2062 words

Poetic Justice

"Mala?" I call my voice cracking. But she has run off with Veena, with her arm around her shoulder. The moment I arrive at the family home I lose Mala to the other cousins. Mala is my first cousin once removed but because we are in boarding school together, I consider her my best friend. I don't think it fair that she should forsake me like this.

"My brother's having his thread ceremony. You must come. We'll travel together." Mala said to me on the last day of school, and that was why I am here. The thread ceremony is a kind of Hindu Bar Mitzvah. After they turn eight, upper caste boys undergo this ritual that initiates them into the fold of Brahmins. I traveled with Mala and her family to this ancestral home, which is also the home of my father's mother's family.

In the following days the relatives converge here. They are all cousins and uncles and maternal relations of my father. Explaining relatives' connections gets complicated, so I will just call them my cousins. My parents are absent. My mother is busy with my two youngest siblings, the youngest had just arrived the previous September, so I am the only representative from my family.

The house is nearly two hundred years old. The front is ornamented with latticed wood and the sloping roof has red Mangalore tiles. I learn that the wooden roof beams date back to the

time when the house was first built. I place the lace-up shoes that I wore at our Anglican boarding school outside the front door. A string festooned with mango leaves hangs over the entrance to the inner rooms. On the wall on one side of the door is a calendar, on the other is a framed garlanded portrait of my deceased great grandparents. The house stands on a height in the middle of a vast stretch of paddy fields which even in May look green. In the distance are purple mountains.

Most of the relatives have moved to big cities except for Veena's father who lives here with his rosy cheeked wife, Leela Maami. Leela Maami wears a nine-yard saree pulled up between her legs and a diamond stud sparkles on her nose.

There are at least four older cousins: all young mothers, thirty-somethings, wiping the noses of their toddlers and feeding them first. Then there are the cousins who are five or six years older than me. Mala and Veena and I are all about the same age which is twelve. Bipin, Mala's younger brother, the one having the thread ceremony, is only eight.

Veena's mother, Leela Maami, is always beaming and bustling around. Today, she's picked eggplant from the vine in the garden for lunch. The young mothers and aunts peel potatoes and roll out chapattis that are like whole wheat tortillas. The fragrance of mangoes ripening in straw baskets pervades the kitchen. She takes a metal cylinder and stokes the embers glowing in the mud hearth and roasts the eggplant. Cheeks flushed, she fans herself. Later we will sit cross-legged on low stools in the courtyard and eat off banana leaves that serve for plates.

Mala and Veena wander barefooted on the stony ground; I tag along after them. The heat rises from the earth. Paddy fields and coconut groves stretch on all sides. Round pepper hangs like grapes from the leaves of the pepper vines. Some days I wander in different parts of the

house, remaining at the edges of the conversations of other groups. At night we all sleep on thin mattresses laid out on the floor. Outside, crickets chirp and dogs bark. The walls are smooth with age. My widowed great grandmother lived here all alone even when she was bent double with age. I'm told she slept with her back on the floor and her feet planted on the wall.

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The older female cousins are gathered in the main hall chatting as they oil and comb their hair. They are discussing the ornaments they've acquired. One passes around a flower-shaped gold hair ornament. Another is showing off a solid gold armband. To me they look like the armbands worn by mythological warriors. The latest craze is for *tanmani,* consisting of strings of pearls with a pendant of gold inlaid with semi-precious stones. The six-year-old terror, Bundoo bounds into the room like a wolf on the fold. He is the son of one of the cousins. The others in the room quickly close their fingers over their ornaments and observe him anxiously. His mother holds him by the collar. To change the subject she asks me what jewelry I'll be wearing for the thread ceremony.

"Nothing," I reply proudly.

"What! Not even a gold chain?"

"Nope!"

It does not bother me because I abhor jewelry, I consider it most bourgeois.

"What are you going to wear?" She asks.

My mother had packed for me a sleeveless peach-colored taffeta dress with a scalloped neck and sash, made by our tailor in Poona. It‘s my best outfit. I don’t have that many clothes because in school we wear a uniform most of the time.

“A *parkar-polka*, right?” The cousin continues. A *parkar-polka* is a long skirt with a short-sleeved fitted blouse. I would not have been seen dead in a *parkar-polka*. I have been raised on the books of Enid Blyton. No one wears *tanmani* necklaces or *parkar-polkas* in *The Mallory Towers* series.

Two days before the thread ceremony there’s a commotion in the main hall I’m at the edge near the open doorway. A group of older female cousins and aunts are standing there. One of the cousins, Meeratai is distraught. With a hand on her neck she lifts up an oval, oily face with acne scars. In a plaintive voice she reports that her *tanmani* set has vanished.

“What do you mean?” the others gaze at her uncomprehending. “But you were showing it to us only yesterday.”

“I put it back in my trunk which was unlocked. I looked everywhere. It’s gone,” she said tragically. “I have a suspicion that …” She declares in a low voice, and throwing a half-look in my direction, “took it.”

“Really?” I catch some arch looks and hasty glances directed at me, as if they have caught me reading a dirty magazine.

Meeratai nods knowingly.

I see the gesture and freeze. *Do they think that I am a moron? That I didn’t see that?*

Horrified, I run away. Now more than ever, I wish my father and mother even my bratty seven year old sister had been there.

I wander from room to room and into the back garden. No one seems to notice me. Rage burns in my heart. I hate them all. I wish I had not come to this place. I want to say, "I would never take your crummy old necklace, not even if you paid me!" A sob breaks out of me. I am all alone.

The landscape of paddy fields and the gently buffeting breeze soothe me.

A black Austin is coming up the mud road, throwing up a cloud of red dust. It comes to a halt beside the house. The car door opens and slams shut twice as my father's great uncle emerges from the car, tall and stooping. My great aunt alights from the other side. The chauffeur pulls luggage from the trunk. I am to return with them to Poona on the day after the thread ceremony.

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I slip in through the doorway wearing my sleeveless peach taffeta dress. I comb my hair and even essay a little flip and tie the sash to my dress all by myself. The older cousins are putting the finishing touches to the drape of their sarees, taking turns to scrutinize their reflections in the mirror of the tall steel wardrobe. They have safety pins in their mouths and are stooping and pulling down with their heels on the backs of their sarees. They add gold and pearl bangles to the glass ones tinkling on their wrists. The sarees are of many hues--the colors are blinding--royal blue, fuchsia, apple green, peacock blue, vermilion. They arrange *pallavs*, the portion of the saree that hangs loose over the left shoulder, to show arm bands, necklaces, bangles to best advantage. Some of the aunts have come around to examine the diamond earrings

one of the cousins is wearing. Some are finishing off their toilet with Hazeline Snow, and a white cloud of loose face powder arises from an over-generous application of it. Others are darkening their eyes with kohl and drawing *bindis* with great concentration on their foreheads. The older women are draping nine long yards of snuff-colored or plum-colored silk, smelling of naphtha balls, into sarees. Meeratai is wearing her *tanmani* necklace.

"So you found it!" the mother of the six-year-old terror remarks. "Where was it?"

It had been in her tin trunk all along. I look at her reproachfully, expecting an apology, but no apology comes, probably because she doesn't know that I've witnessed the facial gesture accusing me.

From the *pandal* in the front courtyard, strains of *Shehnai* music drift into the house. The priest begins chanting mantras.

Mala and Veena are wearing a royal blue and apple green *parkar-polka* respectively. There are gold chains around their necks and they wear slim gold bangles on their arms and little gold hoops in their ears.

An elderly aunt looks me up and down and draws me aside. "You should wear a little gold chain, earrings or some tiny jewelry at occasions like this," she childes me, "it looks nice." The liberties adults take when parents aren't around to defend their kids!

Leela Maami shoves a platter of jasmine strings in my hands. "Go distribute these to all the women and girls." Pointing to my short bob, she adds good-humoredly, "grow your own hair long, so that one day when you are a bride you can wear jasmine strings." She thrusts a silver

sprinkler shaped like an elephant's trunk into Mala's hands and asks her to sprinkle rose water on all the guests, and Veena is delegated to apply a dab of attar on the backs of their hands.

Two hours later the rituals are over, and Bipin, is now a twice-born. We are at that part when holding a silver begging bowl he resolves to renounce the world and leave for Kasi. A maternal uncle offers him the hand of his daughter in marriage to deter him from his resolve. There is much laughter because the maternal uncle has no daughters. I'm disappointed that Bipin's scalp has not been shaved leaving only a little tuft in the back according to custom. He is wearing the sacred thread that is looped from over his left shoulder to his right hip.

Afterwards everyone is seated in rows on low stools in the courtyard waiting for the signal to tuck into the much anticipated feast served on banana leaves. Bundoo caroms between the two rows, snatching a crisp *papad* from Meeratai's leaf.

"Hey, give back my *papad*! Catch him!" Meeratai splutters, her face is apoplectic with rage.

The boy yells, "You're bad! I don't like you."

The mother grabs his arm and marches him out of the courtyard.

Very early the next morning I leave with the tall stooping great uncle and return home.

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On my return I plunge into the last few weeks of vacation. In later years, on the rare occasions when I see Meeratai and her husband interacting with my father, they hang on his every word. By now my anger has been exhausted. I don't remember the accusation when I see

Meeratai, I only remember it when someone mentions the now unfashionable *tanmani*. It never occurs to me to tell my father about it.

Then one day, when I am in my sixties, during one of my trips to India from the States, I relate the story to my father. We are having tea together and out of the blue, the memory flashes forth. I am quite amused by the accusation, but as my father listens, an expression of displeasure crosses his face. I am pleased. This was the vindication my twelve-year-old self had been seeking all along–and proof that my father had my back.

THE END