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Houseflies

As Ish and her female cousins rushed past the noisy entrance to Azad Fairground, decorated with fresh marigolds and the cut-out image of the politician who inaugurated the *mela*, a boy winked at her, which made her smile at her white sandals and painted toenails. If only she and her cousins were alone and not following Big Natwar Bhaiya, so they had the freedom to yak. He, a distant relative, was supposed to be their bodyguard—a vigorous, intimidating figure, smartphone in hand, crisp *gamcha* around his neck, a jacket-*kurta* combo like the kind Chief Minister Nitish Kumar wore—and seemed to proclaim his might was right with his arrogant smile and his self-assured swagger. Ish and her cousins were only inflating his ego by hovering around him like a brood of ducklings, under his protection. It was her parents' idea.

At first, her parents had refused to allow her to leave for two days with her uncle to visit her cousins in their ancestral village, near Jehanabad. They branded this entire region, full of millions of men, women, and children, dangerous, based on news tidbits—stories of snatchings, robberies, murders, kidnappings of young women in broad daylight. Inexperienced fools from the city like her would serve as easy targets at a village fair,

according to her father. “Do you know how many people get kidnapped and for what petty sums, how many girls get molested daily?” her father asked. And her mother said, “What grand new sights will you see, except cows, buffaloes and dung-plastered walls? Don’t you get enough dung right here, in Patna?”

Ish sulked for hours, then voiced the only threat that had any influence on them—how she hated math and wished to stop going to the tutor. They let her go on the condition that she and her cousins would have a bodyguard with them any time they stepped outside home (to thwart kidnapping and rape attempts!).

Beside a stall full of knickknacks, bead necklaces and earrings, a crowd of men, completely unfazed by Big Natwar Bhaiya, appeared to soak up the warmth of the three female bodies. Their bushy male eyebrows twitched in awe, and their lips pulsed with gratification and delight.

Unaware, Big Natwar Bhaiya bared his red *paan*-stained teeth, greeting two male acquaintances, and brandished his fists. Then he proceeded to pat the pectorals and shoulder blades of one of the men. Meanwhile, Ish’s dear cousins, Choonchoon and Kavi, waited demurely behind Big Natwar Bhaiya to show him the deference expected of young women for an older male relation.

In the distance, a Ferris wheel—*kathgodha*—circled the sky, zooming upward and downward with baskets of dangling arms and legs, radiating squeals and screams that passed in rhythmic waves across the fairgrounds. What a relief it wasn’t too hot; clouds blotted out the sun, although this was February, no time for rain. Next to a vendor selling roasted corn and another offering spicy *jhal-mudi*, she swiveled on her feet, savoring the world—rattling toys, catcalls, whimpering, laughing children, the festive air devoid of her parents. “Should we kick off the day by sampling a Ferris wheel ride?”

“Let’s get Big Natwar Bhaiya’s permission,” Choonchoon whispered.

Choonchoon, twenty-one, five years older than Ish, needed the permission of their male escort to go on a Ferris wheel ride. Wasn't it a little sad? In reality, this wasn't who she was. No. Both women seemed so bright and witty when closeted in a room with Ish but metamorphosed the moment they interacted with important male relations, who might bring marital alliances. They needed to demonstrate their potential as ideal wives and turned all affability—timorous smiles, skittish and squirming bodies, fidgety hands and jumpy feet. Thick cotton dupattas shrouded their figures as a testament to their eagerness to save themselves from roving eyes for the special one—the future husband.

Also, as they mentioned earlier in the car ride, they had to be careful because they lived in the spiteful environs of the *paan*-spitting belt, where warring families often sought to ruin the reputations of young women as a form of revenge—they labeled young women as difficult or promiscuous to wreck their eligibility in the marriage market.

Who was Ish to pity her cousins? Daily, her life drained into the gutter of petty confrontations. Even yesterday, her father, who hated her painted toenails, said, "Focus on studies. Don't daydream about a husband." No, she wasn't daydreaming about a husband, although anything, even a husband, as soon as she turned eighteen, would be preferable to her present bleak existence, her life devoid of experiences, her all-girls' school crawling with nuns. Even though she lived in a so-called city, she had never, not once in her life, had the opportunity to speak with a male who wasn't a close relation.

A week ago, she happened to be in the front of her house when the newspaper delivery guy, a sober young man astride his bicycle, asked her when he should stop by to collect his payment.

Her mother ran from the house, shuddering in alarm, shouting, “What is going on? What is going on?” as if Ish and the newspaper delivery guy were in the middle of sex.

The closest she got to the opposite sex was when boys’ school buses zoomed past her all-girls’ bus, and the older boys swayed beside the open doors, flaunting their bodies, shirts flapping against their chests.

At least both Kavi and Choonchoon would find husbands soon, but Ish wouldn’t know a human male for many years, since her parents were “more modern” and didn’t plan to arrange a husband for her until she finished school, ground through college and secured a job.

Houseflies feasted on *gulab-jamuns* and *pedas* while children haggled with the keeper of the sweet shop and trampled the dry ground. A peddler of toys pinched a plastic monkey that let out whiny squeaks. A vendor, employing theatrical hand gestures and a highfalutin’ voice, presented ceramic pots, handwoven textiles and *lac* bangles. Behind its owner, a cow waddled, decked in *genda* flowers and fake necklaces, flicking its tail to drive away some annoyance.

The wind turned and ushered the heady aroma of smoke from hawkers squatting on the ground with stoves—tea frothing in large pots and fresh, brown samosas sizzling in hot oil. A young woman in heavy makeup, who couldn’t be over eighteen, seemed to show off her new marital status with an extra-thick bright line of red *sindoor* daubed from the forehead to the end of the part in her hair. She clutched her husband’s arm, marking her prized possession. Then, as his burnished face leaned on her, she preened, licking the ice-cream cone in his hand.

Ish and her cousins, observing the woman, seemed united in grief. Kavi lowered her gloomy face, a hand on her heart. Meanwhile, Choonchoon seemed to fend off the cruel sight by letting her eyes vault to the blazing sun.

“The labor situation in Bihar will continue to deteriorate unless the government changes its policy,” Big Natwar Bhaiya declared and nodded at his friends. Clearly, he was no ordinary mortal in these regions. From the moment they left their car, less than a hundred steps ago, this was the third instance of his stopping to greet and meet.

“Big Natwar Bhaiya, we want to go on the *kathgodha*,” Ish said, unwilling to wait for the conference to end.

“*Theek hai, theek hai*. Go ahead.” He waved them off in a nonchalant way.

In no time, tickets in hand, they joined a line of men in *dhotis*, brides in *ghoonghat*, women in *hijab*, little boys in shorts, restive young men and toothless citizens. Beside the spinning, vertiginous machine, the line of waiting bodies rippled as people stirred and burbled, high-strung with animation and apprehension.

Choonchoon, struggling to be heard above the music blaring from nearby speakers, indicated a lecherous man in dark glasses. “Look at that *kutta* staring at Ish! I think he has been following us for the past ten minutes.”

Both women giggled, which made Ish feel singled out and stupid and aware of her distinct outfit—a lacy top and a skirt an inch above her knee that her mother had bought on the condition Ish would only wear it on special occasions to her all-girls’ school. In Jehanabad, most grownup girls, including her cousins, wore *salwar kurtas*, and married women wore saris. Did she really need to go the extra mile to attract attention? Stalkers. No,

no. But, as with everything else, her parents' distaste dictated her choice. She was merely a pawn, wearing a short skirt because they hated her exposed legs, keeping her phone uncharged to avoid talking to them.

As the *kathgodha* slowed, it groaned and squeaked. Even the support shaft with a painted blue and green dragon belching fire from its nose looked askew, as if the whole contraption might crash on the crowd ogling it. The baskets, shaped like cups with benches inside, were dented and old and dangling from flimsy chains, and the wooden spokes with colored lights blinking rhythmic invitations had several broken and missing bulbs.

Fidgeting, Kavi, the tallest and strongest of the three, complained of nausea from staring at the *kathgodha* and declared that it wouldn't be a good idea for her to go on the ride. Ish begged for Kavi's company. Only two people were allowed in a basket, and Choonchoon had already paired up with a young girl just behind them in the line.

Among the riders disembarking from the wheel, some convulsed with laughter, and others were stunned and wide-eyed. An old woman limped away, baring her toothless, cavernous interior, her hair radiating like wires. "The best day of my life!" the old woman muttered.

Looking at the old woman, Ish, her cousins and even others in the crowd writhed with suppressed hilarity. Energized, the line snaked forward as people scrambled up a loading station, a set of wooden steps leading to a metal platform, and into the baskets with a little help from the ticket collector, a man in a bright blue shirt. Ish leapt in, then offered her hand to Kavi and watched Choonchoon settle with the little girl.

One by one, couples, women, and children bounded in, 'til the *kathgodha* bloated and swayed like a pregnant woman. Their basket at the very top, the landscape soared—the raised platform at the center for political speeches, where a vendor blew up and knotted balloons in strange shapes for children and transgenders with

painted faces struck raunchy poses. Beyond the fairgrounds, beyond the tumultuous crowds and accompanying confusion stretched for miles the hard, brown earth dotted with trees, split open by irrigation ditches and marked by stray animal and human figures.

“Full, no more, no more,” the ticket collector shouted at the swell of riders eager to gate crash and refusing to wait for the next turn.

Just as they were about to get started, just as the ticket collector was about to press the start button on the control panel—some riders cleared their throats nervously, and some tittered, staring at the solid ground, as if missing it already—Kavi cried, “Hai Bhaiya!” She wrenched her hand free of Ish’s and abandoned all self-control and dignity. “Let me out, Bhaiya. I can’t do this. Let me out, please.”

The ticket collector spat, muttered. While he maneuvered to lower Ish’s basket, their fellow riders hooted, grunted and giggled. Kavi bailed out, and a young man hopped in, capturing her place.

Probably a few years older than Ish, a tall, lean body in a starched white *kurta* with gold show buttons, a smile on his lips, a few strands of hair on his upper lip and a large shaggy pile on his head, he let out a joyful “Aahhaa” as he sat.

Her heart raced as she noted the gap between her body and his on the garish, bright blue bench seat: just a few inches. Unwittingly, her body jerked, tilting away from him, which made her wonder if her cousins might laugh at her—how like a village girl she behaved, even though she was in a city girl’s dress.

The fellow turned to her and shot her a smile.

She smiled back and shivered, imagining the humiliation she would be subject to if her parents were there—how they would wag their faces and fingers and force her to ask for another basket. She smoothed the

cotton fabric of her skirt, pinned the ends beneath her thighs, then sat, ready to go, her back ramrod straight, a somber expression, her head at a mature angle, pretending to be a city girl for whom sitting beside a male was nothing, as if she had many friends (men included) with whom she went out on jaunts to restaurants, movies and pleasure rides.

As the wheel gained speed, hails of screaming and laughing voices scattered like flocks of panicky birds. This was her first Ferris wheel ride—though she never disclosed that to her cousins. Her parents didn't believe in fun. If they ever stepped inside a restaurant, their faces acquired a glow as if they were guilty of too much fun.

Inside the gyrating basket, as she careened and teetered, she had a terrible, sinking feeling of abandoning control over her most vital possession: her body. Then, a new sensation: her co-rider waving his hand in front of her face.

“Kaisa lag raha hai? How are you feeling?” he shouted, trying to be heard.

She nodded and forced herself to smile.

Before she knew, he grabbed her hand with which she'd been grasping the seat and dragged it to the steel shaft. “Hold this, not that.”

That was annoying, because he seemed to treat her like an idiot. He reminded her of some of her male cousins in Patna, who took her for granted, bossed her around and chastised her for not serving them food and water.

“I'm fine,” she said and drew her hand back to the seat, brushing off the pompous instruction.

He laughed. Then he said something, which she didn't understand.

“What?” she said in her best rude voice.

But he seemed either not to understand or ignore her tone. He repeated his incomprehensible words, bringing his face close to her ears. Under her feet, the floor slumped; the basket lurched. Along with fifty other fools, she'd allowed herself to be at the mercy of a poorly assembled gizmo gyrating maniacally, minting money for its calculating owner.

Then suddenly, his body hurled itself against hers—she was pushed, pinned against the side of the basket. “Sorry,” he said and smiled, as he got off her, which gave her the feeling he wasn't actually sorry—he'd engineered the fall.

Was she trapped in the whirling basket with some molester?

In a panic, she stood. The basket reeled as if it might capsize. Grabbing the metal chains, she screamed at a blazing blue color she thought was the ticket collector—doing exactly what Kavi did earlier. “Hello, stop the *kathgodha*, Bhaiyaji!” But the blue color flew away. A barrage of euphoric shrieks drowned her voice. Sweat streaming between her fingers and the metal rod slipping, a tip over seemed inevitable.

She fell backwards into his lap. Had he drawn her down? She stood, stomped at his feet, and grabbed the metal chains again. A dreadful cry rose in her as she saw him stagger behind her, and a projectile, perhaps someone's glasses, swam past her, barely missing her nose. The earth and sky fused into a blur, a howling circle of jarring agony, as she stood, clinging to the chains, swaying, waiting for death or the wheel to stop.

Thankfully, he didn't tug at her again. For the remainder of the ride, her body staggered, seesawed and thrashed about in the basket. When the wheel slowed down and stopped, she scrambled out and bolted to Kavi, who stood beside a stall of handmade dolls with black eyebrows, red lips and black wool braided in long *chotis*, and parents clutching the hands of their mesmerized, drooling girls.

Even Choonchoon, running, appeared right behind her.

Ish barely opened her mouth—it was immediately evident to Choonchoon and Kavi that the ride hadn't gone well, which made her eyes well up. "Our fault. We shouldn't have allowed you to sit with him, alone," Kavi said.

They spotted the fellow, who stood with a bunch of other guys, just beside a stall stacked with potboilers and the latest editions of *Sarita*, *Grihalakshmi* and *Filmi Dunia*. Kavi hollered to Big Natwar Bhaiya, who marched, swaying, to the girls, peered at their grim faces and followed Kavi's gaze to the white *kurta* with the gold show buttons.

"What happened?" Big Natwar Bhaiya asked.

"He grabbed my hand and . . .," Ish said.

Of course, he didn't need further clarification. Of course, he must have dealt with such business many times before. He stomped to the fellow, bellowing. "*Chedkhani karta hai*—you dare misbehave with girls?" He snatched the placket of the fellow's *kurta* and made his body jerk and flap as if it were a clothesline with wet, droopy clothes.

Choonchoon said, "A slap or two will set him up for life. The *kutta* will never misbehave again."

An impromptu crowd of Big Natwar Bhaiya's friends materialized out of nowhere, saying, "*Badiya se mariye, badiya se mariye*—beat him nicely, beat him nicely."

Beginning to doubt what the fellow did or did not do, Ish said, "Wait, Big Natwar Bhaiya. Wait." But nobody seemed to hear her.

While Big Natwar Bhaiya's friends clamored in a show of strength and support, an elderly man, resting on the shoulder of a lanky young man, hobbled forward and said, "*Maaf kijiye*—forgive him. He's just come from Mumbai. He doesn't know our ways."

That triggered a cacophony of laughter. Several of Big Natwar Bhaiya's friends echoed the statement, howling. "Just came from Mumbai!"

"Did you go to Mumbai to become a hero?" Big Natwar Bhaiya asked, as one of his friends slapped the fool from behind, and Big Natwar Bhaiya's knuckles—his large gold and *moonga* ring—closed in on the fellow's eyes.

Ish muffled a shriek. "Wait, Big Natwar Bhaiya. Wait!"

"Do twenty *uthak-baithak*. Now," Natwar Bhaiya said.

Uthak-baithak, the chief, most humiliating form of punishment in schools for small children, involved holding one's ears and alternating between squatting and standing positions. So, the fool started *uthak-baithak*. And Natwar Bhaiya's friends counted in chorus, giggling and laughing.

After he was done, the fool turned to Ish, his eyes brimming with accusation and hurt, before he staggered away, whimpering, with his friends, the elderly gentleman and the lanky young fellow.

Her body shrunk in a futile attempt to be invisible. Her limbs were dead weights; her head felt like a useless lump on her saggy shoulders. As the fool disappeared into the crowd, she couldn't help but wonder if his body had been hurled against hers accidentally. Had he tugged at her because he worried she might tumble from the basket? Was he just a dimwit or a molester? Perhaps the overconfident fool deserved the debasement. Or did he? Her lips parted to say something mean to Big Natwar Bhaiya, but nothing came out, except hot air.

Smiling, proud, Big Natwar Bhaiya announced, “Let’s all eat ice cream” and wiped his forehead with an embroidered handkerchief he extracted from the front pocket of his jacket-*kurta* combo. As if he needed refreshment after the tiresome chore. Wasn’t it a trial, being a brawny man? But what hurt her the most was the admiring, adoring gratefulness with which her cousins greeted Big Natwar Bhaiya and his friends.

Mutely, following her cousins and the troop of men to an ice-cream stand, she lugged herself, shoving one foot before the other, raising little eddies of red dust, feeling an urge to itch her gritty toes. While everyone waited for ice cream, they watched a morose-looking elephant, decked in fake pearls and a shimmering red cloth, suffering a pack of people on its back, on a two-way ride across the length of the fairgrounds. In another closed area beside them, leashed monkeys jumped, parrots fluttered in cages, reciting poetry to please crowds, and grim cows, buffaloes drove away flies with their tails, waiting to be sold.

She wondered if her parents would monitor her more closely after they heard about the ride. What if someone told them she had worn the skirt an inch above her knee? She felt a stab in her heart, remembering the scorn with which her parents greeted the newspaper delivery boy since he’d made the mistake to speak to her. Was she not to blame, always longing for the opposite sex? When would she learn to accept her circumstance, who she was and where she was? Give up.

A housefly, in a rush to feed, fell on her ice cream and appeared to drown, even as it uncoiled its ugly tubular protuberance, plunged in and tried to suck the white juice. Wasn’t the housefly the most hateful of all creatures?

To throw away the ice cream, she moved to the fenced perimeter of the *mela*, outside which there were a few young women, beside a dung-plastered wall, looking aged, washed out from worry, destitute children in tow.

How long would the newly married woman they'd met earlier have fun with her husband, even in the best of circumstances? Weren't her cousins foolish to pin all their hopes on their weddings? Shouldn't she feel lucky she wouldn't be forced into an arranged wedding at a young age? And yet she didn't.

She couldn't. Something fundamental seemed missing in her life. Every day turned out to be just another burden, stacked on other pre-existing burdens—exams, teachers and parents. She was just a porter scurrying about with impossible, unwieldy baggage at a railway station—barely letting go of a set before acquiring new ones.