

Cinderbella

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True to her name, Titli was flitting around like a butterfly, dodging her opponents with ease. She stopped running abruptly and stood by the side of the road as a rickshaw pulled up. She looked at memsahib fondly as she alighted; glasses perched on her nose, a pile of books in her hands. She was different from all the other ladies she worked for. For one her hair was short. Then she never wore a sari like the other memsahibs, with their big fat bellies showing. Nor did she treat her like a worm that had just crawled out of a septic drain.

“Titli, your turn,” Madan called out.

Titli placed the gilli in the middle of the road. She looked at the gilli with full concentration, then swung the danda with all her might. There was a loud crash as the gilli smashed memsahib’s window.

Her first instinct was to run. But she knew memsahib had seen her. “Titli dear, get ready to be fleeced,” she muttered to herself as she dragged her feet to memsahib’s house.

Ma was already there, collecting the broken glass with a broom. She shook her head as Titli entered the house, her head hung low. “Memsahab, I know not what to do with this girl. She no clean any house since morning. All day long she play with boys.”

“Basanti, she’s just a child!” Memsahib said, as she switched on the light.

Ma stopped sweeping and looked at memsahib. “But if something untoward should happen, who be responsible?”

“Why don’t you send her to school?”

“I can’t afford. And what I get by sending her to school? Right now she help me in my job as cleaner and earn few extra rupees. How I manage without that extra income?”

“Basanti, she will earn a thousand fold more if you send her to school!” memsahib said as she took off her sandals.

But ma was already out of earshot. Memsahib turned towards her. Titli hoped she looked suitably repentant.

“Titli,” she said. “If you don’t want me to punish you for breaking the window, you have to promise me one thing.”

“Yes memsahib?” Titli asked apprehensively.

“Everyday after you’ve done your chores, I will teach you to read and write.”

Titli reluctantly agreed. Anything was better than a beating.

“Titli, try harder. I’m sure you’ll get it.”

“But memsahib, I already finished,” Titli replied as she scratched her medusa like hair.

“Finished already? Indeed! Let me see.”

Titli handed her the copy.

“Why, you HAVE finished! And all the ten answers are correct.” Titli blushed as memsahib looked at her and patted her head.

“Oh my my!” memsahib exclaimed when Titli came to do the dishes the next day.

She was wearing a pink party frock. Her normally dishevelled hair was combed and tied with ribbons into two neat plaits. She wore a small plastic bindi and fake gold earrings.

“Memsahib, you know lady I work for two streets away – Gupta madam - is her daughter’s wedding tomorrow. Today I going for the song and dance ceremony.”

“Are you going in those broken slippers?”

“I not have anything else to wear,” she pouted.

“Neelu threw away a pair of shoes last week. They might still be in the courtyard. Go and see.”

Titli ran and fetched the shoes. Memsahib inspected them. “They’re fine. Just dust and polish them and I’ll find you a pair of socks to go with them.”

The shoes were a bit tight but Titli managed to squeeze her feet in.

Memsahib showed her the mirror. “See how lovely you look without all that grime hiding your pretty face? Now why can’t you stay clean like this everyday?”

But Titli’s eyes were glued to the shoes. “Memsahib, I never worn shoes and socks before,” she whispered. Then she was off, hopping and skipping and humming to herself.

When she came the next day, she still wore the same dress, but now it was crushed and had a big stain on it. Her hair was a mess, although the ribbons still hung loosely from the plaits. She went to the kitchen quietly and started doing the dishes. Memsahib had a slight headache and was resting in her bedroom.

She came out after a couple of hours. “What? You’re still loitering about? Aren’t you going to the wedding?”

“No,” Titli answered sullenly. All of a sudden she asked, “Memsahib, you remember story you told me about Cinderbella?”

“Cinderella.”

“Memsahib, yesterday I feel like Cinderbella at the ceremony. I play with other children. They ask me my name and school I went to. I told them name of Neelu didi’s school. They all believe me. Then singing and dancing started.” Titli paused.

She puckered her lips as though she had just bitten a bitter cucumber, before continuing. “Gupta madam twirled money over the girls dancing, to keep off evil eye. Then she gave me that money. In front of everybody. All came to know I just a servant girl. Cinderbella ran off before people come to know truth about her, memsahib. But I sitting there for two hours, bearing the shame!”

“Umm... you must have made a lot of money,” memsahib said. “What are you going to spend it on?”

“My uncle snatch all the money and go off to get drunk.” She then handed a polythene bag to memsahib.

“What’s that?” memsahib asked.

“Neelu didi’s shoes.”

“You can keep them Titli.”

“I don’t need them.”

“Okay, don’t go to the wedding if you don’t want to. Why don’t you stay here and I’ll give you some Maths sums to solve.”

Her face lit up.

Memsahib sighed. “If only Neelu showed half your enthusiasm for the subject!”

A few minutes later, Titli looked up and handed her notebook to memsahib. She watched her put red ticks alongside all the answers.

“If you continue to study like this, forget Cinderella, you will leave even Shakuntala Devi behind!”

“Shakun who?”

“Shakuntala Devi. She’s the greatest mathematician of our country.”

“Really memsahib?”

“Yes, why not?”

Titli came running into the house with the edges of her frock lifted. The frock used to be white once upon a time. But at the moment it looked like it had been dipped in a roadside puddle. Its hem had come undone in several places. On entering the living room, she knelt down and let go of the frock. About a hundred marbles rolled on to the carpet.

“Memsahib, save me,” she exclaimed. “Ma coming to beat me with a broom.”

“Why? What have you done now?” Memsahib asked in an amused voice.

“Nothing. I just defeat all boys at a game of marbles. Sissy wimps. Went running to tattle to my mother.”

“But why would she be angry with you for winning a game?”

“Because (mimicking her mother), have I not told you, you shameless hussy not to play with boys any more? In two months you’ll be married and what’ll you do in your in-laws’ house? Drag my name to the dust.....”

“You’re getting married?” memsahib asked, shocked. “How old are you?”

“Ma say I born the year when Aamir Khan’s Raja Hindustani movie come out.”

“Why, you’re just 12, the same as Neelu. And you’re going to be married?”

“Ma saying most girls my age in village already settled.”

Titli lowered her gaze as Memsahib looked at her with a horrified expression on her face and then at Neelu didi who sat making faces at her glass of milk.

“Neelu stop worshipping your milk and drink it up,” memsahib said.

Neelu didi took a sip followed by a loud “yuck.”

Titli looked at her, then at the glass. Drops of condensed water were glistening on the outer rim of the glass. Her tummy growled. She imagined the cool white liquid going down her throat. She licked her parched lips and curbed a strong urge to push Neelu didi aside and gulp down the milk.

“I can’t even imagine Neelu getting married at this age,” memsahib said.

“Ma say I get lots of new clothes in all my favourite colours. And jewellery too. And all the yummy food that is going to be served.”

She slurped loudly as she imagined what the banquet table might look like.

“But Titli, there’s more to marriage than new clothes and good food_”

“And this time I be the Cinderella of the ball, and no Gupta madam will spoil it for me.”

Just then memsahib’s husband walked in. Memsahib burst out – “Vinay, you know Titli, I have something important_”

“So have I,” he grinned as he loosened his tie.

“What is it?” memsahib asked.

“I got that promotion. We have to move to Delhi by the end of this month.”

“You got it? Just one month? That means... I’ll have to resign right away. We must celebrate. But what about the packing? How will I manage.....What about Neelu’s_”

Sahib silenced her with a kiss.

Titli gawked, covered her mouth and exclaimed, “Haw.” She then ran out of the room giggling.

After a slight hesitation, Titli rang the doorbell.

She could hear memsahib’s voice through the open window. “Neelu, go and see who’s at the door.”

Neelu didi was on the phone, yakking away. “No, I look pale in yellow. I think I’ll stick to light blue. What are you wearing?”

She rang the doorbell again.

“This girl is useless,” she heard memsahib mutter, as she came to the door.

“Titli!” she gasped as she flung it open.

Titli laughed self-deprecatingly as she saw the look of shock on memsahib’s face. What a strange apparition she must present. She self-consciously adjusted the pallu over her breasts which were large and full of milk. She knew her height and face were that of a fifteen year old. She must look comical. Like a bonsai with oversized fruit.

“I heard you back in town Memsahib, and came to see you,” she said, as she entered the living room.

“That was nice of you Titli.”

Memsahib had come back to Ramnagar after three long years. How could she not have come to meet her?

She was smiling at her now as well as at the kids. Titli stood near the door, at the edge of the carpet. Her black-faced seven-month old son clung to her with his thin limbs, like a baby monkey. He had nothing on except a dirty vest. Her daughter, a child of two, was staring at memsahib with interest. She sucked her right thumb while holding on to Titli’s sari with the other. She had thin knobbly knees and an oversized belly. Titli wiped the snot that was running into her daughter’s mouth with the edge of her sari. She looked down at her bare feet caked in mud and remembered the first time she had worn shoes.

Memsahib cleared her throat. “So how many marbles have you won lately?” she asked.

“Marbles?” Titli asked puzzled, then smiled slightly. “Memsahib, you remember?”

She shifted her son from one arm to the other. “I not touch marbles for ages.” She hesitated, then looking down and playing with a little pebble with her bare big toe, added, “my mother-in-law tattles to my man for every little thing and he_” She stopped speaking, and concentrated on pushing the pebble underneath the carpet.

Memsahib opened her mouth to speak. Was she going to ask her if he beat her? Or forced himself on her? Or whether he was older than her? But she didn’t. She was a proper memsahib. Not like Gupta madam who was always asking crude questions.

“What is it?” She said to her daughter who was tugging impatiently at her sari. “We’re leaving in a minute.” She turned to memsahib, adjusting her veil that kept slipping off.

“Memsahib, I come to return this_”

So saying, she handed her the book that she had given her three years back.

“This book is now yours Titli. Keep it.”

“No memsahib, it safer with you. One time I busy reading while cooking and the roti got burned. My mother-in-law snatch it from my hands and feed it to flames.”

Memsahib kept her gaze averted. Neelu didi was still on the phone. She had finished talking about what she was planning to wear on her birthday and was now talking about Ranbir Kapoor's latest affair.

Titli looked at the TV. Elections were around the corner. She smiled scornfully as she listened to the minister droning on about how India was marching ahead under his party's rule.

Memsahib had turned her attention to her daughter. Bending down, she pulled her thumb out of her mouth.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Shakuntala. Shakuntala Devi," Titli replied, the old defiance back in her voice.

Memsahib looked at her. "Shakuntala Devi," she echoed softly. "The greatest mathematician of our country."

Memsahib's eyes were glittering. She managed a grimace of a smile and nodded. Titli gave her a weak smile as she patted her daughter's head. And in that smile there was hope...

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