend Sunny seem to think it is still inhabited by the spirits of some dancers. And you think I am nuts for wanting to try the sweet water.”

Leena laughed. She loved the friendly dynamic between the husband and wife.

“I think I will try the temple, if you don’t mind. It sounds interesting,” she said.

“Well, don’t say I did not warn you! And remind him to feed himself and you. Or he will forget!” Suhani smiled as she walked over and held her husband’s hand.

Within a few minutes both Leena and Vinit were ready to go.

“I gave the driver the day off today so I am driving,” Vinit told Leena as they got into the car.

The car ride to the temple offered Leena the opportunity to watch the city in its morning glory. It was around eleven in the morning and Mumbai was wide awake, even more so than the previous night at the airport. The drive, Vinit had told her, was going to take over an hour. They passed high-rise buildings rivaling those Leena had seen in New York City and areas of slums that she had never seen anywhere.

“Vinit, there . . . that kid . . . he has no clothes and still he is smiling and playing. How is that?” Leena asked as she pointed out her window to a child playing on the sidewalk.

“Happiness is free,” he said.

They reached the old temple driving at a leisurely pace through winding roads and small lanes. Vinit kept his commentary about his work going and Leena found his soothing tone and gentle words evoking a lullaby-like effect in a strange land.

“You really don’t talk much, do you?” Vinit teased her.

“Oh, no, sorry. I was just enjoying listening to you,” Leena said. But she knew he was right. Dadi made those comments about her constantly, “Leena, beta, you have to come out of this shell. You have to talk. How long are you going to keep everything bottled inside?” Leena would just hug her and cry.

The temple came into view as they turned into a small, rough, sandy path. “See—it is barely a shadow of its original magnificent self,” Vinit kept explaining. It was a cheerless building; its walls showing clear signs of neglect, old age, and the results of the incessant beating down of the monsoon rains.

They parked the car and walked up to the building. The dusty, carved walls showed remnants of beautiful intricate carvings of dancers and various Hindu Gods—noses, breasts,

hands had all fallen off, making the carvings look macabre and limbless. A set of broken and unstable stairs led into a courtyard that housed flowers, still in full bloom.

“Who cares for these pretty flowers?” she asked.

Vinit pointed to an old lady walking at the other end of the temple. Wearing a dark blue cotton sari, she had her head covered and was scurrying around carrying something. She looked up and saw them and then hid her face from them with her crumpled sari. She moved closer to the walls of the temple, as though hoping to get absorbed in its shadows and crevices.

“She is the last remaining devadasi here. She lives here and looks after this place. She was ‘donated’ to a temple in the south when she was about eight. She lived there until she was seventy and then moved here about fifteen years ago. She thinks she was given to the temple in exchange for her parents’ wish for a son. She was supposed to be like the bride of God and learn dancing and fine arts,” he said.

“Sounds a bit like the geisha culture in Japan,” replied Leena.

“Well—sort of. But this tradition was supposed to have a religious backing. Sometimes she talks to me, and her stories are sad but amazing—she tells me that once she entered puberty, there was no more money at the temple and all the priests left. She was there alone. There was no one to shield her from the world. A woman who took care of the temple grounds sold her to anyone who wanted to sleep with her . . . often six to seven men a day.”

“What? That is rape . . . she was a minor,” Leena interjected.

“I know. It is heartbreaking. She is such a nice lady but all, all shriveled up inside and out. It is like someone squeezed the spirit out of her and now this thing of bones and blood wanders around here, watering these stupid flowers.”

“Vinit, I don’t understand this. Why did she not run away, why was she still here?” asked Leena as they walked towards a small bench. She guessed that he had sensed her need to sit due to her weak body.

“Run away and go where, Leena? Come sit here with me.” he said. “Now, think it about it—back then there was nowhere for them to go and start a new life. No money, no transport. They lived the hand they were dealt. These days there is hope of escape and a better life for the newer recruits. But her? She says she has two sons who left as soon as they understood what she did. Now she can barely see and barely walk. Tell me where will she go and who will take care of her? Familiarity provides comfort and no one bothers her here.”

He got up to go see if she would speak to him, leaving Leena on the bench.

Leena was stunned. Eighty years of prostitution in this place, in this serene scene. Surrounded by giant green trees, the temple, a temple only in name, almost seemed to be an island all its own. It was just an old building with some carvings. There is no way this place could have a title as holy as “temple.” The leaves rustled quietly as a gentle, cool breeze blew all around. The air smelled of jasmine, sweet and fragrant.

Vinit returned a few minutes later, “She won’t talk today, so let’s just go inside. Are you okay? Do you need a drink?”

“I am fine. This is as sad as it is fascinating.”

“Please tell Suhani that. She thinks I am torturing you by bringing you here and not taking to you the Mumbai tourist traps. She has SMSed me ten times already to bring you back home,” he said, laughing.

As they entered the main temple room, her eyes were drawn to the exotic paintings, or what remained of them, on the temple walls. She noticed a young man standing beside them. He had a notepad in hand and was staring intently at the drawings.

“Hey . . . Sunny, you are here already? Come here, let me introduce you,” Vinit called out to him.

The young man turned around and smiled; Leena had to catch her breath. Sundeep Suri—or Sunny as his friends like to call him—was tall, with dark hair softly falling over his forehead, a lanky frame and light brown eyes. He seemed, to her, like a young George Clooney. He wore a white t-shirt that read, KISS ME, I AM PUNJABI. It made Leena laugh out loud.

“Sunny,” said Vinit, walking up toward him, “meet Leena. She is visiting from the big, bad US of A. Leena, this is my *jaar*, the one and only Dr. Sundeep Suri.”

“Hey, it is nice to meet you,” Sunny’s deep voice perfectly matched his physique. Leena held out her hand.

“Nice to meet you as well. You are a doctor? Not a writer?” she said pointing to his note pad.

“No, no,” Vinit laughed and said before Sunny could respond. “He is the real thing. He only hangs out with me at Suhani’s request. She sends him here to make sure I go back home in the evenings! He is what they call in India a lady’s doctor, or what you would call an OB/GYN.”

“I am an ex-doctor, actually,” Sunny interrupted, “I don’t practice any more. Now I illustrate Vinit’s books.”

“Oh, don’t bore her with your droning,” laughed Vinit. “Leena, he is being too humble. He is a terrible doctor and no woman wants to be near him so he had to quit! But he does run a library. I will take you there one day. Anyway, I have an SMS from Suhani that we need to eat and to feed you. You must be famished!”

Leena had forgotten about food. The mere mention of it made her realize how hungry she was, and all of a sudden, she needed to sit down. A bit of dizziness combined with the jet lag was still making her feel a bit out of sorts.

“She needs a drink, Vinit. Be right back,” and Sunny was gone.

He came back a few minutes later with a Limca, a fizzy, lemony drink. “Here, drink this and then let’s go get a bite.”

“I will leave my bike here and come with you and then you drop me back here so I can finish up the last few pages,” Sunny said to Vinit.

They got in the car and headed to a small South Indian joint a few minutes away from the temple. Although Leena was fascinated with the world outside, the fascination was even more so with the world inside the car.

“Did she talk to you today?” Sunny asked.

“No, she seems even more subdued than usual. Something must have happened,” he answered as he maneuvered the car around the flocks of people on the tiny cramped streets.

“So tell me more about this tradition, why would these girls do this?” Leena asked.

“It is not a question of choice. In the olden days, you know, this was a very respected profession. They were dancers, kings would marry them and give them homes and money. Then—and India has a crazy history—when the British came and the kings lost power, these women, who were artists, were demoted to the title of ‘dancing girls’ like the ones you see in cheap bars,” Sunny explained.

“So they just turned into prostitutes?” Leena asked.

“Well, no one turns into a prostitute. Many died in poverty, some were forced into prostitution to make a living, some stayed, some tried to run away. Anyway, that is what we are working on. It is a sad part of our history that no one is capturing,” Vinit added.

“So let’s move off this for a minute at least. Leena, where are you visiting from in the US? Are you here on work or pleasure? And if you say pleasure I have to ask what the hell you are doing with Vinit?” Sunny asked lightening the mood in the car from serious to amusing.

“Oh, too funny. I live in DC. I think I visited India when I was about three or four with my father, he was related to Vinit’s family, but I haven’t been back here since.”

“So in reality this is your first REAL visit? And Vinit, you idiot, you brought her here instead of taking her to see some nice Mumbai sights? And now she is going to eat at this roadside place with us? Oh, oh . . . please forgive my friend,” Sunny said.

“It is her first day here, dude, first day and she chose to come with me. I told her about Suhani and her kitties but Leena likes me! What can I say?” Vinit chuckled.

“So what brings you here, Leena? Sightseeing? Work? Yoga?” Sunny asked.

“Well, just needing a break I guess. My Dadi thought it would be good for me to come explore the city were my father grew up,” Leena fidgeted in her seat. Okay, so it was partly true.

They arrived at the tiny eatery.

“Don’t worry, this will not give you Delhi belly! It is tried and tested!” exclaimed Vinit as he led her into the small but clean eatery with ten tables and a handful of chairs.

“Vinit, sir! Happy you are back and you have a new friend,” a young man in jeans and a cut-off white t-shirt approached them from behind the cash counter.

“Anil—meet Leena. Leena, Anil is a model but also helps run this place for his father. Anil, Leena is just down from the States and this is her first meal here. Make it good!”



“Welcome, Leena! This place may look a little, how shall I say, well . . . down-market but I can tell you, the food is excellent! I will get you all started with dosas,” Anil shook her hand and then disappeared back into the tiny kitchen.

“So now, it is my turn to ask the questions. You are an ex-doctor?” Leena asked Sunny. “What exactly is an ex-doc? I know doctors retire but you don’t look quite at the retirement age yet.”

“Let’s just say that I wasn’t cut out to be a physician, shall we?” Sunny smiled.

“Oh, come on. Now I feel like there is juicy gossip you are not sharing,” Leena said as she tore a piece of the crisp lentil and rice dosa placed in front of her and dipped it into the steaming bowl of lentils.

“During his doctoring days, Sunny here discovered the dark side of India first-hand,” Vinit said as he tore a piece of his dosa and used the piece to scoop up the spiced, mashed potatoes nestled inside the dosa.

“Oh, I am sorry, I did not mean to pry. If you don’t want to talk about it, that is fine. I was just asking,” she said.

“No, no, you are not prying. It was a fair question. I was practicing in a remote area of Punjab. It was my first year, I had just finished med school and thought I would go to the villages and help out . . . But there was something a little off there and I could not figure out what . . .”

“How so?”

“Something just did not feel right. I was assigned to a tiny clinic. I don’t know how it is in the US, but in India, especially in these tiny villages, most women don’t really go to doctors. And if they do, they definitely do not go to male docs. Anyway, the school I was with set me up here. And then what set off my initial suspicion was that pregnant women

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would show up with their husbands to see me . . . I know that is fairly common in the US but here pregnancy is still a very private, very womanly issue and especially in villages, the women are still shy about it. I would have thought they would come with their mothers or mothers-in-law. I even asked the doctor I was working with and he just said that maybe it is because I am a man that they are coming with a man. We could do no physical exams, only talk to them and take their vitals.”

“Yes, I remember even when Suhani was pregnant with Avni, she preferred going to the doctor with her mother. Heck, I was not even allowed inside when the baby was delivered, she wanted her mom,” Vinit added.

“How is the dosa, friends? I am sending out the *thali* next, okay?” Anil yelled from behind the cash counter. Both Sunny and Vinit gave him a thumbs up.

“It took a few months for me to realize that the men were coming to make sure they knew the sex of the baby. They did not want daughters,” Sunny said as he pushed aside his dosa. His eyes narrowed and Leena could see that whatever had happened still haunted him.

“Really, it’s okay if you would rather not talk about it,” she said regretting her decision to ask earlier.

“It is life. I figured out they were coming to ask me the sex of the baby and when I told them that legally I could not tell them, I found out that they resorted to old wives’ tales—if the mother was eating sweets or carrying the baby in a certain way, they presumed it was a girl. And do you know how I found out? My nurse told me that women were coming in with their privates burned with acid. They wanted to abort and thought the acid would do it.”

Leena shuddered and stopped eating.

He continued. “Then it started to get even stranger. Around twenty weeks of pregnancy, I would send them for ultrasounds to confirm the anatomical growth of the baby. But then many would not come back for delivery. I kept wondering what was going on, but the head of the clinic told me either they had miscarriages or changed doctors.”

“Are you sure you want to hear the rest of it, Leena? You just got here and we don’t want you to give you the worst side of India on your first day,” Vinit’s eyes had narrowed and his jovial demeanor was gone.

“Please, do share, I am fine,” she replied.

Sunny continued, “One evening, I came in late to the clinic because I had forgotten my mobile. The old woman, a *daie*, you know—I think they are called midwives in the US—was sitting by a dried-up well near the clinic and crying. The stench around her was unbelievable. We had been told at the clinic that the stench was from some farm animals that had died in the farm behind the clinic. I guess I was naïve, I believed them.”

Sunny’s voice trailed off. Their table was quiet except for the noise from the other tables that seemed to rudely infiltrate the miserable moment. His next few sentences were a confirmation that he had found hell on earth. The *daie* had pointed to the well. He had walked over and looked in, a decision he regretted till today. At first he could not see anything. The well appeared to be dry. The old lady came up behind him and shone her oil lantern over the well. Sunny turned around and threw up. Baby corpses, fetuses that appeared to be aborted halfway through the pregnancy, and bones . . . baby bones, what seemed to be a mountain of them were in the well. “*Kudiya . . . manu maaf kar deo, rabaa*. Girls forgive me,” the *daie* had begun to wail louder. These were the girls, these were the deliveries he never saw. Turns out, the clinic’s ultrasound technician was being paid by the husbands, and even some of the women, to reveal the sex of the babies.

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“That was it, I left and never went back. There seemed to be no point. I knew the owners were involved. I felt there was nothing I could do. I came here about a year ago and met Vinit at a bookstore. We have been friends since.”

Leena’s eyes filled with tears.

“I did not mean to depress you on your first day out, I apologize,” Sunny said.

“No, no, you did not. Just makes me realize how big the world is and how little I know about it.”

They ate steamed rice generously topped with tempered yellow lentils and sipped cold orange-flavored Fanta, quietly, and then dropped Sunny back to the temple and Leena and Vinit returned to the apartment.

“I feel like the room is spinning,” Leena said as they entered the apartment. Suhani helped her to bed. “Just rest. You will be fine tomorrow. I will check in on you at dinner. If you are still sleeping, we will let you be.”

The next morning, Leena met Avni at breakfast. The young woman, with her chiseled features, flowing dark hair and radiant smile, looked older than her young seventeen years.

“Hi! Mama told me you were here, sorry I haven’t even met you yet! So what brings you to Desiland, Leena *D?*” she asked as she sat at the breakfast table drinking a can of Coke.

“Just a visit. I thought I would explore the city,” Leena replied.

“Mama tells me that Papa dragged you to his temple thing yesterday? How about today you hang with me and I will show you the fun side of Mumbai?” Avni grinned and winked at Leena.

“I would love that. I am still feeling a bit tired. How about we start with a walk around your area? I feel like I just want to see this place first before even wandering into the city!”

“So you are not coming with me today?” Vinit joined them at the table. “I hope it is not because of the discussion about the village.”

“Vinit!” Suhani shrieked from the kitchen. “You did not tell her about Sunny, did you? Prostitution, feticide, oh, my . . . Leena, what will you think of us . . . We are good. Just that there are dark sides.”

“I know. I know. There are dark sides everywhere. Besides, I am really just tired. I don’t have my strength . . .” Leena’s voice trailed off as she realized she was about to step into a subject she did not want to talk about just yet.

“Then, come on, let’s go out now. It is gorgeous outside and not hot yet,” Avni got up, threw her can in the trashcan and waited for Leena to get ready.

For the next several days, Leena rested at home in the morning. Dadi had been texting her every day, several times a day. “I am fine, Dadi, really. These people really surprise me. They don’t push me to do anything I don’t want to do and just let me be. I hope I don’t overstay my welcome. I am beginning to really love it here.”

After restful days, in the evenings Leena went for long walks in the small, ill-manicured park behind the apartment. It was a tiny park with tiny pathways built for walkers. Although it was not well cared for, there were gorgeous red roses in bloom and she loved to stop by and smell them each evening.

Avni accompanied her each time. They walked and talked for hours. Well, mostly Avni talked about her boyfriend, their love-life, her mother not understanding true love, and Leena listened. She enjoyed the youthfulness and naïveté of this young Indian girl trying to

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grow up in the throes of a traditional culture wrenching itself toward a seemingly more modern world. It was so different from her own life entrenched deep in cancer-fighting days and deep, depression-filled demonic nights. Avni was a breath of fresh air, totally in love with life and its offerings. She laughed at everything, smiled constantly, and held nothing back when it came to her opinions.

To Leena's immense pleasure, Sunny dropped in a few times. While he and Vinit would work on their book while seated in the dining room, she would listen in and just watch him. She would catch him stealing glances at her while pretending to listen to Vinit reading his passionate notes on their book.

"Leena, di, you like him, don't you?" Avni asked her one evening on a walk.

"I do not."

"You do. I did not even tell you whom I was talking about. But di, seriously, for a guy to notice you, you have to get out of these damn jeans and these dark t-shirts. Come on, this is India, let me get you into some vibrant colors. You know, Mama is dying to take you shopping," Avni teased.

At first, Leena resisted, conscious of her lack of breasts.

"You may lose a breast, but the cancer will be out forever," her Dadi had said when convincing her, last year, to go for a total mastectomy at twenty-one.

"I look fine. Please, I don't want to talk about looks. I look fine," Leena pleaded to Avni in a quiet voice.

"No, you don't. I have never met someone who is so bent on looking out of place and hiding their God-given beauty. Come on, we need to add some zing to your wardrobe."

In a day, gone were the jeans and the dark shirt, replaced by colorful skirts, silk blouses, bangles, anklets, and even makeup. Leena was surprised at herself. She felt like a new person, just with a change of clothes.

Avni roped in Suhani, who was more than happy to buy Leena new clothes and jewelry to add to her new style.

“You have to let me pay for these,” Leena insisted.

“Really, if I was your mother, which by the way I am old enough to be, would you even dare utter those words? Rubbish. Just enjoy. You look glorious,” Suhani kissed Leena’s forehead as they left the mall with their enormous shopping bags.

Vinit commented, “*Mumbai tumko jum gai* as they say here, Mumbai suits you, you are glowing, Leena.”

Even Sunny noticed. “What happened to your dark shirts? You are beaming in these colors, by the way.”

Before Leena could say anything she felt a sting in her buttock. Avni pinched her and gave her an “I told you so” look.

The next morning, Leena approached Vinit and Suhani at the breakfast table, “I think I am ready to see the city now! Do you have any recommendations of tour companies?”

“Tour companies? Are you kidding? Sunny has been asking me for the past three days how to ask you if he can show you the city. Shall I call him for you?”

Leena felt a warmth rise in her cheeks. “Vinit, the girl is blushing! Just call him,” Suhani added.

“You are stealing my partner, Leena,” Vinit complained good-naturedly as he called Sunny on his phone.

With that one phone call that lasted all of thirty seconds, Leena and Sunny became inseparable—he took her for morning walks at the Maha Laksmi racecourse, lunch at the Taj, and then Victoria rides during the cool Mumbai evenings. They visited every tourist spot in town and his knowledge of the city kept her interested and enticed. He loved seafood and soon had her walking with him in area fish markets to pick out fresh fish that he then cleaned and cooked for her in simmering sauces of coconut milk, red peppers, and tamarind. Somewhere during the time they spent together, Leena could not recall which day it happened: she held his hand for the first time. Now it was a habit.

Vinit did steal Sunny on some days to finish the illustrations for the book. On those evenings, Leena would look forward to her walks with Avni, although she did notice that their walks included a lot of sitting down! They sat on the ratty, old wooden park benches and watched the kids from Avni’s building play cricket. She could never tell who won but the kids seemed not to care. No parents were ever in sight watching the kids, something that really surprised Leena.

“We are supposed to be all about community here, watching each other. Most people do it because they are nosy,” joked Avni, “some even care. I could never imagine my parents coming to watch me when I played. It is just not done here.”

“Come on, *arre*, throw the ball, what are you doing?” The kids’ yells were constant.

Across from the bench where they sat was an old man with a red bandana-type wrap around his head and a clean white shirt, who had a small parrot. Avni had told her that the man claimed his parrot could read fortunes. One day, when she was on her own, Leena went up to him to have her fortune read. “Madam, *appkei maa kahti hai sub teek hoga*.” Leena had no



idea what he was saying so she called one of the boys playing cricket. A group of them came running up. “*Didi*, we can translate. He is saying—your mother says that all will be well . . .” The kids then ran off. Leena thanked the old man and paid him a hundred rupees, much to his gratitude, and went back to her bench. Her mother and father had died hiking in the Virginia mountains about two years ago, and then came the devastating breast cancer diagnosis. Life had been anything but dull.

The past ten days had been strangely liberating, all the emotional baggage left behind in DC. Tania had finally called on the tenth day. “Dadi will only text you now because she cannot hear anything you are saying on the phone,” Tania’s melodious voice made Leena long to go back.

She told Tania that she was now an expert in bargaining and bargain hunting.

“You sound so different, Leena, so much happier and I loved all your new clothes in the photos you emailed me. What are you buying for me? I want to come visit and stay with Avni. She sounds so wonderful. And Leena, who is that handsome guy in the photos? The one wearing the t-shirt that says NEVER, NEVER, NEVER HAVE A BAD DAY?” Tania asked.

Ah, yes, the t-shirt. Only one person had the disposition to wear that. Sunny.

“His name is Sunny, he is a young Punjabi guy here. He makes me laugh so much, Tania, I don’t know how this man constantly finds something to be happy about,” Leena told her sister.

“Leena, I love you. I feel like you are becoming your old self again. I miss you. Come home,” Tania cried at the end of the call.

Leena wiped away her own tears. Suhani sat down next to her.

“You miss your family, I know. I hope this break has been good for you, my sweet child,” Suhani said gently moving her fingers through Leena’s hair.

“Yes, I feel much more at peace. It has been a difficult road. I, me . . . when I lost my breasts, I thought my life would be over.”

Before Suhani could respond, the maid brought over some tea and onion fritters for the ladies to enjoy.

“So listen, what made you think Sunny is Punjabi? I overheard you on the phone,” Suhani said as she sipped her tea.

“Oh, I just assumed, from that t-shirt he always wears—KISS ME I AM PUNJABI. He never really shares anything about his family. Our conversations mostly revolve around things like the taxi drivers of Mumbai or the people peeing on the side of the road, the road-pee kings, as he calls them.”

“Oh, that t-shirt. No, no, he isn’t Punjabi. I don’t think he even knows where he is from. He generally does not share his strange past, Leena. As far as I know he was on the streets of Delhi when some Mumbai socialite found him. She sent him to boarding school and paid for his education. When he was younger, I think he grew up either in her house or in an orphanage. He won’t say. When he was in medical college he fell in love with a young Punjabi girl. Vinit told me she was the love of his life. She told him that his demeanor, laughter, and yes, his fair-skinned good looks reminded her of all her Punjabi friends in Delhi. He had that t-shirt printed up the next day.”

Leena stopped sipping her tea. Nothing here was as it seemed. Nothing.

“I cannot believe it. He, he . . . well, he behaves like he has it all. Everything. Wanting for nothing,” she said quietly.

It was true, she had seen him serious only that first day when she met him. After that, he was always cheery and like many people she saw on Mumbai streets, appeared to follow Vinit’s “happiness is free” paradigm.

“I know. I envy him, too. Have you ever seen that library of his? No? What! You guys go out all the time and he hasn’t taken you to his library?? Come on . . . at least I know part of where he gets his strength from.” Suhani left her tea, picked up her purse and was already halfway out the door.

Leena fumbled around for her purse and then followed.

They hailed a taxi and within twenty minutes were outside an old, broken down house.

“He lives here as a paying guest with a Parsi family. His room and library are in the back of the house,” Suhani said as she pointed to a small bungalow. She paid the taxi driver and began walking toward the small house. They walked by a small, well-tended patch with tiny yellow roses in full bloom. Sweet-smelling jasmine grew freely outside the right side of the house leading to the back. No one appeared to be home. Then they heard the laughter. Sunny was outside in the tiny garden surrounded by little kids and was playing ball with them.

“Hey. What a surprise, ladies! So nice to see you! Welcome to my humble abode,” he waved to them.

“Hi, Sunny! Suhani finally decided to show me what you have been hiding from me all these days,” Leena teased.

“Sunny—show her where your library is, and please get me something to drink. I am so hot,” said Suhani.

“Come, come let me get you something to drink. Library? Yes, of course, . . . here it is,” he said pointing to a small, shabbily built shack. The shelves of the shed were filled with toys of every kind. “This is where my money goes—my, ahem, my toy library. And now people donate. These little ones, who no one really gives a damn about, come here to play.”

The little kids, dressed in tattered clothes, giggled and laughed as a brightly dressed toy monkey banged on his drums and waddled forward.

“They are orphans?” Leena asked, instantly regretting the biased question.

“No, not all of them. Some have parents. But they are all, well, poor. No money. My library allows them to play. People often donate clothes and foods to these kids, forgetting that they are kids. They too have the right to play. To be happy, to laugh, and to smile. They have a right,” his voice trailed off as a young child came over and pulled him to complain about a toy not working.

He bent down to the child’s level and became immersed in fixing the toy. Leena walked over and sat by Suhani.

“I have never heard of a toy library. What a unique idea.”

“He is like the Pied Piper, isn’t he,” Suhani said, her eyes misting. “They love him. This is what I was telling you. I think this is his secret—he gets his strength from them.”

They sat for a while on old white lawn chairs and watched, a bit in awe and a bit in envy, as Sunny effortlessly interacted with the kids. He had a large jug of juice and a bowl filled with grapes and peeled oranges. As he played with the kids, he would motion for them to get something to eat or drink.

About an hour or so later, the sky began to darken. The kids left. Sunny came over and sat down. “I am sorry but I promise them that I will play with them when they are here. I did not mean to ignore you guys! I love them, you know. I hope I can encourage at least one to go to school. Right now they are so busy being kids that I hate to even mention the future.

“So, what are you ladies up to tonight? Have you been to Enigma yet, Leena? Wanna go dancing?” He was full of surprises, Leena had no idea he liked to go bar hopping or dancing.

Suhani called Vinit on his mobile. Avni was at her friend’s house spending the night, so they were all free to head out. “Yes, sounds fun. We will meet you at Enigma at around ten?” Suhani and Leena left to go back to the apartment to have dinner and get ready. Leena caught Sunny staring quietly at the toys sprawled across the garden. He was smiling.

*I am falling in love with this man*, she thought and then her hands self-consciously reached for her chest. She brushed the thoughts of her disfigured body out of her mind and tried to keep up with Suhani who was already in a taxi, negotiating the rate to take them back home. At least that is what Leena thought.

“We are not going home,” announced Suhani. “Come on, we are going to get our hair done, manicures, pedicures, waxing and maybe even a massage. I have to shine for my hubby this evening. Enigma has women half my age.” She was smiling.

Leena was thrilled and nervous, the prospect of getting all dolled up for no special reason sounded like some much needed pampering. At the salon, she got her hair done and her nails painted a bright red.

Their tall hairdresser with a wild mohawk and bright fuchsia lipstick named “Pinky” continuously referred to each one of them as “Baby.”

“We have been taking bets for years on Pinky’s P’s, care to join in?” laughed Suhani when the hairdresser was out of earshot.

“P’s?”

“Privates,” whispered Suhani and they both giggled.

At home, Suhani helped her pick out a sizzling red top from Avni's closet and paired it with a pair of black jeans. "You will break a lot of hearts this evening, you look amazing!" Suhani exclaimed after Leena finished dressing.

That night was a blur. It was a loud, hip bar with fusion music blaring from umpteen speakers. The dance floor was packed with young, nubile bodies dressed in the latest brand-name clothes.

"You look amazing, Leena," Sunny said more than once.

"I told you, I told you," Suhani kept repeating as Leena blushed many shades of pink. Once he got her on the dance floor, Sunny refused to let her go, he put an arm around her and held her close. She was not totally surprised at her own reaction. She had been attracted to him since the first day she saw him at the temple. His warmth and laughter made her feel so comfortable. She laid her head on his chest and they danced together, oblivious to the world outside.

There was a lot of drinking, a lot of dancing, and even more drinking.

Suhani and Vinit spent the night dancing and then left to go home around two. Sunny offered to take Leena home later.

At around three in the morning they left the bar and headed to his home.

The sex was effortless, passionate, wild, quiet, remarkable, gentle, perhaps even good. She clung onto him wanting his strength to be hers, his smile, his attitude. She wanted a part of his spirit. "You are so beautiful," he whispered, "your gentleness . . . your sweetness. I feel like I have been looking for you all my life."

The night was over in the blink of eye.

The next morning, she found herself telling him everything about the cancer, about her parents. They loved her so, gave her the perfect life and then were gone. He mostly listened, sometimes hugging her.

Sunny just let her cry, holding her closer as the tears flowed. She talked and talked and talked.

“You have to get this out of your system. Look at what it has done to you. It is holding you back. There is no way to go back but you can go forward. You have to let it go. You have to. There is no other way to live.”

His logic was so simple. And yet, so hard for her to swallow. He was right. She knew it in her heart.

“Leena, you know I care for you a lot. But at this time in my life, I cannot promise you anything. I don’t have a job, decent place to stay, nothing. I guess all I can promise you is a few special Sundays . . . like this one.”

With that, they left the warmth of the bed.

He dropped her back at Vinit’s before heading out to finish the final illustrations for the novel that was almost done. He and Vinit were moving at lightning speed ever since they found a blog of a devadasi from Kerala. A blog of a devadasi! Leena was getting used to the enigma that was India. Sunny and Vinit were planning to leave Mumbai the next morning to travel to the backwaters of Kerala to meet this amazing devadasi who was blogging.

“How was last night?” Suhani asked the minute Vinit left the house.

“Oh, it was the best night of my life,” Leena murmured and then burst into tears.

“What happened? Did he say something mean? What did he do? Why are you crying?” Suhani rushed over and hugged Leena.

“No, it isn’t anything like that. I think, I think I have . . . he . . . he he told me last night that this was it for him and me . . . just a night . . . nothing more,” Leena mumbled through her tears.

“Are you sure that is what he said? Sunny has a way of hiding behind words. Are you sure?” Suhani gently patted Leena’s head but could not soothe the crying girl.

“I can’t stay here anymore. I don’t want this to go any further. I, I don’t want this to go any further,” Leena got up and rushed to the guest room and shut the door.

“She is in love with him, Mama, she is totally in love with him,” Suhani heard Avni say. Avni had just come in from college and overheard the conversation.

The next morning, Leena flew back to her life in Washington, DC.



## A Beautiful Boy

### *Mumbai, India*

Dressed in a crisp white cotton *kurta pajama*, Sunny sat down on the cold beige marble temple floor and focused his gaze on the idols of the Gods in front of him. Dressed in blue silk and adorned with diamonds and gold, the statues looked majestic. He closed his eyes and began his annual ritual. Each year he would pray for the women in his life: his *bijra* mother, his socialite mentor, and now for the first time, his beautiful lost love Leena. It was always this way on his birthday, or what he guessed was his birthday. He spent the day at the local temple, thanking God for his own life but more for the people who saved him and let him live.

This birthday was different from all others. He had emailed Leena that morning, giving her the good news about his job back in Chandigarh. His proposal to use small neighborhood kids as spies to keep track of local pregnancies was accepted by the head of the clinic in Chandigarh. His boss had been thrilled at the idea. “This is great, the kids can come and tell us who in the house is pregnant so we know and then they can tell us when the baby comes.” The local council, desperate to stop female infanticide, had approved the plan. Sunny was finally going back to being a doctor.

Leena had barely responded to any of his voicemails, emails, or text messages, and it bothered him.

Leena had left suddenly after he and Vinit went to find the blogging *devadasi*.

“I did not have the courage to tell her about my past. But she could have waited for me to at least come back. She left without saying goodbye,” he told Vinit, who in turn reminded Sunny that this was at least the hundredth time he had said the same thing.

“This is the new world, *jaar*, call her, email her, tell her everything and then she will know why you behaved like such an ass that night and told her you could not give her anything,” Vinit chided him.

“She won’t respond to anything I send her. She barely sends a hello back. She hates me. I really blew it,” Sunny had said, tears welling in his eyes.

The bells of the temple began to toll and the priest began reciting loud *mantras* in the background. The temple bustled with activity as seeking souls prayed for love, money, health, prosperity, revenge, babies, abortions, school grades, and job acceptance letters.

The louder the sounds became, the more quiet Sunny felt.

He began to breathe steadily and draw his thoughts closer and closer to his center. He closed his eyes. At first the images in his mind were fuzzy, but then as his spirit settled, he began to see a clear picture of Kamla Devi.

Shabbily dressed in a dark maroon sari, red bangles dangling on her arm and a name-calling foul mouth perpetually painted red by her incessant chewing of *paan* full of betel nuts, lime, a rose mix, and cardamom, rounded out with a stinking tobacco-filled *beedi* dangling from the left side of her mouth, Kamla Devi never mastered the graceful art of being a woman, but she always tried desperately to at least look like one. Her gold nose ring with a big red stone and her bright blue earrings never seemed right. Her hair never grew past her ears, and her teeth—the ones that were still in her mouth—showed years of tobacco and tea stains. Sunny missed her terribly.

He was thrown in her path during the Delhi riots of 1984, or so she told him. He was barely four years old. His memories of that day were her memories. Kamla, part of the Indian “invisibles,” as a famous author once called them, was a *hijra*—not a true transsexual, she was a castrated man living as a woman. When she was first castrated, she lived with a

group of other hijras who were either women born into men's bodies or naturally born with no distinguishable sex identity, making them instant outcasts of society. A small group of them lived in a shared house with a guru, a teacher, who guided them. She lived in that house for eighteen years before her guru let her move out on her own.

As a young boy of nine, Kamla had been taken away from his family and forcefully castrated. When she tried to go back but her father would not have anything to do with her. "What will people say? You are not a man anymore. You are not even a woman. There is no room for you in my house." So, resigned to her fate, Kamla had moved into the small group room that housed a tiny group of the local *hijras*.

The hijras earned their keep by singing and dancing at other people's happy occasions. Legend had it that these rejects of society possessed powers to grant any wish or hurl any curse. Some people hired them for their blessings, but most paid them off to prevent the *hijras* from cursing them. Kamla joined her hijra clan as they danced and celebrated the births and weddings at the homes of regular people; she celebrated the joys of the world as she wept at her own being.

Kamla secretly wished for many years that the kinder hijras would take her in. These were the true transgenders she had seen. They dressed like regular women and wore no garish makeup, they made an effort to fit into society, and even worked in offices. A few of them would even speak to her like, like, like she was human and not a weird specimen of spice. Instead, she was caught in an unusual, cruel, underground hijra community that stole kids and added them to their group. They took most of Kamla's earning each week, beating her if the numbers fell. She once tried to reach out to the other community and they welcomed her, teaching her how to dress and walk and talk. Then the elder of the group that

abducted her found out. Kamla was brought back and beaten so badly that she was unconscious for three days. Now she no longer protested.

Kamla told Sunny that she first saw him when he was wandering the streets on that day from hell. A bomb had gone off in the heart of Delhi. The shopping area of Sarojini Nagar was totally destroyed. Different factions blamed each other for it and thirsty swords looked for revenge. Sunny, barely four, had been running blindly until he literally ran into her. He hid in her sari, tiny as he was. He barely moved when the armed man came up to them. "*Hindu ya Muslim?*" he yelled. "*HINDU YA MUSLIM?*" Kamla had shaken her head, "*Khud dekh le na*, see for yourself," she said as she clapped her big hands. She had no idea. The man pulled down Sunny's pants to look inside and had then turned and walked away. His penis saved his life. Later in life he would often joke that he was saved by the skin of his dick.

Kamla asked the little boy the names of his parents, his address, anything that would give Kamla a clue about where to take him. He was so stunned by the fire and chaos around him, she told him later, he could not even remember his own name.

"There was nothing left. Just bodies. No, that is not true. No bodies. Just pieces of people. Many of the *kuccha* homes were on fire. I tried to find your parents," she would tell him this story many times, almost as if to explain why she had bought him home with her.

Kamla named him Sundeep, the beautiful light of the sun, but neighbors began calling him Sunny and the name stuck. She added Suri as his surname a few years later while filing out a form for the local school. She knew no one by that name, but she knew it would give him some identity.

The first couple of days, he mostly followed her around the tiny hut quietly, holding on to the end of her sari like it was the jaws of life, never letting it go. He slept at her feet,

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ate at her side, and stayed within a few feet of her when awake. She hugged him once—he had smiled for the first time: a rare yet almost perfect smile. When the hijras from her clan came to collect part of her earnings at the end of the week, she hid him behind her cot and placed all the clothes she had on top so that they could not see him. The plan worked for that day.

When the children in the neighborhood called him to play cricket, he went out but mostly sat at the side and stared. A deathly blank stare that said volumes and yet no one ever heard. Occasionally he picked up the ball and threw it back at them. He just seemed to be there, not alive and not dead. Just there.

Then the local kids began to tell their parents about this radiant little boy, and the tongues began to wag. The gossips, from the local barber to the local washermen, all wanted to know, *Who is he? Where has he come from? Why is he with her?* People stopped him on the street to chat with him. Neighboring mothers brought bananas and a creamy almond halwa for him to eat, “*Kitna pyara baccha hai. Kis ka hai* Kamla? What a lovely boy, whose is it, Kamla?”

Kamla, conscious of her dark skin and skeleton-like body, constantly informed him that his looks would be his undoing. He never understood the logic. One day she explained: “People notice you, you are too fair. *Gora rang sau aab chupata hai* (fair skin hides a hundred faults). They want to look at you. They expect a beautiful boy to have a bright future. They want you in their life. Here, child, on the street, that is the curse of death. If you were plain, you would blend into the background. You would be like everyone else. But you are not.”

She constantly told him to face down, to look at the ground as he walked and to not look people in the eyes. “Yours eyes are too bright, they shine and twinkle. There is laughter and allure in them. They will blind your future.” He took it all to be the mutterings of an old

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soul and tried, at least when he was in front of her, to be the quiet, demure, subdued person she wanted him to be.

“You are very fortunate, God is on your side, you must have been born on a lucky night,” she finally told him. She continued her rigorous efforts to look for his parents or some relative. No one knew where this child came from or where he belonged. She finally found the nerve to go and register his photograph at the local police *chowki*. She never heard a word back.

Most nights when they slept, she tied a small rope around his foot and held it in her hands. She would puff on her beedi and chew her paan, watching him until he was fast asleep. “I don’t want people to steal you,” she said. It took him years to learn that she was worried about child prostitution and his being abducted by the local gangs to beg on their behalf. She huddled close to him as he slept, terrified that the rats and cockroaches that lived with them would eat his tiny fingers and toes.

On nights when she could not sleep, she stared at him and wondered if she should take a knife and cut his face. Be cruel to be kind. Life is easier on the streets when you are ugly. She knew that. She had never been raped because no one would touch her. They said she was too ugly. No rape in this neighborhood was a miracle. But this child, on the brink of becoming a man, why had God been so cruel to him? Such perfect hair, such striking eyes, such a rare disarming smile. He looked like an angel. It would have served him better to look like the devil.

She enrolled him in a local school and later, as the years rolled by, he began to cheer up. The teachers, who themselves only had high school degrees, soon noticed his reading ability surpassed even theirs.

Their daily routine was simple but guarded. She cooked once a day in the evening, a bowl of rice and some lentils. That was dinner. Leftover rice was breakfast. After breakfast she accompanied him to the local tap in the middle of the neighborhood where they either filled a tiny jug with water or he took a quick bath. She then walked him to school. Later, she picked him up on her way back from work around lunchtime. Some days they stopped by the library on the south side of town. Well, technically it was a library. The air was musty, the furniture dusty, but Kamla took him there because no one looked at them, made fun of them, or asked questions. Many of the books had been destroyed because of a leaking roof. Sunny spent hours browsing torn, damaged books he could not yet read and looking through the rotting encyclopedias as if they hid the answers to all that ailed him.

After the library, she would feed him from a large leaf filled with lunch—some bread and a cooked vegetable. He was then allowed to play on the streets as long as she could watch what he was doing. He played marbles or cricket with the neighborhood kids but mostly he just watched.

One day an older child gave him an old carom board game—it consisted of a mostly rotten wooden board and some wooden coins. The goal of the game is to get the coins into the pockets at the four corners of the carom board using a striker, a small plastic disk—sort of like playing pool with coins instead of balls and a disk instead of a stick. His eyes lit up. It was the first time in his life someone had offered him a toy all his own. It became his solace. Although the game was supposed to have at least two players, he played by himself for hours on end. He cleaned a corner of the hut to place his carom board and would clean it each day. Kamla surprised him one day by bringing him a box of special borax powder to smooth out the surface of the game board. He was ecstatic and thanked her by filling the water jug by himself for the rest of the month.

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Many evenings he helped her clean and cook and some days she even took him to the local market so they could indulge in his favorite snack, *gol gappas*—tiny fried balloon breads stuffed with potatoes and onions and then filled with spicy, minty water—all to be eaten in one bite.

Tuesdays were Kamla's holy days and he would accompany her to the local Hanuman Mandir so they could pray together. She taught him to fold his hands and close his eyes and chant *Jai Hanuman* in praise of the Monkey God.

As the priest chanted sermons and prayers, people would clap.

"Why is everyone clapping?" he once asked her.

"Our hands have a lot of poison stored in them, and clapping makes the poison go away."

"Why do they light incense sticks?"

"Every part of the prayer is meant to be good for everyone around the temple. The incense is used to make sure the air smells good for all of God's followers."

Her answers always sounded true, she was so convincing, but he was never sure.

At the end of the prayers, the priest always gave them *boondi*, tiny flour balls of sweetness soaked in clarified butter and a touch of cardamom. Sunny would cup his tiny hands together and accept the sweets. The priest would then add a red vermillion dot to his forehead and bless him. Kamla would be right behind him.

People always snickered and stared, but the kind old priest would stare them down or occasionally lecture them. "We are all God's children. Even them. Be afraid of His wrath if you look down on one of His own." It had no effect. They were constantly laughed at.

Once Kamla chased down one of the hecklers and beat him up with her bare hands until someone intervened.



*“Ek hijra aur ek chikna”* they said.<sup>1</sup>

“Yes, I am a hijra,” she yelled, “so what is it to you?”

Generally people stared at him and then at her and shook their heads. “God knows where this hijra stole this child from? Poor thing. Is there no one who can help him? He will convert the boy to a hijra, too.”

Sometimes the hecklers called Kamla a man. It was the only taunt that reduced Kamla to tears.

It made the strange relationship stronger.

The hijra and the chikna.

As Sunny grew older, lack of food became an issue. She constantly worried about his thin frame and not having enough to feed him. With barely enough to feed herself, she relied more and more on the kindness of others to feed him.

She devised a new way. Together they began to roam the religious sites in the city where people would throw money their way. He had seen other hijras make a scene and yell and scream, “Why are you throwing this money on the floor? I have hands, you can give it to me in my hands.” But not Kamla. She would pick it up and continue walking.

People threw money to get rid of them. Some threw money and asked her to dance just so they could mock and laugh at her plight. Some thought she could tell fortunes and hung on to every word. “You will have many sons,” Kamla would tell married women, “and your sons, they will care for you a great deal.” The women would smile and pay her big money with dreams in their hearts.

She had another job that she never told him about, he found out years later. This one actually brought in some legitimate money. Money she had been depositing in a bank, just

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<sup>1</sup> Chikna is a slang term used to refer to a fair-skinned, good-looking man.

for him. After all, she said, she had no one else to give it to. The job she did was simple, humiliating but simple. She had been hired by local credit collection agencies. If someone defaulted on their bills, she was hired to go to their place of work and create a “hijra scene”—clap her hands loudly and dance obnoxiously till she embarrassed the person into paying his bills. It worked wonders: no one wanted this scene played out at their work place. The creditors got their money, and she was able to make a life. If that is what one would call this—a life.

And then one day it happened. Their worst nightmare came true. He was ten.

They came, a band of hijras, and took him away.

As he sat outside the house, squatting and using his fingers to wash out his mouth, a tall hijra dressed in a bright fuchsia sari came up from behind him and picked him up. No one stepped in to help. He never cried or struggled. His eyes never pleaded with her. He just curled up into a ball.

The young hijras walked over to Kamla to hold her back in case there was a struggle or she tried to stop them. “You knew this would happen,” they said, echoing the thoughts in her heart. Tears ran down her cheeks; there was nothing that she could do. They had cared for her when she needed it; they had given her a place to belong. They had allowed her to work in their area. They felt she owed them.

And just like that he was gone. Gone.

She tried to find him over the next few days. Each day was torture; she would go from lane to lane, house to house, to all the hideouts she knew about, looking for any signs of her little boy. She even crept into the main hijra house to see if he was there. He wasn’t, and the younger ones warned her to leave before the elders came in and found out she was meddling.

Then a strange thing happened. A few of the younger hijras stopped in at her tiny hut a few days later. “Do you know where he is? Is he here?” they asked. She found that odd. Why would she know where he was? She begged them to take her to him, to tell her what happened to him, but they did not. They threatened instead. “He has to stay with us. If he comes here you need to tell us. As soon as he shows up, don’t delay.” She was terrified; she had no idea why they were so angry. She had, after all, let them take him.

Even the neighborhood gossips did not know what happened to him.

That was a bad sign, she thought, usually they knew everything.

Two days went by. She wept each night for Hanuman to protect Sunny’s soul. Then someone sent word.

The gossips had found something.

The eunuchs who took him tried to castrate him, without anesthetic as was custom. Instead they had got him drunk on some locally produced rum. They gave him many glasses of rum and forced him to drink until he first threw up and then passed out. The elders then readied themselves with the sharp knife, ready to cut away a part of him that was keeping him from joining their clan.

Kamla was amazed at how the gossips had found out about this secret custom. She knew in her heart that the gossips, for once in their life, were correct. Yet she did not want to believe them.

Squatting on the dirt floor of her tiny room, she began to weep for her son before the gossips finished their tale.

Her sobbing turned into a wail and she began to beat her chest, “Why, God, why that poor little boy. What will I tell him now? How will I tell him that he will never be a man or a woman?”

The gossips tried to calm her down, “Kamla, don’t cry, wait, listen to the rest of the story.”

She stopped for a minute.

“Just as they were beginning to recite the verses for the castration ceremony, one of the young hijras called out to them that the police had come. They all ran out of the house to stop *thullas* from coming inside.”

Kamla’s eyes widened. This was unheard of. They never left anyone during the ceremony, there must have been something else major that was happening.

“Sunny, where is he, what did they do to him, please, for God’s sake, tell me, please?” she folded her hands in prayer and wept as she stared at them.

“When they came back, he was gone.”

Gone? He was gone?

She began to laugh and cry, and cry and laugh. She could not believe his luck. God was kind to this boy. Getting away without being cut—this story would become a legend of sorts. Just then someone banged on her broken wooden door.

Loudly.

“Open this door, open up. Kamla, open the door, open it, fast, now.” The banging got louder and louder and louder.

The priest placed his hand on Sunny’s shoulder. “Sunny, *beta*, are you alright?” Sunny opened his eyes, transported from the memories of Kamla’s tiny dingy dark room to this marvelously white and well-lit temple. “Who is Kamla? You were screaming her name with your eyes closed. Are you okay, my child?”

“Yes,” Sunny could feel the tears running down his cheeks, “I am okay. I am so sorry to have caused a scene.”

The priest smiled and walked away.

Sunny wiped his tears. He was sweating profusely. His mind wandered back to the day the hijras took him from Kamla. He had no memory of running away from the hijras. His last memory was one of waking up covered in a blue satin comforter in the home of a petite, fair, and very voluptuous Mrs. Karishma Mehra. She told him that she found him lying on the street and brought him home on instinct, much against the wishes of her lawyer husband, Ashish. His foot appeared to be broken and his arms had a few lacerations. Mrs. Mehra’s words echoed Kamla’s to Sunny’s ears, “Such a good-looking boy, what were you doing on the streets? You look like you are from a good family. What were you doing out on the road in the middle of the night and is that alcohol I smelled on your breath? You were drinking, tell me?”

He had told Mrs. Mehra everything, as much as he could remember, anyway.

Instantly, she took on the role of a surrogate mother. He heard her fighting with her husband the second night he was there. “Who is this boy, Karishma? Why is he here? He cannot stay here. What if he is a crook? I don’t care. You need to get him out of here.” Sunny could barely hear her responses.

When he awoke the next morning there was no sign of Mr. Mehra.

Dressed in an olive green sari embroidered with brown and green flowers, and wearing beautiful freshwater pearl strings, Mrs. Mehra was by his bedside with an old garrulous-looking physician.

“His leg will take at least two weeks to heal. It isn’t broken . . . I think it is just a sprain. Don’t let him walk or run around for now. The cast should help.”

The doctor left and Mrs. Mehra gave Sunny some pills along with a glass of the freshest *mousambi* orange juice he had ever tasted. He could not take his eyes off her. He had never seen someone so ethereal in real life. She smelled of roses and her hands, painted with an intricate pattern of henna, as they touched his were softer than roses that he took to the temple.

It was only when she had left the room that he allowed his eyes to wander. He had never seen a room like this except in the Bollywood movies that Kamla would give him money to go see sometimes. Everything looked beautiful, pale blue silk drapes with hand-painted flowers, ornate and gilded lit wall sconces, a TV that seemed bigger than the size of his cot at Kamla's house, even the doors, the floor, did the rich have cleaner dirt?

Just as he was adjusting his eyes to the brilliance of the room, a young, wiry girl with dark hair came into the room holding a broom. "I am going to clean now. I am Madhu. Memsahib is so nice to bring you in, isn't she? She has a heart of gold." As Madhu swept the invisible dirt in the room, Sunny could barely keep his eyes open and drifted back to sleep.

He was awakened by a number of female voices. He opened his bleary eyes and saw six or seven well-dressed women staring at him. "See, Mrs. Sharma," Mrs. Mehra was saying, "see what I mean. He looks like he is from a good family. Ashish just does not see it. Well, now that he has gone to Calcutta for two weeks, I have two weeks to figure out what to do with this child."

All the other women seemed to synchronously nod in agreement as Sunny stared at their faces.

"So sad, *na*, I wonder where he came from" said one with a nose ring, "*Arre baba*, you have to be careful these days, so many little ones are thieves," said the one with garish red paint on her lips. "*Chalo, chalo*, now let's go out," and with that they were gone.

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Madhu kept Sunny company in the days when Mr. Mehra was out of town and Mrs. Mehra was either out at her club playing cards or getting dressed to go out. About ten days into his stay, Mrs. Mehra had approached him about what he wanted to do.

“I want to go back to Kamla.”

Kamla was ecstatic to see him. “I knew you would come back, I knew you would come and see me.” The hugs and the tears flowed as a very self-conscious Mrs. Mehra waited at the doorstep.

Sunny introduced them and Kamla bent down to touch the feet of the young woman. “Thank you for taking care of my son, my beta.”

Feeling awkward, Mrs. Mehra took two steps back.

“No, no, please don’t worry. He is such a sweet boy.”

Kamla glanced around her room, clearly panicking that she had nothing to offer the young woman as a reward, nothing but thanks.

“I will never leave you now, Kamla.”

He remembered her expression to this day, it had become embedded in his mind. She very quietly said, “No.”

The hijras would be back at any moment. The gossips who had been seated in the room had let themselves out as Sunny entered and Kamla knew it was a matter of hours before the hijras would return. Kamla bent down and touched the bandage on his foot again and again, as if willing it to heal.

It took them a mere twenty minutes to decide his fate.

Kamla handed him a bank passbook. Mrs. Mehra, in all her finery, was touched and volunteered to pay for his schooling at a boarding school just outside of Mumbai.

Kamla cried some more.

“Don’t think I am doing this out of the goodness of my heart,” said Mrs. Mehra, “I do nothing all day except spend my husband’s money. He is never home. I figure when I die and God asks me what I did of value on this green earth, perhaps this one small thing will help me save face.”

With that, Sunny left his eunuch mother to go with his new young socialite caretaker.

Kamla made him promise he would never write to her for fear that the hijras would read the notes and find him. She wrote him for a couple of years. The letters came from different cities around India. And then they simply stopped.

Mrs. Mehra never stayed in touch, either. She put him on a train to a school in Pune. When he arrived, a small suitcase in tow, an older gentleman who turned out to be the principal received him at the train station. His years there were spent in quiet learning. He kept to himself and no one seemed interested in his fascination with the carom board.

It was when he started medical college that Mrs. Mehra wrote him to say that she could no longer pay for his expenses. Her husband had now forbidden her from sending more checks.

Sunny, all of eighteen, found a way. One he never quite forgave himself for. He found out that bored, rich housewives paid top dollar to sleep with such a handsome man. He had a list of four lonely ladies, each of whom put him through one year of medical school. He provided company, often just listening to them talk about their busy husbands.

They all reminded him of Mrs. Mehra. She was barely twenty when he first met her, but she already looked like she had given up on life.

“I have nothing to do, no curtain call. Life has come and gone and I never even knew when I was supposed to be living and when I just started existing,” she had told him.



For a few weeks he even had a real girlfriend. He had a t-shirt drawn up in her honor: KISS ME, I AM PUNJABI.

He graduated and went back to look for Kamla. The gossips, now old, told him she had died of dengue fever.

“You mean she still lived here? Her letters to me came from all over India,” he said.

“She never moved. She would give a note to whoever was going out of town that month to mail to you. She wanted you to think she was away so you would not come back here and face the bad people.” The gossips were delighted to share this big piece of news.

Sunny felt empty. He picked up his bag and took the next train to Punjab. He was going to work at the clinic in Chandigarh.

What was meant to be a dream job turned into a horror story when he found out about the abortions. He left Chandigarh in a heartbeat and now found solace in his small home in Mumbai.

He prayed for Kamla and Mrs. Mehra.

Today, for the first time, he prayed for Leena.

He opened his eyes and smiled as he thought of Leena. He leaned forward and lit a sandalwood incense stick for her as he had done for Kamla and Mrs. Mehra. The sweet scent of the sandalwood filled the air.

Leena made him smile; he had never encountered someone who carried the burden of the whole world on her shoulders quite so seriously. She was youthful, so precious, there was so much at her core. She had strength he envied. “I could never face cancer the way you have faced it, you are so brave,” he repeatedly told her.

Vinit teased him, “Finally, you have fallen in love.”

“No, no, she is just a friend,” he protested at first, and then wondered if there was any truth to Vinit’s statements. Could he fall in love with someone he could never be with? Her life was in America and his was in India.

“I was such an idiot to let her go, Vinit, do you think she will ever come back to me?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you call her, man? You have been sulking since she left. What were you thinking anyway? Why would you let a girl like that get away?”

“I, I don’t know. I . . . you know my past. You know about how things went down during college. How can I tell her that? Tell her I was a prostitute? I don’t even know who my parents are, where I come from, I know nothing. What can I offer her? I just wish I could get her back. I know she doesn’t owe me anything but I thought she would call today.”

She had sent a card that arrived a week earlier. It had a shimmering golden painting showing two people on a wooden boat with one simply holding a paddle and the other one actually maneuvering the boat. The note inside read, “Thanks for being my boatman, my *majhi*, and bringing me to shore. Happy Birthday!” He smiled at the note. She was wrong. He may have been her boatman, her guide, but he had not led her to shore. She had gone into the sea, into the open, alluring sea of life and adventure and of great tomorrows, leaving him behind on the shore of past loves, lives, and memories.

The vibrating of his cell phone brought him back to the present. Perhaps it was her.

The temple was loud and he could barely tell who was on the phone.

He got up and folded his hands in reverence and left the temple to go outside.

It was Vinit.

“Sunny, Leena’s grandma just called. She is back in the hospital.”

“Can you please call them back?” replied this most beautiful son of Mumbai. “Let them know I am on my way to DC.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am an engineer turned food writer based out of Washington, D.C.. I have been published in many major national and international publications, including *Food & Wine*, *The New York Times*, *Parents*, *Cooking Light*, *Prevention*, *AARP-The magazine*, *Health*, *SELF*, *Bon Appetit*, *Saveur*, and many more. My food essays have been included in Best Food Writing anthologies (2005, 2009, 2010, 2014). I have published three cookbooks, the latest being: *Modern Spice: Inspired Indian recipes for the contemporary Kitchen* (Simon & Schuster, 2009). In 2012, *The Chicago Tribune* picked me as one of seven note-worthy food writers to watch.

I am a frequent speaker at the Smithsonian, NPR and many other prestigious outlets.

My first fiction short story - MOTHER - has been published by Akashic Books in their collection *Singapore Noir* that released on June 7th 2014

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