

“...mother discovered she was missing a nipple...”

“Could have been one of ours!” Mrs. Green cried, wiping her eyes with one of the

fabric swatches we set aside for the new curtains. “Always suspected...we kept Beth away from them...”

“You’re a good woman, Mrs...”

Though my ankle was still tender, I ran home. Curled tight inside my bed, under a blanket regardless of the unending heat wave, I waited for my father to come home.

When school began Sarah’s seat was empty and when I asked the teachers or Mrs. Green if they knew where she was, they said Sarah and her Mom had moved out west. My Frenchman and the other workers had left too, gone back to wherever they came from. To my amazement, for the next few months my dreams were empty of the Bad Men and their troupe, of Sarah’s smelly grandfather, and even of my mom. My nightmares were filled with hands, familiar hands of men and women, holding me back from seeing, my face pressed up against a white wall, unable to listen.

She

Subhash Chandra

At a first glance nobody could make out that she was a *hijra*. *Hijras* consider themselves women. But for other people, they are males, and masculine pronouns are used for them. Chotey, however, was different. Her face was hairless and her body had those soft scanty hairs which women have. Her hips were soft and rounded and there was a natural feminine lilt in her walk. She even had small elevations around her nipples which could not exactly be called breasts, but with a little bit of padding, they made her into a charming woman. Slim and seductively dusky, she had a certain feminine grace, which even some women lacked. The only give-away was her male voice. Not surprising, therefore, that Chotey considered herself many cuts above the other *hijras* who had to go to painful lengths to look feminine by shaving their faces, arms and legs regularly and who in their eagerness to look womanly adopted exaggerated feminine gestures. The believers said God was making a woman and then by mistake gave her a male voice and the atheists called her a freak.

She was a member of a *toli*, a group of *Hijras*, headed by Tabbal, the Chief *Hijra*, who controlled their earnings, commanded their loyalty and managed their affairs. Chotey was the only one in the *toli* who lived life on her own terms. Tabbal had had a couple of showdowns with Chotey.

“Remember you are a part of my *Toli* and I am responsible for your protection. I’ve to give *hafta* to the police and monthly salary to the two musclemen for our security; otherwise every other day one of you, more so you, will be raped. There are many who have been lusting after you.” Then Tabbal added with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, “You’re gang-rape material, my sweetie.”

“Tabbal, listen to me.” Calling him by name was a privilege which only Chotey enjoyed as others had to call her Amma, “If you want, I can move out any day. I’m not afraid of the goons. I can look after myself.”

“And what’ll you do for a living? You’ll not be allowed to dance on the occasions of births and marriages and collect money. You know I’ve the power to ban you. And you know very well your lover Shabbir doesn’t earn enough for his ailing wife and two daughters.” After a malignant pause he said, “Yes, you can, of course, start ...”

Shabbir was a barber, and because he did not spend much time at the shop, his brother, Inayat, often scolded him for his affair with Chotey. “Think of your wife and two daughters. Who’ll marry them, given the reputation you’re acquiring – the lover of a *hijra*! Shame on you! Shabbir’s response to his elder brother was only a guilty silence, always.

The spats between Tabbal and Chotey had established a power equation between them in which the balance tilted in favour of Chotey, because Tabbal knew he could not afford to lose her. If Chotey left, their earnings would plummet and they would have a difficult life. It was Chotey’s beauty, her genial nature and winning smiles sprinkled around generously while gyrating to the beats of Tabbal’s *dholak* which emptied men’s pockets in the presence of their wives. She also endeared herself to women by giving them advice on how to keep their men in control and to the old women by touching their feet to seek their blessings, after her dance was over. Women were expansive with gifts and gave her costly saris, almost new. Tabbal had a personal reason, too, because of which he wanted to keep her. He liked the feel of her soft body when sometimes Chotey lay on the same cot with him and went into orgasmic ecstasy when he could kiss her. Everyone else in the *Toli* had received thrashings for their occasional assertion of independence. But not Chotey. Other *hijras* were burnt up with jealousy but never dared raise the issue.

As it is, Chotey was a bad example for the others in the *Toli*. Ever since her affair with Shabbir, she had turned into a headache for Tabbal. But she continued to be a mint for them. Therefore, having participated only in one dance, Chotey left the group to spend the day the way she wanted to. She would move around like a carefree girl, conscious of her beauty and the men’s gaze.

Many would have parted with a big chunk of money to bed her, but she spurned them all. There were only two men – Shabbir and Masterji — in the whole of Bara Bazaar, who mattered to her – the one she loved and the other she respected. Masterji was the only educated man in the Bara and Chota bazaars. He ran a shop of second hand books for school and college students and his shop was next to Inayat’s. Every day Masterji’s son spent time at the shop on his way home from the school, looking up books and selecting some to take home. Chotey, who spent some time at Masterji’s shop every day, would look at the boy longingly, pinch his cheeks flushed from heat and wistfully tell Masterji: “Give me this boy of yours. I’ll bring him up like a prince.” She read the English newspaper at the shop and talked with Masterji about local and national events. She had studied in a public school up to class seventh. Her parents were rich and had successfully hidden her from the *hijras* for eleven years. Then luck ran out on them and the *hijras* of the city got suspicious. One day they waylaid her when she was on way to school, checked up her genitals and gleefully informed the parents that they had claimed the one who was rightfully theirs. God had given the child to them and nobody could take her away. Not the government, nor the police, who in any case never interfered in such matters. A big all night *jalsa* (function) was held to celebrate the inclusion of a pretty *hijra* as a member of their family. *Hijras* from all over Meerut converged and sang and danced with abandon all night.

Shabbir and Chotey were madly in love. Shabbir had sometimes talked about divorcing his wife and marrying Chotey. But she had always given him a firm “NO.” “It will be a sin in the eyes of Allah to leave a sick woman to fend for herself and you can’t abandon your daughters. It’s alright. We can go on like this. Your love is all that matters to me.” Shabbir started spending longer hours with Chotey. Inayat would blow his top, “You’ve no sense of shame, *haramzade*! People laugh at you for becoming a Majnu of a *hijra*. Why don’t you get some poison for Bhabhijan and strangle your daughters? That would release them from this miserable life.”

One day, Chotey and Shabbir had an argument. “I can’t take it anymore.”

“What has happened now?”

“Every night Inayat bhai comes over – the two families lived in the same mohalla at a short distance from each other – and snatches my sleep away. He goes on and on, berating me as a degraded individual, abusing me in front of my daughters.”

“So?”

“Let’s run away from here.”

“I won’t. In fact, I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I’ve responsibilities.”

Shabbir was surprised. “Are you joking?”

“No, I’m not.”

“I can’t understand you.”

“You’ll, when the time comes.”

After a pause, Chotey added, “Besides how shall we survive? I mean how’ll you earn for both of us?”

“I’ll open a barber shop.”

“What about the investment?” Chotey had the money, but she didn’t want to give it to him. She knew work was beyond him now.

“Are you in love with Tabbal?”

“You’ve gone mad!”

Shabbir’s eyes had turned into cinders.

That night Chotey left Tabbal. He had started getting fresh with her.

“No, Tabbal. Don’t bother me. I’m tired.” Actually, she had been feeling low after her quarrel with Shabbir in the day.

“*Meri Jaan*, I’m not asking you to do anything. Just lie quietly in my arms.”

Tabbal began fondling, then kneading her body. He hugged her so hard that Chotey felt choked.”

“Stop it, Tabbal. I don’t like it.”

But Tabbal was on fire. He started kissing and then chewing her lips. And as he lifted Chotey’s sari, she got up from the cot, jerking herself free. A rejected *hijra* is worse than a woman scorned!

“You bitch. You go to bed with Shabbir every day, free. I’ve a right over you and you deny me! I’ll teach you a lesson, you wait.” Tabbal ran to the kitchen to pick up a knife. In the meantime Chotey jumped off the cot and in big leaps ran out of the house, and never went back despite Tabbal’s pleadings and promises that he would be nice to her.

But she hated what she was doing now and it had expectedly enraged Shabbir. She had started going out with men and was always willing to service customers even at odd hours. She was earning big money. A couple of her rich clients offered to keep her as their mistress, get her a house and give her a lavish lifestyle. Such people she discarded for good and did not allow them anywhere near her. Shabbir’s rage had begun to turn into a deep hurt, which enveloped him in gloom, and filled him with a sense of futility. He was fast slipping into deep depression. Sometimes though he would give vent to an angry outburst, shouting to no one in particular “The bitch, the bitch. I’ll kill her. Yes, I’ll.” At other times the object of his anger was Tabbal: “He’s the one who’s using Chotey to earn a lot of money for him. Her not staying with Tabbal is a ruse. I’ll murder Tabbal, the bastard! The whole lot of them!” But his condition was worsening day by day. Slowly, he became an abject figure; his life was falling into pieces.

He began to stalk Chotey when she went out with a customer, but that didn’t last long. He had started feeling weak. At times when he walked fast, he panted for breath, felt giddy and coughed hard, nearly choking. Chotey dodged him, when she could. When she saw him from a distance, sitting on a broken culvert or under the shade of a tree, she would change her route. One evening when the dusk had descended, and the trees were filled with chirping birds happy to be back home, Chotey was returning from a tryst with one of the customers. Shabbir tiptoed from behind and hit Chotey on the head with a stone. Even as she lost balance and reeled down to the ground, Shabbir kept hitting her repeatedly, shouting all the while, “You bitch, today I’m going to finish you. You will be dead, yes, right now.” Chotey had fallen down, groaning. Then he himself slumped to the ground near

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