

Melody

(approx. 1,270 words)

No breeze down here on the street, but above me it catches that big wind chime in the cages. Bong. Bong. Bong. From here, lying in the dirt, I can see the second-floor porches where Parvi cleans for tonight. A dog pees beside me and I can't do nothing to stop it, so I let my mind fly away. My mind is a tailor bird, winging over the streets of Mumbai, light on the breeze. But now the chime rings again, and Parvi is laughing, and my mind flies back to where she mops the cages in the sky, bleach spilling in sprinkles over the edge. Some lands in the dirt near me, stings my nose. *Sorry*, she sings to me, and laughs again.

Now I smell chicken. That's Chandra. We have meat today, and she is down here on the street cooking dinner in the hubcap she stole. It's quiet now. The men have not arrived yet. No cars. No drinking. No fighting. Peace like this does not last.

Now I feel a breeze. In my hair, like fingers. The sun is going down, but I am still wet from the heat and the fever.

The girls laugh at me. Melody, you lazy whore, they say. All day on your back and not making money? But they are just fucking with me. They have become more kind to me now. They weren't so nice when I first got here. Yankee shit go home. But I was Sanjay's girl, so they had to tolerate me.

Sanjay is the one who named me Melody. My real name is Geeta, which I like better, but Melody is the name that stuck, so there you go. I thought Sanjay was a god when I met him. That was maybe ten years ago, back in Philly turning tricks behind the Wawa. Sanjay was tall and fine and had slick ebony hair and a silver tooth you could see when he smiled. He spoke so beautiful. Said he was a businessman on holiday. Said I could be his girlfriend. Said he could get me work in India. In a way, I guess all that was true.

When Sanjay brought me to India he gave me blonde wigs and pink dresses and called me an American beauty queen. He sold me as an exotic, because my mother was white. But back in the States I was an exotic, too. There they called me black, because my father was Indian.

Too bad Sanjay got so cruel. I once saw him slit a monkey's throat. One time he set a girl on fire. He would beat me and cut me with razor blades. But I'm not complaining. Only the stupid complain, and that is not me. You think that's funny? You think a person's got to be stupid to be a whore? I'll tell you, the opposite is true. Out here, a stupid girl is dead in a month.

I don't mean that every man is cruel. No, no. With some men, when I got to know them, I could allow myself to relax a bit. To go to a place in my mind that was deep, and dark, and safe. Like a cave, where no one could find me.

Manini visits me every day now. She knows it's almost over. She comes down in the afternoon and makes sure that I am in the shade. Brings me honey water. Sings me back to earth when my mind flies away. Pats my hand when nobody else will touch me. Talks to me about karma and tells me karma don't care if you're a whore as long as you treat people good in this life. She said karma adds it all up and deals it back to you fair and square. So I figure I deserve everything I got, the good and the bad.

But she also said when your time is up you got to be thinking good thoughts, 'cause everything in the next life hangs on that moment. She said you got to be clear, like the color of glass. I told her I used to be the color of music but now I'm the color of disease. I said all the other colors left because they think I'm contagious. You *are* contagious, Manini said, and she kept patting my hand.

There was a time when I was beautiful. I'm not bragging. As Sanjay would say, I know my assets. But he worked me too hard. Every night up there in the cages, looking out over an ocean of men down in the street, strutting and shaking my butt, trying to get picked. I'd paint myself like a parakeet and shake my tits and stroke my cunt and shout through the bars: pick-me, pick-me, pick-me. Wave after wave of men, every day, every night, and Sanjay always nearby, hitting me and taking my money.

But after Sanjay got killed, Manini was nicer to me. More food and new clothes, like we're a family. One time, I think it was my birthday, or maybe Parvi's birthday, when Chandra and I were in bed with our men, just a red and gold curtain between us, and Parvi was on the bench with her next man waiting, and I was just finishing my man, when zip! the curtain is gone and there's Manini holding a cake! A lemon cake with a candle! All the girls are naked and laughing and eating cake. I got icing on my hands, and not thinking, I cleaned them in the pail on the floor. Manini got so angry for soiling the good water! She beat me like a dog, and the others got the hell out before she started in on them.

But two minutes later she was hugging me, and Parvi came back with fresh water, and Manini washed me and put on fresh makeup and a new dress to get me ready for my next man.

Always another man. So many, I'm surprised it took so long to get sick. Manini says death is just another man. Says he's going to get us all one day, and he's going to take me any way he wants, so I might as well open myself to him.

Do you hear that? Maybe a rat. Lots of rats down here. Or footsteps, maybe. Now it's voices, getting closer. Men's voices. Some men are so cruel they do things to me even now. I can't fight them off. All I can do is pray they get my disease.

But no, these voices are singing. Such a beautiful song. I think I know it, but I'm not sure. I can't trust my mind anymore, it comes and goes as it wants. Sometimes it hides in a cave, and I struggle to guide it back into the light. Music helps. That is why I like the chime so much. It has a beautiful voice that sings to me with the wind and returns me to good thoughts. I don't want to die thinking bad thoughts. I don't want to be angry at Sanjay or anyone. I don't want karma taking me unprepared.

I've seen karma stalking me. They say karma gets you fair and square, but I think you're a shit of a beast, karma. I've seen you tracking me, sniffing at my footsteps. I hear you humming your tune in my ear, soft and low. You want to catch me off guard, but it's too late. I am already gone. I am singing, and I am flying, and I'm the color of air, and I ain't afraid.