

When you drive north from Delhi's prosperous South Extension, there it comes, the Sewanagar Flyover. As the car takes the incline, you see the two massive arc lights of Nehru Stadium. Mount the peak and the 75,000 capacity Stadium comes to full view, its west and north gates approached by wide boulevards that turn and twirl about manicured traffic islands in an insidious winding design. But it's not the grand stadium or the opposing ostentatious office buildings that I want you to notice. It's what's below. Look down where the steaming stench rises.

Below is where Chhotu lived. Nothing unusual in that. For so many others live there. Rags, straw, soiled gunny bags, torn tarpaulins, plastic sheets and just about anything make up their shelters. Chhotu's was held down in rain and storm by twigs, broken bottles, stones, and old shoes that he had collected. Anything worthier was stolen – bits of plastic, tin cans, beer bottles, all fetched a set price per kilo that the *kabadiwala* collected on his rounds. And even a few paise were good for a smoke. A *bidi* is like food when you're hungry.

Down the length of the flyover runs a pavement. Just off it and parallel to the flyover sweeping above, run deep brackish *gullies* filled with monsoon water, thickened with mire and all sorts of refuse and waste that is tossed into it by the dwellers. There's one good thing about the place though. It has an awning, a solid one that keeps the worst elements out even if one has to bear the late night rumble of lorries and cars overhead.

The pavement divides into shelters, each shelter has its lord. When their territory is infringed upon, even many dogs rise to the kill, like the people they live off. Yes, they guard their little domains carefully with stalking stance and wary eyes.

A Death in Small Print

○ Manju Kak

Sometimes the papers report a stabbing, a rape, a cholera epidemic. Mostly they don't, sensibly choosing the sensational murder of a rich widow in closeby, affluent Defence Colony to yet another outbreak in these human infestations where such things are bound to happen. Who's interested in the likes of Ramu, Kallu, Munna, Pappu anyway. Not readers of the English press surely.

Chhotu didn't go to school. He could make no sense of what the teacher said. True, municipal schools were free, but what was the use! Last winter his teacher had knitted two sweaters for her son and three for her grandchildren while 'teaching'. All Chhotu learnt was to love the colours;

bright blues, greens, yellows, clean and glowing as the strands unravelled out of her bag as she sat, her surly chin upon her turkey neck, clackety-clacking. He'd liked the white sweater best. Once when she stepped out of class he had touched it, and held the soft garment to his cheek. He had wondered why he didn't own something like that.

Out of school and with the boys it was fun. They raced cycle tyres or flew a kite. Bade was the gang leader. *Sala!* the tricks he knew. The first time was when Chhotu saw him filch a hanky from the Babu's pocket. It was sparkling white and Chhotu had wanted it. Bade simply told him - wait and watch. Like a magician he sneaked



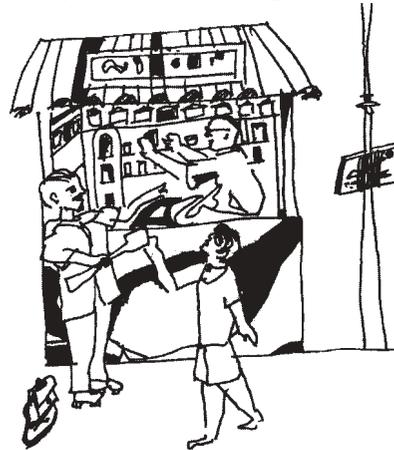
himself through the crowd, brought it and pressed it into Chhotu's small misshapen hands. Fingers that had been crushed between railway tracks. That was why he was so small, his mother explained. It was the accident. It had happened when they first came to the city. Also, there was no milk in her by his time.

His three older stepbrothers were bigger. But then they were born in Tirana village, near the town of Narona. He'd heard about it. That the fields were wide and green with cane and paddy. And orchards of great big mango and *jamun* trees. *Amma* said all through summer they ate so many that their fingers got stained purple with the juice. They had two goats too. But they had to leave them behind. The Thakur landlords had gone on a rampage and killed many. Those fools who were trying to be equal, asking for rights, for wages – under the sway of those book-readers with guns who told them so. What had been the use of all that talk? God made them unequal said his mother. And he made them untouchable. And some city-bred preachers should not have interfered. And fools like his father shouldn't have listened. Yes, she lamented sometimes.

So all Chhotu had seen was the Crossing and the *sabzi mandi* (wholesale vegetable market) behind Sewanagar. His foster father, who came to his mother sometimes at night, said he would take him to India Gate one day. By the time that one day came he would be old enough to go himself, Chhotu sniffed.

When he was older Chhotu wanted to be like Badé's Uncleji who sat at the *paan* shop. He had lots of money to spend and all he ever did was make *paans*, eating a few himself. He took whatever the young Badé brought him. His mouth drooped and his *kajalled* eyes glazed as he

glanced down his nose. He rifled through the day's booty, muttered something under his breath and gave Badé some notes. Sometimes a big one. Like the other day when Badé brought him the bag. It had two rings in a zipped inner pocket. They shone – how they shone, the green and red stones surrounded by dazzling white ones. Chhotu wanted one for his mother. She would have liked it. She had looked so beautiful, bathed and clean wearing a red saree his foster father had brought. That day Uncleji had given Badé fifty rupees. Fifty



rupees! Badé had given him five. Five rupees when all he'd done was tap the car window!

This time Chhotu had been standing below the railway crossing well over an hour. Only some fruit had come his way, pilfered from those that pushed their mobile stalls. After the sixth train left the rush would begin. Otherwise the whole day had gone by listlessly: flies humming around fresh juice vendors and ice lolly vans, attendants lazily swatting them. Ice-cold machine-water sold intermittently at fifty paise a glass. Only the potter had done brisk business. He had sold fifty flower pots when a jeep pulled up. Fifty pots! What could anyone want with so many, thought Chhotu.

He yawned abstractedly. From a distance he heard the shrill hooting.

It was the sixth train. The gates of the crossing lowered as cyclists raced across to beat it. In a while the scooterists were manoeuvring between pedestrian crowds and cyclists ringing their bells incessantly; voices were raised in bargaining and occasional cars honked their way through this morass of people, cows, stray mongrels, rotting peels and the splattered droppings of dung.

It was now brisk business for the mobile stalls lined on either side of the Crossing all the way to the *mandi*. Pale green gourds, bunches of spinach, pumpkins, torees, obese purple brinjals and long sausage-like ones, pears and apples and all that was of the rainy season. And perennial bananas, gold and black encased sweet bananas in terraced mounds on stalls straining under their weight.

But Chhotu noticed none of this. He saw it every day so he looked unseeingly, slipping his hands into his pockets every now and then to pull out his hanky. It was the people he had eyes for. Chhotu watched them speculatively. All he had ever been able to pinch was a wallet that was empty. Not that way stupid, Badé said. You have to study the customer first. What they drive, their hair, their clothes. Shoes, always look at their shoes. And what they buy. The *mausambis* and out of season fruit from the pucca shops or the sub-standard stuff from the vendors. Chhotu thought all this over. The weight of what he was learning seemed so much. More than the silly stuff the teacher had written on the blackboard. He couldn't understand how it would help them. What could people earn by learning wriggling figures? On the other hand look at Uncleji. Now he had brains. He was respected. No one in the whole bazaar dared raise his voice at him. Chhotu

wanted to grow up like Uncleji. The boss, looking with watchful eyes as he sat on his *gaddi* making *paans*.

He stared at the people coming and going. He felt he was going to be lucky. Inside him he felt he was going to hit upon something big today. Bade would be proud of him. The crowds began gathering. It was three days to *Raksha Bandhan* and a Friday evening too. Soon there wouldn't be space to walk. Chhotu knotted and unknotted his hanky while he waited.

The seventh train was coming. Still nothing had turned up. Its hoots grew shriller as the crossing gates fell slowly over pedestrians, cyclists and scooterists racing past to beat its descent. The final drop, and those who were but a moment ago a melee were neatly separated. Like the Kauravs and Pandavs drawn across a battlefield – those the *pujari* in the *mandir* told tales of. That was another place Chhotu loved to go to. On Tuesdays, he and Badé would line up after ringing all the brass bells at the entrance. They managed to get a handful of *laddoos* that devotees distributed when they came out of the shrine. Chhotu usually took one for his mother. But not for his stepbrothers. He didn't like them. They casually kicked him around. All he does is eat, when will he earn something, they spat at him.

It must have been fifteen minutes before he noticed. She was fair, tall, rich-looking, with a servant who was black. It was a white Maruti she drove. Neither of them seemed from these parts. One too white and one too dark. She sat in the car patiently waiting for the gates to reopen. So fascinated was he by her face that he failed to notice the bag she had kept on the empty seat by the open window. He carefully looked at her again. An upper-class woman. Badé

had said these were the easiest targets of all. Then it came to him in a flash.

When she heard the *thuk thuk* sound, Mina didn't immediately realise where it came from. She rarely came to the *sabzi mandi*. But this time she had a big dinner planned and the price of vegetables had shot up in the monsoon. It was better to buy them wholesale here. The noise came again. She turned. A little scamp of a fellow was tapping her car with a stone. Scratching its paint! She was angry; she got out and hollered. That



was the cue. As she screamed at Badé, Chhotu pushed his misshapen fingers through the window and was off.

But her servant was faster. He too had been a thief once. A chase and the little wimp was brought back, the handbag tucked under his soiled clothes. Chhotu whimpered, whimpered terribly all the way to the police station.

They beat him mercilessly, as the police do. She was shocked. He was but a child, she scolded the sub-inspector. He must let him go at once! She had absolutely no charges to press. After all, she had got her bag back hadn't she? "Petty thieves make great big criminals", he warned as she

ticked him off haughtily. "Believe me we know how to deal with this lot. We're trained for it. This scum of the earth has hide like leather. They should be taught a lesson." But Mina was stony. "Madam do good now and ruin him for life later. Let him off and he'll pounce on the next victim. A murderer, that's what he could end up as". She paused, thought, relented, and left Chhotu. Just one night in the lock-up and he would leave off petty thieving, she was assured.

At her dinner party there were *roghan josh* and *malai koftas*, *kababs* and *biryani*. Everyone agreed she was a good cook till she brought in the chocolate soufflé. Then they said she was superb. And she served fresh fruit brought from the *mandi* afterwards. Which put her in mind of her narrow escape. She recounted it, all eyes riveted upon her pretty face. And how much money was there in her purse? they asked. Not much, just a fifty, she replied. But these pickpockets have to be taught a lesson. Oh yes they concurred. Times were bad. And law and order simply terrible. This talk of social equality only made it worse.

The next day Chhotu's mother cooked no food. "Nothing you can do about it", said her sons. "He was too small. And his fingers misshapen. He wouldn't have amounted to much. You would have had to feed him all his life."

Only Badé and she went to claim the body. Small and thin, blue with bruises from the *lathis*, still clutching a soiled little hanky in his fingers. She slipped it out.

The newspapers gave it in small print; the death of yet another minor in police custody. □

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