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## The City of Gold

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"The school ma'am came yesterday," Gita said while wiping the floor of the room, where she and nine others slept. Arti was dusting the wooden pedestal where the idol of Lord Krishna got worshipped with sincere devotion every morning and evening. She turned to say, "She is not a school ma'am. She is a social worker from an organisation called Rang".

Gita, for whom every working woman was a 'school ma'am' asked, "That boy spilled my tea last year. Will she bring him again?"

"That was a different NGO.... I mean a different organisation involved in doing something for the society. This year they will take us for a picnic near the Ganges."

"Picnic?" Gita was taken back to the only picnic she had participated in, the one near Chandaganj, organized by the strongmen of the locality, where she had lived with her husband and in-laws for forty years till his demise. That was also on the bank of the Ganges. She still remembered the songs they had sung in the bus and the young boys dancing away.

The lady whom Gita had mistaken for a school teacher came again that evening to meet all twenty of them. "Picnic. Picnic," Gita whispered to Binati's startled expression.

Overhearing the word the smiling lady said, "We are not going for a picnic but to Sonpur and that also for an entire week".

This revelation led to much excited chatter in the room as the name Sonpur was something that had fallen into their minds like a seed, grown and spread into branches with its many associations, flourishing leaves, where myths were written since the ancient times and nourishments prepared out of the crystal clear water of its river mingling in sunlight dripping from its temples, palaces and shops. Even after the commotion had died down, Gita and Arti's conversation continued, a word for every word, like the long braid trailing down the back of the social worker, the only women with hair in the room full of shaven headed widows.

Once she had left, some of the widows found themselves day dreaming while singing devotional songs in the main hall of the temple. Would they get to see the five headed elephant? Would they get to take a boat ride across the purple river?

They did not have much to pack. It did not take time to bundle up one or two saris, a little money and palm sized pictures of Gods and Goddesses. Meena could not do without her betel box and Shanti was strongly dissuaded from carrying a pillow by a representative of Rang, who assured it would be provided for. The night before the trip, Sunaina whispered to Binati, “Don’t take your jewellery there. I have heard that beneath all the glory and glitter, there is a thick network of thieves and dacoits.”

“Are you mad?” Binati hissed angrily. “How do you expect a widow like me to carry jewellery?”

“Don’t fool me. I’m not saying that you wear them. But I have seen you admiring them when you think we are deep into our sleep.”

“You see me doing that in your dreams,” Binati sealed the subject and hurried off to the next room to speak with Savitri.

The twenty women from the shelter for widows reached Sonpur after two days of train journey, to be greeted by a tall gate done up with lights. The word Sonpur flashed brightly, the ‘S’ styled like a bird. They were led to a resort with a small pond surrounded by neatly trimmed shrubs of yellow and orange marigold. The front garden had a separate section for aromatic herbs and another one for a variety of cacti. The long balcony overlooking it had a couple of bonsai and a round bowl on the wide window sill was strewn with an assortment of fragrant petals.

As per the itinerary, on their first day, they were taken to visit the Maha Kali temple. While the other devotees had to wait in a long queue, they found themselves within the main shrine in a matter of minutes. It was the tallest and most imposing deity they had ever seen, the gold crown of the mother Goddess almost touching the ceiling. A boy had to climb upon a ladder to garland her with the hibiscus wreaths offered to her by the worshippers. According to rumours, between two of the Goddess’s toes there was a trap door which led to a secret chamber. It was said that the family who had built the temple several centuries ago, hid their immense wealth in that hidden room. People who came to visit the Goddess would not have seen such a door even if it existed as both her feet were covered by layers of flowers.

The subsequent day was spent in marvelling the grandeur of a palace; its stately pillars, winding stairways, ceaseless corridors and halls lit up by strands of sunlight coming in from a row of arched windows. Accompanying this huge, white building was an equally magnificent and well maintained garden with lotus ponds, fountains, streams, bird baths, flowering shrubs and many fruit trees. In circular patches of cleared ground bordered by chrysanthemum shrubs, empty swings slightly swayed in the breeze; reminiscent of the king’s wives.

In the evening they were driven through the newly developed areas of Sonpur, lined by offices designed in the modern architectural styles. The widows could hardly control their gasps on seeing a seventh storied building acting as the column of a fountain, with

the water shooting up from an infinity pool on its roof, falling all the way along its height to collect in a sparkling water body around it.

A boat picnic was scheduled for the following day. The river was called purple due to the colour of the stones on its bed and the five headed elephant was an emerald encrusted statue in front of a temple on the river bank. The boat ride took them through a tiger sanctuary where they spotted deer and wild boar. Arti claimed seeing a tiger but no one believed her except Gita. The ride ended at a fair ground where they savoured hot *jalebis* and spicy *chaats* and bought small decorative item made of burnt clay. They had to return to the main city by road as it was forbidden to pass through the forest area after sunset. On their way back, they got to see brilliant displays of light. The city dwellers were lighting fireworks from their terraces and open grounds to celebrate the birthday of a local hero.

On Thursday the group watched a 3D movie with scintillating special effects. Naina, Aditi and Mrinalini had agreed to enter the multiplex only after they had been convinced by a representative from Rang, who accompanied them, that the good versus evil plot was not different from the tale of Ramayana. Everyone was mesmerized by the creatively done up visuals, a melodious soundtrack and acting that could turn the characters from mere ideas to identifiable human beings. The only exception was Sunita who sat with her eyes closed from fear throughout most of the film's duration. After the movie the women were given three hours to spend in the sprawling mall area. They could eat in the restaurants, shop and chat. The fashionably dressed young people made Uma, Aditi and many of the others uncomfortable, who felt they had landed up in some alien territory. It was explained to them that the mall was a place from where people bought clothes, shoes and various household items and that it was no different from the shop studded lanes near the Lord Shiva temple close to their shelter. While all nineteen of them entered a restaurant to have crisp *puris* with spiced vegetables and mouth watering pickles, Binati complained about feeling bloated and declared that she would sit on the bench overlooking the children's play area till the uneasiness was gone. She stepped into the food zone only after the rest had finished their meals and busied themselves in shopping. With the money allotted to each by the NGO, the women concentrated on picking up reasonably priced and seemingly durable items among the many utensils, folding umbrellas, pairs of sandals, cloth bags and lamps on display.

When Binati joined the others, she could not help feeling a difference in their attitude towards her. In the bus, while they chatted excitedly with each other, she was being deliberately avoided. After repeatedly trying to strike up a conversation and failing, she was finally made to face Meena's question, "How could you eat non vegetarian food?"

"Of course I didn't have any such thing. How could you accuse me of it?" Binati seemed outraged.

"Arti had left her purse in the restaurant by mistake. She saw you eating chicken cutlets when she went to fetch it. You were so engrossed that you did not even notice her."

"She had mistaken. I ate vegetable cutlets."

“Binati, I was not a widow since my birth. I was born in a non vegetarian family. I do recognize a chicken item,” Arti stated firmly. Binati could not think of another sentence to carry forward the argument. She had been caught. She helplessly tried to push aside the curtains of silence being drawn around her but had no option but to resign, not knowing how long the solitude intentionally crafted by the only companions she had known for years, would imprison her like an accused without trial remaining in dark about her sentence.

After dinner, when Binati was alone at the basin in the dining area, washing her hands with the soap, a quiet nudge made her turn around and face Gita.

“How did it taste?”

Flagger basted, Binati stared blankly.

“I wish I could have also eaten some chicken preparations. Why do we have to sacrifice these things whereas men don’t when their wives die? Are we lesser humans?”

Binati did not know how to express her relief on finding an ally. It seemed a clot had been lifted from her chest allowing her emotions to flow freely, unhindered. The eagerness which had left her completely a few hours ago, about knowing what awaited them on the last day of the trip, came back, prodding her on to cross the bridge of sleep to a new morning. She rested her head on the pillow, not entirely joyous but with a sense of peace slowly claiming its lost place.

Like most nights sleep did not come very easily to Gita. She stood in the balcony overlooking the pond. Back in her home, there were so many things she never had, many necessities without which she had to spend her days. She had lived with the holes arising out of deprivation like a page of an old book with bores made by insects, but her husband had been there, also drilled with poverty, as if he was the facing page of the same book. Once he was gone, his absence had been the central pit in her life. Like the shifting of soil, those around her including her grown up children removed whatever small privileges she enjoyed in such a manner that her existence sloped towards the pit letting all colours drain in it.

The last day of the trip was reserved for the amusement park. The benevolent organizers of the trip had guessed that some of the widows might not warm up to the idea of visiting a place that openly declared itself as an area of amusement. It was kept as a surprise and the women came to know about it only after they had already entered its gates. Those who still made some noises changed their minds after getting down from the striking cars, exhilarated by what they found to be innocuous fun. A toy train ride across the vast territory of the park, showing them all its wondrous corners, elated them further.

They were intrigued by a ride named ‘From Hell to Heaven’ but did not know whether to try it.

“The perfect ride for Binati,” sniggered Meena, “She has to go through hell anyway, now that she has eaten chicken.

“I am really curious,” Gita said ignoring Meena’s comment.

“I am not going to hell,” Sunita said indignantly.

“No one’s asking you to go to hell. It is just a ride,” Gita sounded exasperated.

The ride ‘Hell to Heaven’ took the widows down a narrow staircase to a dark cave like area. Under the flickering lights of lamps they could see a pond of boiling water and cable cars almost skimming over the surface. Only two people could sit in each cable car and Gita shared the one with Binati. The pond narrowed into a stream and flowed on through narrow passages inhabited by grotesque demons and ghosts. The air was filled with shrieking sounds of pain and chilling laughter. Gradually the passage widened and became illuminated by rays that seemed to emanate from its walls. Soon the widows found themselves in mesmerising gardens, dotted with fountains of clear water and roses of all colours including blue. Beautiful maidens were showering petals on them as they reached a snow covered mountain. Lord Shiva, Goddess Parvati along with their children held up their right hands in blessing. Lord Brahma was sitting in meditation in another mountain and Lord Vishnu was lying in a tank with effects to resemble the waves of an ocean. All the statues were so life like that devotional tears started trickling from Uma’s eyes.

The next ride that caught the widows’ interest had the caption “The Best Ride You Will Ever Have in Your Life- But Only For The Bravest”. The widows were as hesitant and scared as they were eager to try it. Finally Binati overcame her fear and opted for the ride come what may.

“We will go after you are through,” Sunaina said while the others nodded.

It was the first time someone other than Gita had spoken to her since the day before. Binati’s spirits rose at once and she got into the vehicle at the edge of the track. It was so dark inside the tunnel through which the vehicle went that Binati was not able to see clearly what lay ahead. The vehicle went straight for sometime before it started taking unexpected detours like her handwriting when she had tried to sign her name for the first time at the age of forty, guided by the kind Maharaja of the ashram.

When Binati finally appeared at the other end of the three dimensional maze, her eyes were wider than they had ever been, there was an unconscious smile to her lips and her breathe could be felt like the winds of a nascent season. She had to take another ride along with the other widows to keep their request. The other visitors to the amusement park, on seeing twenty widows, clad in white saris and with shaven heads, emerging at the end of the journey in their bright red vehicle, yelling with joy and excitement, could not resist clicking on their cameras.