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Somewhere in Mumbai

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Three long whistles.

Our day has begun. The naked bulbs in our kothis and the tube light in the hallway are lit. We all come out of our kothis arranged in two rows. A curtain thick with layers of dirt drops where the door should be. At the end of the hallway, we turn left into a hallway just as long. That hallway leads us to the shower room. One guard is at the front and another at the end of the line. Their hands carry pipes. Whistles around their necks dangle on their chests.

The shower room contains three toilets, four sinks, and five showers. There is no tap. We use jugs to pour water. The toilets are piss-yellow. The water is cold like wounds. We share two bars of soap, two towels, and three jugs between eleven of us. The guards watch us as we take off our clothes, pile them at a corner, and enter the showers. We do not feel naked. Not anymore. Some breasts droop. Some breasts are not different from the chests of boys. One or two breasts are perky. Those are the ones the guards stare at. After the shower, we put the same clothes back on.
A long whistle.

We form a line again and go back the same hallway. About midway, we turn left into a room. It’s the dining room. We all sit on the cement floor. Not a single chair. Or a table. We get a cup of chai and two parathas. Chai is without milk and cold. Parathas are hard like tin. The guards stand at the door as we drink chai like water and chew parathas like bones. We wash the cups and put them upside down on a counter to dry.

A long whistle.

We form a line. We follow the path back to our kothis.

Our kothis are just enough to fit a wooden bed. The bed contains a handmade mattress, quilt, and pillow—all black with dirt. Cigarette butts, cheap wine stains, and burst condoms litter our kothis. Bollywood movie posters cover the brick wall. A bulb hangs precariously from the ceiling so low one has to be careful to avoid bumping one’s head. The light from the bulb fails to penetrate the darkness settled in our kothis. We do not have access to the switch. The guards have a master switch that controls all the lights in the kothis. We never know when the lights will be turned on and off, but they control our day and night. Not a single window or ventilation. We breathe the same air breath after breath.

Two short whistles. The first customer.
We go out of our kothis to the selection room and stand in a line against the brick wall. A rusted cage with a parrot inside hangs from the ceiling in the selection room. The parrot looks at us. It does not try to get out of the cage at all. It just stares at us. It eats the food malkin gives it twice a day. It has memorized few phrases that malkin has taught it. Tumhara nam kya hai? Tum kaise ho? I wonder how long it has been in that cage. I also wonder if it still remembers how to fly.

The customer is middle-aged. He is wearing a checkered shirt and black pants and glasses. He looks as normal as anyone. His hair is nicely combed, mustard oil shining in the dim light. His shyness manifests in his cheeks that flush and his thumb that fidgets. It cannot be more than his third time visiting a beshyalaya.

While the customer briskly runs his eyes over us from end to end, a man enters the room with a girl in his arms. A dalal. The girl looks unconscious. Drugged. He rests her on the couch against his shoulder. Her head falls to the side. The man does not notice it. He is busy talking to malkin. Negotiating the price. The man points to the girl’s face and eyes, but malkin appears to be uninterested. She has been in the business too long to show her admiration for the girl’s beauty in front of the dalal. The girl cannot be older than twelve.

She has donned a red sari. Tilhari dangles above her blouse. A streak of sindoor marks her head where her hair parts. Just married. I feel something like a pinch. I, too, was just married when my
husband told me we were going to Kathmandu. I had donned a red sari just like this that my husband had bought for me. On the way he gave me a bottle of orange juice. When I woke up, I found myself here. That was the last time I saw him. I was sixteen when I got here. I don’t know how old I am now. Hardly any of us know our age. We feel too old to wonder about our age.

I remember all these things after a long time. I cannot tell how long. I have not stepped outside this beshyalaya since I got here. All I can tell is it has been a long time. I have almost forgotten my past, but this girl forces me to remember. It has been so long I have begun to doubt my memory.

The customer chooses the last girl in the row and follows her into her kothi. We return to our own kothis. I lie on the bed and stare at the ceiling. I try not to remember the girl in the selection room, but I do. Her wedding dress makes me remember my past, which is as distant as a dream. I woke up that night in this very room. The first thing I saw was the bulb. As I tried to get up, my body ached. I felt heavy as if I had woken up in the thick of night after seeing a nightmare. When I tried harder to move, I realized my hands and legs were tied up. Bishwas! Bishwas! Instead of my husband, a guard showed up. Shut up. Shut up. Where’s my husband, dai? Where am I? Why are my hands and legs tied? Help me, dai!

Two short whistles.

This time it’s the police constables on duty. There are two of them, and both come here when they are on duty. One still has
his uniform on. His right hand holds his hat and his left his stick. He uses the stick to turn our heads right and left. He uses it to poke our breasts as well. Once I dreamed of killing a police officer. He goes past me. I breathe a sigh of relief. He does not have to pay. Instead, he collects hapta when he leaves. It’s for the inspector who is in charge of this area. If he doesn’t get the money, malkin will be behind the bars. The policeman chooses the second to last girl in the line. He hurries towards her kothi pulling her along. The rest of us go back to our kothis.

No one came to my rescue that first night. No one. I prayed to God. Nothing. I tried to untie myself and failed. I fell on the floor as I tried to wriggle myself free. The guard picked me up and put me back on the bed as if I were a doll. I cried and screamed so hard that after sometime I could not even cry. I fell asleep.

When I woke, I saw a man with several fat gold chains around his neck staring at me. Each of his fingers wore at least one ring. He began taking off his clothes and started touching me. For some reason, my hands and legs were not tied anymore. Please, dai! For God’s sake, don’t. But he continued touching my hands, legs, and cheeks. I tried to run, but there was nowhere to go. Outside a guard stood. I found myself shrinking against a corner. He started touching me. I fought back, but I was no match for him. Soon he began kissing me. Just then I felt my thumb sink into something round. My thumb felt wet. My eyes! My eyes! I saw him suddenly pull back and cover his right eye with his hand. My thumb dripped red. He went running out of my kothi.
Inscape

Then three guards entered. One held my legs, another my hands. They put me back on my bed and continued holding my hands and legs. The third one started undressing.

Two short whistles.

A man of at least seventy. His face is papery. Shrunken veins are easily visible through his wrinkled skin. He looks a little uncomfortable as he looks at us. He looks at our faces and drops his head immediately. He points to the youngest among us. I wonder if he is one of those old men who think they will regain their sexual desire if they sleep with the young girls, especially the virgins. He is old enough to be a grandfather.

When I woke, I found myself naked. My clothes were scattered. Then I knew everything was over. But when another customer came, I refused again. Then the guards came again and repeated the process all over. After the fourth time, I did not move at all. I don't even remember twitching a muscle. There was nothing to fight for. Nothing to lose. After that day, the guards stopped visiting my kothi. Instead of guards, other men came.

Two short whistles.

I can smell his breath from the hallway. The air is thick with the smell of cheap alcohol. As we stand against the wall, I notice him staggering. Between his index and middle fingers is a lit cigarette. He goes from one end to the other. He comes back and stops in
front of the girl on my right. He raises his hand, but when he is about to point at her, he loses his balance and points at me instead.

He follows me. I don’t look back. I undress myself, but he doesn’t. He is too drunk to do so.

When he is done, he fishes out another cheap cigarette and a matchbox from his pocket. He tries to light a matchstick and he misses it. He tries again and misses again. With his hand falling, down goes his body full of sweat. Soon he is snoring. I grab the matchbox from his hand and tuck it under my pillow.

Soon my hope for rescue died away. In fact, I hoped I wouldn’t be rescued. How could I go back home after this? There was no reason to live anymore. After everyone slept, I threw my shawl into a wooden beam in the ceiling and inserted my head into the noose. I threw myself from my bed. I was in the air. Gravity pulled me down. The noose went tight against my neck. Tighter. Tighter. And the darkness turned darker. Just when I thought everything was over, the shawl gave in and I fell on the cement floor. The guard came running to my kothi. A guard always stood by my kothi for a long time.

A long whistle.

We come out of our kothis again, make a line, and walk to the dining room. Three parathas and potato curry—our second and last meal before we sleep. After we finish eating, we take our dishes

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to the shower room. We wash the dishes with ashes and put them back in the dining room.

On the way back to our kothis, the parrot looks at us again. Tumhara nam kya hai? Tumhara nam kya hai? Putali, I find myself almost whispering to it. Putali. Butterfly. But that’s not my real name. That’s the name malkin gave me after I got here. When I was young, butterflies were my best friends. I used to run after them in our orchard. I never touched them though. They were so delicate and fragile I was afraid of holding them. Sometimes they made me jealous. Beauty spread all over their bodies. How they kissed the most beautiful flowers. I wanted to know the secret things they whispered to marigolds. But after malkin gave me the name of Putali, I stopped thinking about the butterflies.

Two long whistles.

This time it’s the doctor. The doctor comes every once in a while, what seems like a month or so. He says he is here to make sure we are healthy, but we know better than to trust him. We know better than to trust anyone. He is here to see if any of us is HIV-positive or pregnant. He is here for his own need as well.

By the time he comes to my kothi, I am already naked. He makes us take off all our clothes—everything—before he enters our kothis. Saves him time. He shines the flashlight into my eyes. He makes me stick out my tongue as far as I can. He taps his stethoscope on my back. Then he lets the stethoscope rest on his neck. He removes
the gloves cautiously. Then he starts touching me. I know what he is doing, but I pretend I don’t. He spends much more time with the two young girls. When he is satisfied, he gives me injections and pills and a glass of water. I swallow the pills without water. None of us knows what they are for, but we all take them. He checks my mouth with the flashlight. He draws my blood.

Three long whistles.

The lights are turned off. Night has fallen in our kothis.

I pull the quilt over my body and close my eyes, but I cannot sleep. I turn to the left. Still no sleep. I grab the matchbox the drunk customer had dropped. I slowly move the quilt to the side and touch the floor with my bare feet. Freezing. I have lived here so long I can walk around in the dark without bumping into anything. I am cautious anyway. I lift the curtain with my right hand and look into the hallway. Dark. At the end of the hallway there is light. I hear him snore. This one always snores. I grab the matchbox lying under my pillow. Standing just behind the curtain, I listen for any movement. Nothing. I slip into the adjoining kothi. I light a matchstick and cover it with my hand so that the guard won’t notice the light. It’s the same girl. She is still wearing the wedding dress, but the tilari is not on her neck anymore. Her husband must have taken it. The matchstick burns out. It falls from my hand and disappears into the dark. I light another matchstick and take it close to her face. Her hair is parted exactly the way mine was when I got here. Sindoor is still there. The guard continues to snore.

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My hands tremble. Knees as well. I find myself reaching for the girl’s cheeks. I have forgotten the touch of a young girl’s face. I remember looking into the mirror and touching my cheeks before I got here. I feel her face in the dark. My hands go down the cheeks, down her chin, to her throat, and stop there. She is breathing as if she were in her own bed, in her own house. I hold her throat in my hands. I squeeze her throat gently. Then tighter. And tighter. Her breathing becomes short, but she doesn’t wake. Her legs and hands flutter like the wings of a butterfly.