

Urine Lane

By Saskya Jain

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“You’ve killed it,” Dhanesh said to Chunni.

The two children hovered over the rose stalk, which they had secretly removed from the garden and planted in a discarded earthen pot. They were hiding it behind the old stove on the terrace. The smell of big, red chillies, drying on a stretch of cloth at the back, burnt their throats whenever the breeze picked up. Dhanesh was nine, Chunni a few months younger. The year was 1934.

“But I didn’t even touch it!”

“You *pointed* at it. Don’t you know that flower buds die when girls point at them?”

“Is that really true, Dhanesh?” Tears filled the girl’s eyes.

“Maybe it won’t die if we wash it,” Dhanesh said quickly. He poured the remaining water from the tin over the plant as Chunni stroked the tightly closed bud with her forefinger.

Back then, Valsad was more village than town. The house in which Chunni lived with her family was small but handsome: two stories tall, with a roof that doubled as a terrace. They lived on the lower floor. Nobody slept in the rooms upstairs, which were used mainly for storing grains and coal. Chunni spent most of her time on the terrace. The mosaic floor of marble chips and ceramic tiles glistening in the afternoon sun reminded her of the pond at the edge of Valsad.

Dhanesh lived a few houses away, but he spent more time on Chunni’s roof than at home. Their fathers were cloth merchants, and Dhanesh knew that he, too, would one day trade fabric.

"Chunni!" the girl's mother called from downstairs.

"Quick, Dhanesh, hide!"

Heavy footsteps could be heard on the stairs. Dhanesh ducked behind the stove, just as Chunni's mother appeared in the door.

"For so long I've been calling you! Have you gone deaf?"

"I was just—"

"Who were you talking to? Did that Dhanesh boy sneak into the house again?" Chunni's mother glanced around the terrace.

"I was telling the birds to stay away from the chillies."

"Liar. The birds are not interested in chillies. You're too old to be playing with boys. Especially that boy. Look at his father—always trying to be smart with us! And don't ever lie to me again or I'll make your backside glow like a lantern on new moon."

Chunni feared her mother would look behind the stove, the only hiding place on the terrace. Her mother's eyes, however, fell to the floor.

"Wasting water again!" She pointed at the empty tin lying in a muddy puddle next to Chunni.

"My feet were hot, Ma. I was only trying to cool them."

"Useless girl." Chunni's mother slapped her head as she passed her. "I wanted you to bring down the chillies, but now I might as well do it myself."

Chunni sighed. "I'll carry it, Ma." She took the bundle from her mother. Dhanesh heard them leave the terrace. After what seemed like a long time, Chunni returned.

"You can come out now," Chunni whispered to Dhanesh.

When he stepped out from his hiding place, he was shaking slightly.

“You got scared, didn’t you!” Chunni grinned at her friend.

“I did not! You’re the one who was scared!”

But Dhanesh was thinking of his father, who had forbidden him to come to Chunni’s house and threatened to beat him black and blue if he so much as considered it. He, too, had mentioned the family rivalry. “It’s shameful enough for me that my youngest son is more interested in playing with girls than book-keeping,” he had said. “If you give that bastard Manishbhai an opportunity to humiliate me in public, I swear I’ll never let you forget that day,” he continued before informing his son that he was hiring a teacher to give him lessons. “Your mother says you are too young. Tah! What does she know? Running around the garden all day long like a beggar’s child. Just wait till the summer is over. The only sight I want of you then is bent over a book. Is that clear?”

Chunni led Dhanesh to the back of the house.

“Tomorrow I’ll show you something special,” he whispered as he stepped outside. He would make the most of his last summer without lessons.

But it was two weeks before Dhanesh could sneak out of his house again. He had come once before, but there was no sign of Chunni. This time he was lucky. He saw her tending to the tomatoes in the garden and threw small twigs and pebbles at her until she noticed him between the bushes. They met a few minutes later at her back door and climbed the stairs to the terrace.

“What’s in there?” Chunni asked.

Dhanesh placed the metal box he was carrying between them on the mosaic floor. Inside was a stack of postcard-sized prints.

“Are they for me?”

“Shh! Do you want them to hear us?”

Chunni’s hand flew to her mouth, making her red glass bangles tinkle as they slid down her arm. “Are they for me?” she whispered, spreading the labels out before her.

“Yes.” Dhanesh had spent the previous weeks collecting the labels stuck to the corners of the bolts of cloth that arrived by boat from Manchester every month. He knew that Chunni was not allowed into her father’s godowns; perhaps she had never seen them before. Even if she had, Dhanesh figured that if he gave them to her she would not forget him once the teacher started coming to his house.

Most of the labels depicted the familiar gods and goddesses, but one of them showed an elephant suspended in mid-air by a pulley lifting it from a pier onto the deck of a big ship, smoke billowing from its funnel, ready to cross an ocean. “For my king,” the caption read in Hindi and English. And below it: “In 1875-6, HRH King Edward VII returned from his state visit to India with four Asian elephants for the London Zoo.” Dhanesh had liked gazing at the animal dangling above the sea, belly strapped into the tight canvas, legs hanging free.

“This one’s my favorite.” He handed Chunni the label. A bicycle bell sounded from downstairs. Chunni stuffed the prints into the box. She ran to the edge of the terrace while Dhanesh hid behind the stove, just in case. He peered out at his friend.

“Surenbhai, look up here!” Chunni was yelling into the street. Dhanesh knew that Suren was Chunni’s cousin. But to Dhanesh, he had always just been one of the older boys—fourteen, fifteen—clustering together at weddings or at the shops, smoking or playing kabaddi in the back lanes. Suren wasn’t handsome, but everyone knew he could swim like a fish. Dhanesh had seen

him practice in the pond. He had heard that Suren had traveled to the seaside. Yet, until this day, Dhanesh had never thought of him as his friend's relation.

"Come downstairs. I'm taking you for a ride around the orchards," Dhanesh heard him say.

Chunni glanced back at her friend.

"Who's up there with you?" Suren asked.

"Nobody, Surenbhai. I'm coming. Just let me ask my mother's permission."

Chunni hid the metal box next to the rose stalk and took Dhanesh's hand as they climbed down the stairs. Halfway down she let go. She would distract the family members so that he could sneak out.

A few minutes later, Dhanesh was running along the dusty path to his house and caught sight of Chunni perched on the back of the bicycle as Suren pedaled. Dhanesh could not see Suren's face, but he recognized his tall, muscular body picking up speed in the opposite direction.

#

Another week passed. The following day Dhanesh would start his lessons. His father had unexpected business at the store, and the women were taking their afternoon nap. Dhanesh walked towards Chunni's house as he recalled the day before. He had accompanied his mother to the clinic, where he watched through the slit between the curtains as the doctor freed his mother's hip from her sari to give her an injection.

"B-Complex," the doctor said. Dhanesh was unable to get these words out of his head.

He was disappointed to find Chunni's garden deserted. He was about to turn back when he heard a long, slow whistle. He looked up. Chunni was standing at the edge of the terrace, gesturing him to come upstairs through the back.

"When I grow up, I'll be a doctor," Dhanesh said as soon as they reached the terrace.

"Can I be your patient?"

"Only if you're really sick." Dhanesh crossed his arms and brought his face close to hers.

"I don't have time for headaches."

"I'm *very* sick, doctor." Chunni sank to the floor, avoiding the puddles that had formed all over the terrace from the recent rains. She spoke with her eyes closed. "Look, I'm so sick I fainted."

Dhanesh sprung into action. "Great, but don't die yet!" He looked around. His eyes fell on the whisk broom that lay forgotten in the corner. The broom was made from the dried, central veins of coconut palm fronds, their ends naturally pointed.

"Found it!" Dhanesh pulled a stick from the broom: He squatted at Chunni's side and pulled his shirt over his head. Chunni squinted at him through half-open eyes as he wrapped it around her knee. "Pretend that your leg is broken."

"Ai, Ma! My leg. Doctor, doctor, will I ever walk again?"

"I can't say. You'll need a B-Complex injection, and then we'll see." Dhanesh pushed the tight fabric of Chunni's blouse up as far as it would go, exposing the rise of her stomach. He leaned over her body and dipped the end of the stick into the nearest puddle before poking it into her skin.

"Oooh, Doctorsahab!"

The terrace door burst open and banged against the wall. Suren stormed through it. The two children shrieked. Suren snatched up Dhanesh's shirt and clamped his hand around the boy's arm. He ordered Chunni to get dressed and slapped Dhanesh, who started crying.

"You devil! What's this filthy business? And you!" He met Chunni's eyes. "I saw you invite him upstairs! Aren't you ashamed?"

"We were just playing doctor-doctor!"

"Chup!" Suren raised his hand over her head but didn't hit her. "Rundi."

Dhanesh had never called a girl a slut. The word sounded strange to him from Suren's mouth.

Suren dragged Dhanesh down the stairs, the shirt bunched in his hand.

"Look how I caught this badmaash on the terrace with your daughter." Suren pushed Dhanesh into the center of the room where the family had gathered on hearing the commotion from upstairs.

"He was undressing her—luckily I came up just in time to stop him."

There was a moment of confusion as the adults took in the topless Dhanesh and Suren, not having noticed either of them enter the house. Within a few seconds, however, their eyes focused on Dhanesh.

"Goonda! You think you can play mischief with the daughter of this household?"

Chunni's mother slapped his right cheek, then his left, then the right again.

"He snuck in through the back door! He's probably been doing it for weeks," Suren said.

"How dare you mislead my granddaughter like that!" A bony hand struck Dhanesh's head.

Chunni's father pushed away the women. He clawed Dhanesh's chin and forced his head up. "I'll teach you to come near my daughter. I'll show you and your good-for-nothing father!" Dhanesh, eyes still screwed up, waited for the slap to crash down on his face. When nobody spoke or moved for a few seconds, Dhanesh's eyelids relaxed just enough to peek at Chunni's father, who waited for the boy to open his eyes before he struck him.

#

Two weeks later, Chunni was sitting in the prayer room. She was supposed to dust the statues of the deities, but the rag lay in a pile next to her feet. From the kitchen she heard the muffled voices of her mother and aunt.

"I heard that the little devil has been packed off to Bombay to live with relatives."

"That boy is cursed! Thank God we saved our Chunni before it was too late."

"Mind you, she must have given him a share of encouragement. Let's hope the one good beating was enough to tame her."

Chunni picked up the cloth and wiped off the shrine and each of the figurines. She struck a match and lit the lamps. So Dhanesh's father had thrown him out. Chunni resolved to say her prayers. Not once, but twice every day, once for herself and once for him, for the rest of her life.

#

It was a Wednesday, Dhanesh's day off from the government clinic. He was dressed in his usual attire: pressed white trousers, matching shirt, and a beige khadi vest in the fashion of the freedom fighters—now leaders—of the country. His oiled hair was parted to one side.

"Do you really have to go to Bandra every Wednesday? You know Parvati said Dr. Chavan sees patients at home on his day off." Dhanesh's wife put the tiffin box into the khadi

bag. "She also said they're buying a radio this month." She squeezed the water bottle in next to it.

"Some things cannot be measured in gold, Lakshmi. Going to the Relief Centre once a week is a small sacrifice for me. They need all the help they can get." The doctor gathered up the bag and his attaché. He dipped his hand into his vest pocket and took out a coin. "Have a kulfi with Parvati at the sweetshop later. Just don't go around covering your face like some old bag from the last century. You know how much I dislike that."

More than twenty years had passed since Dhanesh had spent his last day in Valsad. His relatives in Bombay, though not unkind, paid little attention to the banished boy. Dhanesh threw himself into his studies at the local school. The following year, he won a scholarship to go to St. Joseph's High School for Boys. At first he was intimidated by the teachers, most of whom were Jesuit Fathers. They dressed strangely, ate with knives and forks, and worshipped frightening pictures and sculptures of a murdered man. But by the end of the school year, Dhanesh learned English. He relished the white, spongy bread served at the school's canteen, and liked to dip it into his tea as he had seen the other boys do. He even went to confession at the chapel once, but decided he preferred to just avoid sinning as best as he could. The school's motto was "Loyalty through service," and it was the Fathers who had taken the boy on their rounds at the leper colonies and encouraged him to become a doctor. Later, he did not forget to invite his teachers to his graduation from the medical college and, the same year, his wedding.

#

The following day Dhanesh was back at the clinic.

“Next!” he called in the direction of the door, which stood open, and on which there hung a wooden board painted green with “Dr. Dhanesh Patel” written in white Gujarati, Marathi, and English letters.

“Next?” Dhanesh looked up from his paperwork.

A man stood in the doorway. Dhanesh returned to his file, beckoning him forward with his free hand. When the doctor had put his signature in the necessary places, he closed the folder and looked up. The man before him was tall and thin; his small eyes bulged from within lean features.

“My wife is injured,” the man said.

“Where is she?”

“At home.”

“Why-didn’t you bring her in?” It’s no use, Dhanesh thought. I practice medicine in the greatest city of this country, but these village types think we’re only waiting for them to come in so we can chitchat.

“She says she can’t walk all the way to the clinic. She is in pain.”

Dhanesh sighed. He took out his clipboard and notepad from the drawer. “Name?”

“Suren.”

The doctor paused. He looked at the man before him, whose eyes were fixed on his feet. He lowered his pen to the paper and wrote down the name. He cleared his throat.

“Patient’s name?”

“Chandana.”

Dhanesh stood up. "Wait here. My pen has dried up." He went into the back of his office and closed the door behind him.

Was it he? Had they really married? Was Chandana Chunni? It was absurd to think of Chunni as anything other than the girl he had left. But she was a woman now. They could have married and moved to Bombay. It was not impossible. He wondered whether Suren had recognized him. Had he maybe followed him to Bombay to see what had become of the banished boy? Was this a trap? The doctor remembered the tired, shrunken figure standing in his office. No, he couldn't have. He had adopted his surname only after he had arrived in Bombay, and Dhanesh was a common name. So was Suren. Dhanesh recognized that the only thing that had remained with him from Valsad was Chunni, not so much as a memory, but as a talisman.

Dhanesh stopped kneading the seam of his vest between his fingers. He found a pen and returned to the front office. The man stood as he had left him.

"Sign here," the doctor told him when he had taken down the wife's symptoms and their address.

The man looked at the clipboard that the doctor had placed in front of him and then lowered his eyes to the floor.

It was as Dhanesh had suspected: Suren was not literate. He had not sought him out deliberately. He had not read his name on the door. He had probably come looking for a doctor, and been given directions to the clinic by a neighbor.

"One more question—" the doctor said, and Suren turned back. He would ask the man the name of his ancestral village. But after a moment of silence, Dhanesh said, "Never mind. You may go now."

Dhanesh thought he withheld the question because he didn't want to be reminded of his hometown—if the man even was from the same place. But the truth was, he was scared that the man would have named a place other than Valsad. Dhanesh told himself that he did not trust him. I should just go see for myself, he thought.

#

The address the man had given Dhanesh was on Mootar Galli—Urine Lane—known as such for generations because of the open sewer running down its side. The lane was at the very center of the jewelry market. Dhanesh snaked his way through the crowd on his bicycle, past moneylenders sitting behind low desks in their dhotis and buttoned-up shirts, past paan-shops and stalls selling hot sev, past the satta-wallahs dangling out of storefronts by chains. “Four anna!” one of the betters yelled. “Three anna!” another, hanging on to a chain on a balcony, echoed from above, lowering his wager on the stock prices of silver and gold. They dangled from storefronts and balconies, craning their necks and crying out to undermine each other's bets.

The doctor navigated his bicycle alongside the gutter, the flow of the blackish stream matching his speed. When he pulled the brakes in front of the building at the end of the lane, the breeze ceased immediately. The stench of urine flooded his nose.

The building had been painted a pale pink at construction a few decades ago. By the time the doctor arrived at its door on his bicycle, its coat had cracked and fallen away like old earthenware. The paint had flaked off entirely, but nobody, least of all the tenants, paid any attention. It was the city, Bombay, that had repainted it over the years. Layers of dust and grime now plastered the outer and inner walls.

Dhanesh checked the wristwatch he kept in his shirt pocket during the monsoon months to keep it from getting wet. He was not too early. As he stretched his limbs, he suddenly realized that he hadn't even bothered to ask about the nature of the woman's injury. How careless of him! What if it really was Chunni? She would laugh at him with her small mouth and yell "What kind of a doctor are you? A doctor who is blind to his patients!"

He got off his bicycle and leaned it against the wall. He had already taken a few steps toward the doorway when he realized that his cane, essential not to his comfort but his appearance, was still hooked to the handlebar. He turned back to retrieve it.

Reaching into his attaché to take out the torch from among his equipment, he entered the building. As he had expected, the staircase was dark, despite the bright morning sun. It was not the first time he made a house call in a chawl of the area; he knew that light was a rare commodity here, as were clean water and uninterrupted sleep. A few minutes later, Dhanesh was climbing the next set of stairs, the beam of his light zigzagging over the creaking wooden steps.

"The Doctor is here!" he heard children whisper as they poked their heads through doors and scattered in and out of the hallway. A man's voice threatened the children; they fell silent. As Dhanesh ascended the last few steps, the man from the day before appeared in the doorway, his hands loosely clasping each other before his concave chest.

"Doctorsahab, you came!" The surprise in Suren's voice touched the doctor. Perhaps his colleagues had made empty promises to the man in the past.

Suren seemed more at ease than the day before at the clinic. He led the doctor through the paneled double door painted a royal blue. The room suggested a large family: To Dhanesh's left rose a pile of bedding for the children of the house. On the right, two mattresses formed an L-

shape along the walls, lined by hard cushions. The men of the family seemed to repair jewelry; bags of silver and gold thread, tassels, and beads piled up in the corner, and a badly scarred wooden chest with a slanting top that would serve as storage and work space had been pushed against the wall beyond the two mattresses. Directly in front of the doctor, another doorway led to the women's room, hidden from view by a piece of cloth nailed to the top of the door frame. To its left stood a cupboard and to its right a covered window denied more glimpses into the back.

On the wall above the pile of bedding hung a chair, the horizontal beam of its backrest suspended from a long, rusty nail. Suren must have acquired it at considerable expense, to be taken down only when a brother-in-law of some social standing visited their home. Such quaint ways these people have, the doctor thought, expecting the man to take the chair down for him.

Instead, Suren gathered the cushions in a pile in front of one of the mattresses. "Sit, ~~==~~ Doctorsahab."

Dhanesh was not offended that the man didn't offer him the chair. Sitting on the cushions would make the examination easier.

Deep moans could be heard at regular intervals from behind the makeshift curtain. The doctor's eyes followed the man as he pushed it aside and disappeared into the back room. He watched the cloth sway in its frame. Dhanesh couldn't imagine that the person behind the curtain was Chunni. The thought moved him, and he decided that if it was Chunni, he would not reveal himself to her so as to not disturb her memories of him. But it's not her! he told himself. How could it be?

The sudden intensity of the moans suggested that the patient was getting up. The curtain rippled, and a short, slender woman appeared in the doorway. She hesitated, her husband's hands gripping her upper arms as he stood behind her. For a moment the three of them remained still, listening to the sounds of morning of which they were not a part: cloth whipping against slabs of stone in the courtyard, the clang and clatter of steel utensils under the communal taps, wailing babies, birds fighting over sill-space.

Dhanesh noted the woman's flat feet and thin arms held close to her sides as if she were posing for a studio photograph. His eyes were drawn to the point of her chin protruding from the veil of the sari covering her face.

It's just a chin like any other, he told himself.

Dhanesh, seated on the pile of cushions against which many of these men's backs must have rested after hours of restringing bead upon bead and knotting tassels onto heavy silver chains, watched the man lead his wife to the mattress, where she lay down. There was no sign of her injury. The man crouched on the floor next to the doctor.

"Are you in pain?" Dhanesh asked, as he unclasped his attaché.

The woman's hand wandered to her face, and Dhanesh thought she would adjust her veil. Instead, she held the fabric between the thumb and forefinger and rolled back the cloth. The woman's eyes were lowered, but Dhanesh saw her eyelids quiver as she blinked. The top half of her left cheek up to her temple was red and raw wherever the blisters had broken open. Second-degree burn, Dhanesh thought. It was a miracle that her eye and lips had been spared.

"What happened?" Dhanesh could not hold back the question.

The wounded area was no bigger than a kidney, but he knew that the pain would be severe at this stage, especially where the blisters were still intact. He noticed a small ridge of pus. Somebody must have touched and infected the wound.

The husband laughed a small, embarrassed laugh. "An accident in the kitchen. You know, Doctorsahab, water boiling on the stove, the children running around. These things happen in households like ours."

Dhanesh was sure the man was lying. Unless she had poured the hot liquid over herself, how could it have splashed on her face in this manner? The man, Suren, must have lost his temper and flung a spoonful of hot oil or steaming tea at her. It's not Chunni, the doctor told himself as he took out the antibiotic ointment, the iodine, and the cotton from his attaché. He spoke without looking at Suren. "Next time there is such a—" he hesitated for a moment, "such an incident in your household, take your wife to see a doctor right away. Don't wait till there is an infection in the wound like there is now. Of course she is in pain!"

"Yes, Doctorsahab. Next time we'll go to the clinic right away, so you don't have to take the trouble to come here." Suren cleared his throat. "Will she be all right?"

Dhanesh did not reply. Let him think his wife was dying!

At that moment the woman opened her eyes and looked straight at Dhanesh. Immediately, she lowered her eyes again, but in that fraction of a second Dhanesh thought he had recognized Chunni. No, it couldn't be. This woman's pupils were darker and her lips thinner, he noted as he poured iodine on the cotton. Chunni's eyes had been brown, not black. Her mouth was small but full. But the next moment he was no longer sure. Perhaps the sun reflecting off the glistening

terrace floor in Valsad had made her black eyes appear brown. Or perhaps this woman really wasn't Chunni. He realized that he no longer remembered what Chunni looked like.

Dhanesh cleaned and dressed the wound. When he was finished, he took out his torch and lifted the woman's eyelids.

"Look up," he said. Dhanesh shone the light into her pupils, which took on a rich amber color as the torch's beam passed through them. He plugged the stethoscope into his ears. He evened the folds of her sari over her chest and listened to her heartbeat. It was fast. He knew it couldn't be from the injury. Could she have recognized him? Perhaps she had even inflicted this injury on herself to bring him to her? Her husband certainly didn't seem like the type to call a doctor unless it was somewhat serious. No, she would not hurt herself in this manner, and certainly not for his sake.

Dhanesh continued to examine the woman. He rubbed his hands against each other before reaching below the woman's ears. There was no sign of swelling. He took her temperature. She did not have a fever.

Dhanesh was about to close his attaché when his eyes fell on three framed pictures hanging on the wall facing him, which he had not noticed before. The central image showed an elephant dangling from a pulley above a Bombay harbor pier. He paused. The attaché remained open. He looked down at the figure from his tower of cushions. The woman's head was inclined towards him, and he imagined their gazes crossing even though her eyes were closed. Calm down, the doctor told himself. There were thousands and thousands of bolt labels, and they were collected by households all over India, even now after Independence; he knew that. And yet. He thought back to half an hour earlier, when the man had denied him the chair. What he had

accepted as a practical consideration, the doctor now saw as a slight. Did Suren not draw out his vowels a little too much when he addressed him as "Doctorsahab?" Was he making fun of him?

"She has a fever, from the infection," Dhanesh said to the man. "I will prescribe some tablets." He handed him a miniature bottle of sugar pills. "Two with every meal for six days. Come to my clinic if she's not better after that."

Dhanesh glanced at the elephant hanging from the pulley. Then he drew the veil back over the woman's face.

"B-Complex," Dhanesh said, and turned to the man. "Your wife needs an injection, to boost her strength."

Without hesitating—almost as if he had expected me to say so, Dhanesh thought—the man twisted his head towards the back room and called out a name. A boy of five or six entered.

His head was lowered, but Dhanesh noticed his eyes roaming freely inside the room, lingering on his shiny leather case for a moment before shooting back to the figure of his mother on the mattress and that of his father crouching beside the doctor. The boy's eyes betrayed to the doctor a silent glee at his visit, fueled, perhaps, by memories of deserved and undeserved lashings and denied meals.

"Boil this." The man handed his son the needle the doctor had given him. The boy disappeared into the back.

"I will inject in the hip," Dhanesh said to the husband.

"Doctorsahab, please do whatever you deem necessary."

A few minutes later, the son returned from the back room with a steaming pot and placed it on the floor before his squatting father. The man tried to fish out the needle with his fingers, but the water burned his fingertips. "Sala!" he cursed.

Dhanesh took the pot from him. He put on a rubber glove. Pinching the needle between his thumb and forefinger, the doctor attached it to the syringe and knelt down on the mattress beside the woman.

The husband edged forward, curious to witness the procedure. He leaned towards his wife. Like a frog waiting for its prey, Dhanesh thought.

"If you move when Doctorsahab gives you the injection, the needle will break inside of you. Isn't that right, Doctorsahab?"

Dhanesh kept silent. It's not Chunni, he told himself, and I'm not here to educate anyone. ~~Soon, I will be back at the clinic. There must be a queue of patients waiting for me.~~

He removed the fabric from the woman's hip. She drew in her breath when the doctor dabbed a coin-sized ball of cotton drenched in cold rubbing alcohol over her hip. Goose bumps ran over her skin. He took out an ampoule with clear liquid from his attaché. He placed it between his palms and slowly rolled it to keep bubbles from forming. Each time the ampoule *crossed from his palm, over his fingers, and back into the hollow of his hand, the glass made two* soft clangs against the gold ring on his finger. The doctor held up the vial to eye-level and snapped off its tip at the mark. The boy started. This brought his lingering presence to the attention of his father, who shooed him into the back room with his eyes.

The doctor dipped the needle into the opening and drew in the liquid. He raised the brimming syringe to eye-level and pushed the plunger forward a fraction. A few drops of the

liquid oozed from the needle's point and ran down his fingers and hand. He lowered the needle to the woman's hip and pushed it through her skin.

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Dhanesh did not go back to the clinic that day. He went home. The door was locked; his wife would be at the market or at Parvati's. He entered the house and hung his shirt on the nail beside his desk in the bedroom. He opened his attaché, and took out his instruments, placing them side by side on his desk: the stethoscope, the rolls of bandage and cotton-wool, the syringes, the vials and pill bottles of glass, the pincers, the torch, his notepad and pens, and the scalpel. Finally, he took out the framed picture he had brought back from Urine Lane.

"We don't have much money to pay you, Doctorsahab," Suren had said when Dhanesh stood up to leave. "We'll remember you in our prayers if you—"

~~"I'll take this picture as payment," Dhanesh said and pointed at the middle frame.~~

Suren's face lit up. "That? Take all three, Doctorsahab!" Suren checked himself, fearing, perhaps, that Dhanesh would change his mind if he pointed out their minimal value.

"I want only that one."

Dhanesh held the frame in his hands. "For my king," the caption read.

The doctor peered into the empty attaché on his desk. The light of the bulb did not reach it, and the doctor saw only its black mouth.

He heard his wife enter. Before she could ask why he was home at this hour, he called out to her. "I'm home, Lakshmi. I took the afternoon off. I thought we could go to the sweetshop and have kulfis, but first bring me a hammer and a nail."