

Chotey whom he had grievously injured. Chotey said in a sad, faltering voice, “Go home, Shabbir. Your family needs you.”

“What family? I’ve no family.” He had been sleeping the nights on the slab projections in front of shops. In the day he wandered aimlessly – dishevelled, shabby, ill, and distracted. He looked like a famished, seedy beggar.

After three days of the incident, he did go home. Despair and gloom swirled in the house. A silence had overpowered the house, which was occasionally broken only by hushed voices. Shabbir’s wife lay inert on the cot in a corner, as usual. The forlorn daughters moved about slowly, on soft feet. His wife motioned to the elder girl and whispered to her.

“Abba, Amma says you shouldn’t have hurt Khala.”

“Khala? What Khala?”

“Chotey Khala.”

The roof seemed to crash on him.

“Why? And how does she know I have hurt her?”

The girl didn’t answer the question, and continued, “Inayat Chacha has stopped visiting us. We had no money for food, medicines, and for our school fees.” The girl was silent for a while, and then added hesitantly, “Khala has been helping us.”

Chotey lay in his one-room hovel, injured and feverish. Tabbal had sensed his opportunity and sent a *hijra* from the *toli* to take Chotey to the doctor, but she stubbornly refused. Then Tabbal himself came to her room, and sat by Chotey’s side for hours. “Didn’t I tell you he’s a good for nothing fellow? I knew, he would harm you one day. Look at your condition. What has the badmash done to you? Come now, I’m not going to let you suffer all by yourself. I’m taking you to hospital right now. You’re really in a bad shape.”

“No need. It’s not serious. I’ll get better.” She knew Tabbal’s intentions.

In a couple of days the wounds turned septic. She burned in high fever and moaned all day and night in her lonely room. She wanted desperately to speak to Shabbir, once.

In twenty four hours, life ebbed out of her.

Betrayal

Nalini Warriar

I opened my eyes slowly, one at a time. I was slumped over my desk, my computer still breathing softly. The moon drifted in and out of the clouds throwing shadows on the frosted decanter with the green liquid. It glowed and darkened in tune with the thud of my heart. I licked my lips and I tasted the sweet residue of my last drink.

I touched the key pad and last paragraph I had written appeared on the screen.

I felt the pull of the absinthe as I gazed at the decanter. In my mind, the green shifted to yellow and the aromatic mixture turned my thoughts into images. I worked my way through the final chapter, managing to stay away from the lure of the bottle. The images were so faint I *wanted* to take another hit before they faded away completely. I knew that would be my downfall.

One drink was *all* I allowed myself.

I wrote until the pale fingers of dawn touched the sky over the river. Still, the ending eluded me. I finally broke off, knowing it would come to me later. I knew better than to push it. That was the secret of my success.

It was late afternoon when I woke up. My mouth was full of craters and trenches. I took a cold shower and, slipping a fresh T-shirt over my head, I pulled on a pair of shorts that were lying on the floor and went for a walk. The sun beat down on the roof of the Château Frontenac, a green sheen covering the copper. I stood on the wooden planks of the Promenade Dufferin, letting the heat cover me while the soles of my bare feet tingled, willing the ending to come to me. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t quite see it.

The air fanning my face was hot and dry. I licked my lips, my tongue following the outline of my mouth. In the golden haze, I saw sun bouncing off the glass of the new condominium

complex on the banks of the St. Lawrence. A sailboat with a blue sail drifted on the calm waters. The ferry to Levis was packed with people and cars and often I've wanted to join them. That wish remained a hopeless craving like the taste of a sweet mango in the middle of the Quebec winter.

I climbed the stairs to the Plains of Abraham and the Battlefields, avoiding the paved paths and the asphalt roads. I walked across the undulating greens, my feet luxuriating in the texture of the lush cool grass beneath them. I squinted to my left, rubbing my soles over the carpet of grass.

'The End, The End,' I murmured, letting my head drop to my chest.

I made my way to the low wall that rose on the hill where the English and the French had slaughtered themselves. If only the earth could talk.

Wolfe and Montcalm.

I didn't think of them as heroes and saviors. They were murderers like all before them. Discovery of the Americas had meant death and extinction for her peoples and riches for the Europeans. And I was one of them. My family had accumulated its wealth by bringing to light the treasures hidden under the earth. Aluminium. Copper. Gold. Thanks to them I never had to struggle to survive. It was a comfortable, uneventful and steady life. I'd dabbled in history and literature for some time and then found a comfortable job at the Laval University as an archivist specializing in South Asian history. The job gave me something to do. A place to be each morning after my run. It gave me an excuse to take a break from my reading and writing. But the best part of it was that it allowed me to come back to what was waiting for me at home. That boring job had brought a little sanity to my life.

I squinted to my left. A hazy mound that was the Île d'Orléans rose from the river. In the distance, the St. Lawrence widened and blurred with the shoreline.

By now, people took up all the benches in the park. Soon it would be dinnertime and the smells of food would mingle with that of the river. I waited, watching the sun sink down beyond

the river to my right. The sky turned a fiery orange that trailed into an intense blue, darkening as the red ball of fire sank rapidly within the next few minutes.

With the darkness came my thirst.

It started deep in my chest and moved upward. I felt it rake the inside of my throat, scratching its way towards my mouth. The dryness turned to an itch that was so intense that I had to cough. My lips burned and my mouth was on fire. I popped open my bottle of water and poured some down my throat. That brought no relief. The water tasted bitter. I spat it out much to the consternation of an elderly couple passing beside me. She took a step back and he put his arm around her shoulder. Steeling myself, I poured more water down my throat and this time I managed to swallow it. Then I made my way home. I had been savouring the moment when I would sit down at my desk by the window and pour the one and only glass of green magic of the new evening. I jogged the rest of the way back to my apartment. Sweat trickled down my chest and back as I fumbled with the electronic key pad. Finally I got the numbers right, the light flashed green and the door swung open. I shut the door behind me and leaned against it. My chest heaved and my breath gushed out of my mouth, a fire raging in my throat. In the living room, the windows were sheets of unadorned glass and the light reflecting on the water was so bright that I could clearly see the precious bottle of emerald green liquid on my desk glowing an electric green.

I stumbled to the desk by the window and with trembling hands poured some of it into a long necked glass. Then, placing a sugar cube on a slotted spoon, I poured some cold water from a thermos that I kept on my desk over the cube and watched as the liquid turned yellow, then milky. Before I took my first sip of the evening I breathed in deep of its intoxicating aroma. I didn't have to wait long for the magic to happen.

I felt the whisper of velvet over my body and fiery fingers caressed my throat and chest. Closing my eyes, I leaned back in my chair, the fragrance of jasmine taking me back to India.

Yes, the ending was coming to me. Before my mind could reason with my action, I quickly poured a second drink and brought it to my lips.

“David,” a voice whispered throatily.

Although I was preoccupied with the sensations on my skin and in my nose, I recognized it. A warm breeze perfumed with sandalwood blew gently over my skin. Drops of moisture landed on my arms and legs. I peeled my shirt off and gentle drops rained on my chest. Flowers bloomed before my eyes. Now my nose detected not only jasmine and sandalwood but also magnolia and gardenia. Camelia and rose. The aromas turned fruitier: mango, jackfruit and ripe small bananas. Then spicier: cloves, cardamom and cinnamon.

“David,” the voice came again.

It was a voice that had haunted my dreams for as long as I could remember. I wished it would keep on saying my name forever.

With great reluctance, I opened my eyes. There were flowers hanging from the ceiling and walls. Garlands of jasmine, rose and marigold. I wrinkled my nose. I didn’t particularly care for marigold. I looked to where the voice had come from.

She looked just as I had seen her in my dreams. She was wearing a blue skirt and blouse. There were jasmine garlands in her hair, around her ankles and wrists. Yes, she was but a figment of my imagination yet I would have done anything to hear that voice again and again.

There was a man with her. He wore a white cloth tied around his waist. Above that, a golden belt with a snarling tiger head buckle glittered starkly against his dark skin. A broad gold necklace graced his chest. There were gold bracelets shaped like snakes around his upper arms. Gold studs twinkled in his ears. A wreath of golden twigs sat on his long dark hair. Two deep furrows arched from the sides of his nose to the corners of his mouth. Crinkle lines fanned out from his eyes. They were amber and so clear that I could see the green of the bottle reflected in them. One arm was on her shoulder and the other was draped on a long, black stick.

“You promised, Asok,” he said in his gravelly voice.

“No,” I said. “I’m not who you think I am.”

I knew immediately who he thought I was. I had been in Delhi researching for a book at the university library where I smothered myself with the history of King Ashoka and the Mauryas and other rulers of ancient India.

“You said you’d take care of him, Asok,” the gravelly voice now said, bringing my wandering mind to a halt.

I slowly brought my glass to my lips again. “What makes you think that I’m Asok?” I asked.

When I didn’t get an answer, I looked up at the man.

“My name is Durgaputra,” he said ignoring my question.

“I’ve told you before that I’m not Asok.”

He gently pushed the girl forward. She took a deep breath and, pursing her lips, she blew a cloud of white smoke into the air. It billowed out and floated to the ceiling. I began to distinguish sounds. A thunder of horses approached me. A flank of riders, swords flashing in the sun, appeared in the horizon. As they came closer, I saw that they were bare-chested, with long, dark hair flowing out behind. The horses were magnificent. Enormous, adorned with golden jewels and flower garlands. They came closer. I saw the nostrils flare and a whiff of warm, moist breath hit me. It reared and the rider waved his sword letting out a cry of triumph. Then my heart almost stopped: the rider looked straight at me!

And I looked into my own face.

The same skin. The same smooth and hairless chest. The same grey eyes in which I saw battles raging.

I heard the clash of metal on metal. The sound of metal piercing flesh and the cries. Oh, the cries! It was enough to make my blood curdle. I felt warm fur under my legs. I looked down. Yes, it was my body. And my arms and legs. I felt a splash of warm liquid on my chest.

Rain, I thought.

How I loved the tropical rain! I looked down again. A trail of red streaked from my shoulder to my navel. The cries around me brought a chill to my heart.

But my thoughts were *his*. My words were *his*.

Suddenly, I was surrounded by riders. Swords flashed in the early morning light, the promise of heat to come in every thrust. I saw Ravi, my brother, dig his heels into the flanks of his mount and charge towards me.

“It’s a trap,” I heard him shout.

There were too many soldiers. But I was not one to give up so easily.

“I will kill you, Shivaraj” I heard myself saying. “Your kingdom shall be mine and I shall become the greatest ruler this land has ever seen.”

Heat mounted to my head as I thrust my sword into my opponent’s body. My arm moved again. This time the head fell off in one clean slice while a gush of red sprayed my face and chest. I wiped it with my upper arm, my vision clouding with red.

How had they known about the ambush? I asked myself.

Later in my tent surrounded by my generals, I asked the same question. They avoided my eyes, refusing to be the betrayers themselves. As I stared into each one’s eyes commanding them to reveal all that was in their souls, bits of conversation flashed into my head like clouds sailing across a blue sky.

“It was Durgaputra wasn’t it?” I muttered between clenched teeth. And I knew from their looks that I was right. “Didn’t I give him everything? Land, jewels, palaces? All I asked in return was his loyalty.”

I sent three of my best generals in search of him. But they never found him.

“Why did you betray me?” I asked now of the old man.

“You promised that you would look after my son,” he replied. “I put his life in your hands and you betrayed me.”

“It was a battle! And he was in the middle of it. Don’t you know that I am not God?”

“Well, see that’s it. I *thought* you were. I thought you had all the powers in the world. I believed in you.”

“And you take your revenge by betraying me? Do you not remember that you swore allegiance to me? Did I not marry your daughter?”

The girl beside him took a step towards me.

“A daughter cannot take the place of a son. My son was my life. Without him my life has no meaning.”

I approached him.

The yellow eyes of the snakes on his arms glittered to life and watched my progress warily. The wreath of twigs on his head began to undulate. And hiss. Soon they would slither down his head and body. I had to stop that before they reached me.

Snakes terrified me.

I suddenly knew what I had to do. I raised my arm and lifted my sword high up in the air. Then I brought it down on his neck. His head rolled to the floor soundlessly. The twigs turned to dust on the way down.

“Did you have to cut off his head, Asok?” The girl said in her throaty voice, raising her arm.

“Your father betrayed me,” I replied. “A king cannot allow that.”

“You took my father’s life,” she said. “A daughter cannot allow that.”

I saw the flash of steel as her arm came down. There was brief sensation of pain and a burst of fire on my neck. The last thing I saw was the bottle of emerald green liquid glowing an electric green. I knew then that my thirst for it would never be quenched.