

## Dirty White Strings

Every evening when the sun slips through the skies of New Delhi, I unbutton Lily's dress. I slide it down her breasts with one hand and grab her neck with the other. I don't pay attention to the men in the courtyard. Some of them breathe clouds of fire; others walk around on stilts. Neither do I mind the little children with their mouths full of puffed rice. They cheer on the fire-breathers and the stilt-walkers. They will grow up to be like their fathers, who have grown up to be like theirs. I just sit on the front steps with Lily's umbrella dress at my feet. The door behind me is outlined with orange, white, and green triangles. I paint them every year on Independence Day, except during such moments, I can't remember when that is. Because when I run my fingers over Lily's body, I always get lost in the same question. *How many times could we make love before morning if, tonight, you were more than cloth and wood?* The pigeons on the asbestos roof guess a number between three and a trillion, and coo their babies to sleep.

Unlike the pigeons, I am not a numbers person. I can't remember my own phone number. But I have not forgotten the price per meter of the chiffon *sari* that I used for Lily's dress—written on one of the edges in the shopkeeper's lazy handwriting. When my needle zipped past the "Rs 275" in blue marker, my wife, Lalita, had been dead for a little more than a day. Not long after she stopped breathing, and before I set fire to the kerosene-spattered logs on her funeral pyre, Lily was born.

The monsoon of 1999 was eternal and wet. Not wet like the dots of mud on your ankles when you wade through the puddles of last night's rain or like the drops that slither down the leaves the next morning and

fall upon your cheeks, pretending to be tears. But wet like the insides of your dreams are soaked, and all you can remember is rain.

On one such day, I cupped my hands around my ear and placed my head on the left of Lalita's bosom—where her heart had been beating. Thunder clouds were rattling the windowpanes of our one-room hut. The bottom right corner of Ganesha's poster, with his pet mouse nibbling on a golden *laddoo*, was flapping in the table fan's breeze. The God of New Beginnings watched the tiny white creature flailing around with the unglued corner. I could hear the rainwater leaking through the ceiling and collecting in the saucepan that I had placed on the floor, right under the hole in the roof. I heard my own heartbeats against my eardrums, recurring and distant, like horses galloping in another galaxy. But I heard nothing else. So I rushed to the warehouse in a mad frenzy and returned drenched from head to toe, with blocks of wood and colorful fabrics bundled up like a baby in my arms. They were the finest of all my raw materials.

For a day and a half, I stayed in that room with my dead wife, doing what I do best. I studied every detail of Lalita's corpse and created a string-puppet that looked like her. I'd been crafting puppets all my life, but that day I bit my lips, cut my fingers, fumbled, and forgot. It took me hours to carve a face out of the rectangular piece of wood. But I made sure that the cheeks were chiseled, just like Lalita's. The arms and legs were firm and shapely after I stuffed them with layers of cotton batting, then wrapped a thread several times to form the wrists and hands. Thick red paint dripped on my pajamas as I painted a pair of bow-shaped lips. At last, I held my breath and colored the two wooden bumps that were the puppet's eyes—white inside, black outside. Lalita's face was slumped on one side of the pillow. I couldn't help but think how her eyelashes shivered every time she put *kajal* around her eyes. Now her eyes were open, but her lashes were still.

By the following morning, Lalita's eyes were bulging. Her body was ice-cold. It had developed a greenish tinge and begun to stink. But I still had to stitch the puppet's dress. I considered holding one hand to my nose, but I needed both hands to work. So I tied a handkerchief around my face and continued. I hastily stitched some silver moons and stars on the chiffon *sari*. I then folded it lengthwise and breadthwise, measured it, and marked the edges. But by the time I put down my scissors, I was

retching. I felt my hands tremble and my stomach turn as I pushed the needle in and out of the cloth.

At last I held the puppet in my arms and stood next to Lalita's body. It was nothing like the Lalita who sat cross-legged in the temple after a bath, counting the 108 beads of a mala, with water trickling down her uncombed hair. Or the one who fanned the firewood, with sweat running down her long neck, as she cooked baby eggplants with fresh coriander leaves. More like the one who pushed me on the bed and unhooked her blouse with an evil look in her eyes. Who nibbled on my lips so feverishly that she made me forget my name. So I decided to name the puppet after the name I used to whisper into Lalita's ears when she sank her fingernails into my flesh, leaving me with bleeding half-moons on my back. "Lily?" I begged. "Please hurt me."

Seventeen years—that's how long ago that was. Except on evenings like these, when I sit on the front steps caressing Lily's face, it all seems like it happened yesterday.

It's a little past sunset. The men in the courtyard have put aside their stilts and fire-breathing equipment to join the men, women, teenagers, children, and senior citizens of the colony sitting in a big circle. Pradhan Ji is standing in the center, talking in a loud voice. Time and again he waves his fist in the air and people shout slogans in unison.

Lately, this has become an everyday affair. It was the letter from the Delhi Development Authority that started it all. It claimed that the residents of Kathputli Colony have been encroaching upon more than five hectares of government land for all these years. And now it is time to *regularize* the state of affairs. I start calculating how many months have passed since the DDA's notice, when the door behind me opens, and I turn around. It's Ankita with her empty bottles.

She calls out to me, says she's going to listen to Pradhan Ji. "I'll come back after filling water, okay?"

"But it's late now." I look at my watch. "You can fill water in the morning. And Pradhan Ji is saying nothing new anyway."

Ankita doesn't like standing in the queue at the municipality tap. When I was a little boy, I hated it, too. But Bai Sa still woke me up at 4:00 a.m. and sent me off. Every morning I stood in the queue with the sleeping mat's crisscrossed impressions on my cheeks. In fact, I quickly mastered the art of sleeping while standing up. As I waited for my turn, I

tried to stop yawning and closed my eyes. That way it was possible to finish a few of my dreams from last night.

The queue for the water tap starts where the narrow lanes of the colony end. The lanes are lined with houses on both sides. Every house has puppeteers or magicians, fire breathers or traditional healers, acrobats, sword swallows, story tellers, or all of the above. Grandparents, parents, and children have practiced the same arts, under the same asbestos roofs, and filled their drinking water from the same tap every morning.

I was barely eight months old when we moved here, too young to remember anything. But I've heard the story enough times to recount it like an unforgettable memory.

When we left Rajasthan, the north winds were singing their woes to the desert, eroding and creating the sand dunes over and over again. Bai Sa had wrapped me in a camel skin blanket and was waiting under a tree for Babo Sa. No one knew if it was a neem tree, a peepal tree, or a mango tree. It was a different tree every time I heard the story. I imagine a canopy of green leaves keeping out the sun as I slept in Bai Sa's arms. We stayed that way for hours, a couple of ants on an infinite canvas of golden sand, until Babo Sa finally returned. He had a big camel suede bottle tucked under his arm. "Enough water for the journey," Babo assured Bai as he helped her on the back of an old burly camel. And so we left in search of better things.

On the map, Rajasthan looks like a kite with a torn edge fluttering in the sky. Last year I cut out a map from the newspaper and sellotaped it to the back of the radio. Although stained and tattered, twenty-eight out of twenty-nine states are still noticeable. The distance from the black dot for Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, to the red star for New Delhi, the capital of India, is as wide as my fingernail. Yet it took us a whole week to get here.

There were not so many cars on the streets of Delhi when I was a boy. No CNG-powered buses, no tall buildings with reflective glasses, no king-sized national flag at Central Park, no metro trains with red-green-blue-yellow metro lines, no tourists with their colorless, freckled skins exposed in unimaginable places, and no malls with water fountains. A loaf of fruit bread cost only twenty-five paise and photographs were black and white.

Bai and Babo's photo album is thicker than my pillow. The first picture is of them receiving a trophy from a woman with an unusual streak of gray hair, the then prime minister, and their smiles are bursting at the seams. Then there's one where our colony is a sea of triangle tents and wild grass. Bai Sa always looked at it and remembered how, when we started in this city, we used to eat three times a day and make more money, the kind of money that helped replace those tarpaulin homes with the brick huts that we have today. But Babo Sa's favorite picture was the one where he's surrounded by a crowd outside the Red Fort. Each of his fingers is pulling on one or more strings as a puppet with spiral sideburns greets the people with hands folded in a *namaste*. He often touched the smiling faces and complained about the world. It was a better place when there was no radio, television, Bollywood, or internet. People had more time for puppets and puppeteers.

Bai and Babo performed in many countries. The government took care of the airfare and visa but didn't pay much. Some nights there wasn't any rice in the house. There were enough puppets on the kitchen shelf, though, so it looked anything but empty. Bai Sa listed out the names of all the places they had been in the same order every time, "Moscow, Bulgaria, Denmark, Canada, Swin-der-land, Indonesia, London, Japan, Paris, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Dubai." But nothing fascinated me more than what Babo Sa believed to be a puppeteer's escape from the cycle of death and rebirth. "Every puppeteer has a ticket to *moksha*," he would say, "and it is that one puppet into which he breathes life until he is rendered lifeless."

It is the middle of summer, but I am almost shivering. My cotton shirt feels too flimsy. I check my watch again. Ankita is waiting for my permission to see Pradhan Ji.

"Please, papa?" Ankita sticks out her chin, "I'll be okay, I promise."

"Fine, fine. But he is saying nothing—" She leaves before I can finish. "Be safe!" I call out, but she keeps walking. The plastic containers dance around her hips.

"We are artists, not scum," Pradhan Ji bellows into the microphone. "And their politics cannot defeat us!"

The rocky courtyard is packed with people. The women are on one side, with their big, kohl-rimmed eyes about to set something ablaze. These are the same women who wash dishes every morning with their

feet swamped by soap bubbles and their faces hidden behind the loose ends of *saris*. The men are on the other side. Their puckered foreheads make it hard to believe that they breathe fire and swallow swords for a living. The children are sitting between the men and the women, obediently, although there is no puffed rice for them to eat tonight.

I approach a group of men who are not listening to Pradhan Ji. They are talking to each other in low voices. Mahesh, the stilt-walker and my neighbor, has a finger pointed to the sky.

“All those flowers and sweets in his temples go to waste.” He gestures for me to sit before continuing. “And if you think he will save us, you are wrong.”

“Save us from what?” I ask, trying to join the conversation. Everyone in the group fixes their eyes on me.

“The government, of course.” Mahesh looks at the other men with half a smile. “It seems like Raju Bhai has been busy stripping puppets again.” They laugh.

Some say that the DDA plans to bulldoze our houses to build a mall like the one in Saket with crystal blue waterfalls. Others place their bet on a cinema hall. Yet others talk about a tall residential complex with kidney-shaped swimming pools and security guards in black uniforms. Nobody really knows what will become of the patch of land we have called home for the last fifty years. All we know is that the Delhi government wants us gone.

Ankita likes the idea of a mall replacing all these huts. She doesn't want to think about where we would build our new homes or if we could build them at all. That one day she could point to a jazzy shopping complex and boast about growing up on the same plot of land is enough consolation for her. Her friends are gathered under the guava tree and listening intently to Pradhan Ji. She is sitting with them, but she is preoccupied with a dried leaf, crushing it to a fine powder between her fingers.

One day, when Ankita was six years old, I braided her hair, patted some talcum powder on her cheeks, and took her to my warehouse. She cupped her chin in tiny hands and watched in rapt attention. When the puppets danced, she clapped and laughed until tears ran down her face. Since then, she has accompanied me to the warehouse almost every day. Sometimes I used to go to the warehouse in the morning before she

woke up, and I returned only at night. On such days I would keep some *rotis* and onions by her bed before leaving the house.

The years seem to have passed in a blink. Today Ankita is a young woman and an accomplished puppeteer. Sometimes she makes her puppets dance for hours without stopping, telling herself stories she eventually doesn't believe in. Her hands move as if under a spell. She travels with me for performances throughout the city. She is an expert in the kitchen, too, and cooks baby eggplants better than her late mother. And in a month's time, she is to marry an acrobat who lives four houses away.

I have prepared everything for my daughter's wedding day—exchanged all of Bai Sa's and Lalita's jewelry for pieces that are new and more fashionable, ones that Ankita picked herself. I have procured an appointment from Raj Painters to get the house repainted, booked the best sweet-makers and florists in my budget, invited the pundit who conducted the *puja* with Bai Sa and Babo Sa when I received my first hair cut, and taken a loan from Pradhan Ji to combine it with my life savings, so the small wooden box under the bed is heavier than it has ever been, to be opened only for the payments and proceedings of the ceremony. I have prepared everything, everything but myself. It breaks my heart to picture the little girl who took her first steps with palms wrapped around my fingers walking around the fire holding hands with another man.

When Ankita was born, the midwife had to rub her with a hot towel, massage her feet, and roll her on her stomach before she let out her first cry after seven long minutes. But just then, Lalita stopped breathing.

The midwife's gray hair was swept back into a thin braid and smelled of coconut oil. With a toothless grin, she placed Ankita in my arms, adding that my wife was the kindest and the most beautiful woman in the world. I was too unprepared to wonder if that's what she told all husbands whose wives succumbed to childbirth. She kept her wrinkled palm on my cheek before saying, "You have no business loving her when the gods love her more than you do."

My wife and daughter struggled for all of seven minutes to stay alive. Only one of them made it. Soon Ankita's shrill cries began to engulf the vacuum that Lalita was leaving behind. She was mourning her mother's demise long before I knew where to start. We were not meant to be like those families on billboards claiming that you're three steps away from a

home loan, while mother, father, daughter and son smile excitedly outside a bungalow. Yet, if only for seven minutes, our family was complete.

“We will not leave!” Pradhan Ji bellows into the mic again. “Kathputli colony is the world’s largest community of street performers. If the community dies, the art dies.”

As the elected head of the colony, Pradhan Ji believes we should resist the government’s proposal. Although it isn’t really a proposal. The DDA wants all the families to sign a document consenting to vacate their homes. And everyone knows that they will make sure that happens, this way or that.

“Who wants to die rebelling?” Mahesh looks away from Pradhan Ji, tossing black chickpeas into his mouth. “I’d rather eat, sleep, fuck, and live.”

The men around him chuckle and nod in agreement. It is the same every time. I never take either Pradhan Ji or Mahesh very seriously. But tonight I leave the buttons on Lily’s dress untouched. I bury her face in my chest as if I don’t want her to know what is about to happen. As if she *could* know, somehow. Early next morning, I put Lily in a polythene bag and wiggle my little finger inside Ankita’s ears till she wakes up. We head off to my warehouse. I sing Rajasthani folk songs that I remember from my wedding, Ankita twirls and tugs the strings, and the puppets dance and dance. No one needs an audience.

It took several muggy August afternoons for Lalita and me to get married. The ceremony went on for four days and five nights in the Sai temple before the two of us could leave on my brand new Bajaj Chetak. The pearl blue scooter was decorated with marigold flowers for our first ride. Tired and happy, we joined the evening traffic sashaying on the streets of gold. The city’s toxic skyline with its neon billboards, tall buildings, and shopping malls, the India Gate with its flame in the memory of dead soldiers, dogs scrounging for food inside garbage bins, and endless zebra-striped road dividers whizzed past us in a flash. Around my waist were Lalita’s arms, stacked with bangles right up to her elbows.

At one point, she started playing with the buttons on my shirt. I jumped a red light. The traffic policeman blew his whistle impatiently and raised his baton to make me stop. But I was too distracted looking at

my wife's hands, painted with swirling grapevines in bright orange henna. Now, no matter how much I try, it is impossible to imagine them adorning my daughter's hands. The grapevines inside my head can only adorn one bride at a time.

Have I once again loved a woman I have no business loving?

The week passes quickly. Ankita and I make three trips to Chandni Chowk before buying a lime green wedding dress with small, diamond-shaped mirrors on the hemline. She tries it on every morning, afternoon, and evening. But I don't get tired of telling her how lovely she looks.

Every other day, another young woman with unblemished lipstick walks into the colony, accompanied by multiple cameramen, for one more breaking news story. "*Kathputli*, as we know, is Hindi for puppet," she says. "And ironically, the fate of Delhi's Kathputli Colony has itself been reduced to a play of puppets."

Some talk about how various presidents and prime ministers have given away awards to the residents for their contribution to the traditional Indian arts. But none of the political leaders have given us proper houses in which to display those awards. Others go through multiple retakes trying to pronounce "Ijazul" right. Ijazul Khan's Great Indian Rope Trick has made it to the Guinness Book of World Records. He lives in the lane behind ours. Everyone told him that the trick was a myth, but he spent years perfecting it. When he presented it on the first day of the twentieth millennium, on a beach with pearl white sand, the twenty-five thousand people there gasped together. We watched it on Pradhan Ji's TV.

The nightly meetings with Pradhan Ji continue, but Mahesh and others don't change their minds. So when a DDA official arrives with the documents on a Monday morning, around half of the people peacefully put their thumb impressions in navy blue ink. The other half watch and swallow their spit.

I am changing a light bulb one evening when two policemen barge into the house and hold me by the collar. One is taller and wearing gold-rimmed spectacles while the other has chewing gum in his mouth. They push me against the wall, ramming my face next to the socket, and the light bulb smashes in my hands. Ankita and I have been eating in the dark for a little less than a month now. But I forget all about it when one

of the men holds my bleeding hand close to my face. A glass shard sticking out of my palm almost pokes my eye.

Ankita is trying on her wedding dress when the men arrive. I see her sobbing over her many reflections in the mirrors on her dress when they find her crouching behind the bed. One by one they run their hands over her slender waist and pinch her belly button. I ask her to run. One of them slaps me twice across the face. The other one grabs her hair. I ask her to run again. This time Ankita bites the policeman's wrist so hard that he lets her go.

They don't chase her. The taller one fixes his spectacles and punches me till I fall down. I taste blood in my mouth. They slowly unbuckle their black leather belts. In the moments that follow, I am kicked and flogged until I can't register pain. I hear a metal buckle landing on the floor with a clang. Soon the poster of Ganesha on the opposite wall is being shredded before my eyes. *Religious man*, their voices sound like distant echoes, *bet you don't drink*. And so I am drinking a dark brown liquid from a small bottle. It looks like Dettol, but it isn't. *Sign the papers*. Some more bitter liquid dribbles through my lips and goes down my throat. *Sign or we'll be back*.

For the next few minutes, I am sprawled on the floor. Moonlight filters into the room through the holes in the asbestos roof. One moment Ankita's face is right in front of me, the next moment I see circles without circumferences. At some point, I feel her soft neck against my wrists, and soon my arms are wrapped around her. I hear my knees bumping into the bed's wooden panel, but nothing hurts, nothing but the beautiful face so near to me, and yet so far away.

Pradhan Ji has commenced the evening's meeting. Today is the first day of police violence in the colony. A number of people have been beaten up, and some rebellious young men have also been arrested. There is fear and resentment among those who have pledged their loyalty to Pradhan Ji and refused to sign the papers. I can hear him talking on the microphone, requesting everyone to sit down.

Bai Sa and Babo Sa left Rajasthan in a caravan with Pradhan Ji. When they arrived in Delhi and picked a place to set up their tents, there was nothing but wilderness for as far as they could see. They couldn't have imagined that within half a century, the wasteland would be worth scores of rupees. It's hard to forget all those evenings we spent sitting

outside our half-built house while Babo Sa prepared the cement mix. The wedding season was in full swing when the house was under construction. Days were packed with performances. It was only in the evenings that Babo found the time to improve upon the structure of cement and bricks.

Bai Sa had the same answer every time I asked what story they played that day. Salim and Anarkali. It was a hit at weddings.

“Salim and who?” I would ask, although I knew full well.

Anarkali, Bai Sa would then explain for the umpteenth time, was a slave girl in Emperor Akbar’s court. Prince Salim was the Emperor’s son and heir to the throne. One day Anarkali was dancing in the court, and Salim couldn’t keep his eyes off her. They fell in love before the world could stop them.

“*Anar* is for pomegranate and *Kali* is for blossom,” Bai Sa would say before handing me a puppet with spiral flicks and sideburns, colorful dots above the eyebrows, an elaborate nose ring, and accessorized hair. Although the slave girl was originally called Nadira Begum, Salim used to address her as Anarkali. She was as beautiful as a pomegranate blossom. Salim and Anarkali’s love story was a happy one until Emperor Akbar came to know of it. He disapproved of the relationship and imprisoned Anarkali. Salim was thus forced to go on war against his own father. But the crown prince’s army was badly defeated.

“What about Anarkali?” I always hoped for a twist, like maybe she managed to elope with Salim and they lived happily forever after.

But Bai Sa never strayed from the plot. “Anarkali was buried alive between two walls.” She pointed towards the house each time. “Like that.” I watched as Babo Sa laid the bricks, his trowel rhythmically scraping and tapping the surface of wet cement.

The alcohol is weakening my senses. I see seven or more wooden windows behind Ankita, although we have only two in our house. When Babo Sa could still use a hammer and saw, he built them with leftover wood from the warehouse. Bai Sa stitched the frilled half-curtains. I imagine a bulldozer tearing through those curtains and smashing the wooden panels in a single blow. I imagine it seven or more times.

In fact, seven or more times Ankita carefully places my head on the pillow so she can stand up and get some antiseptic, but I don’t let her go even though my fingers bleed from the light bulb that could not light up

our darkest dinner because I look for the little bony bumps behind her neck and find the pearl snaps on her blouse instead, which makes her flinch but reminds me of all those years of buttoning and unbuttoning a chiffon dress, all night, every night, to try and strip off the memory grapevine inside my head which Ankita carefully places on the pillow so she can stand up and get some antiseptic, but I don't let her go because my ticket to *moksha* is that one puppet into which I breathe life until I am my puppet's puppet and she is the woman I love and we inhale and exhale and move and make noises and be happy because we are more than just cloth and wood tonight, so I tug on the pearl snaps, undo Ankita's dress, and watch my daughter's blouse slip off her shoulders to put the infinite principles of puppetry to shame.

Ankita stares at me with eyes that are emptier than the screw-threaded bulb socket above her head. Her hands shiver as she snaps the artificial pearls back in place. She then sits down in the corner farthest from me, locks her arms around her folded knees, and starts weeping.

"We will not leave!" In the courtyard, Pradhan Ji continues his speech. He urges the people to not give up so soon. In his passionate voice, he proclaims once again, "If the community dies, the art dies!" And the crowd repeats after him.

If Bai Sa was here, she would have disagreed with Pradhan Ji. She would have told him that the art never dies, but the audience does. I remember the evening she couldn't stop complaining about Babo and her performance at a wedding in Okhla. She said that people were distracted. They were discussing the weather, the stock market, and each other's clothes and jewelry.

Reluctantly, she untied the gunny bag with the props and puppets. It had rained on their way back home. She wiped the puppets with the loose end of her *sari* and laid them down to dry on the wicker mat. In the moon-washed nightfall, they looked like soldiers in a single file. I wondered what it's like to have thousands of rupees for a private Salim and Anarkali show and not bother to watch it carefully. What it's like to not be on the stage. To be the audience.

I reached over Bai Sa's outstretched legs and grabbed one of the puppets in file. She smacked my hand.

"What do you want?"

"Anarkali."

I asked Bai Sa to tell me a story where Anarkali doesn't die. But she told me to finish my rice and sweet potatoes, and go to bed.

"Please?" I held the damp end of her *sari*.

She pulled away the *sari* and placed a handlebar-mustached puppet in my lap. It had a bright green crown on its head. Salim.

Bai Sa squashed a stray mosquito between her palms and swallowed her yawns as she talked. Salim's love sentenced Anarkali to death. Not because she was a slave girl while he was Emperor Akbar's son, but because Akbar himself was fond of Anarkali. In fact, she was one of his many wives. That's the story of father, son, and pomegranate blossom.

"Funny how his mind, body, heart, and soul belong to him." Bai Sa studied Salim's tasseled crown. "And so does the entire Mughal Empire. But what does not belong to him are these." She pulled up the strings attached to the puppet's arms and waist, strong white cotton threads that had frayed and discolored over the years. Salim stood up to look at me.

"It's the same for him everywhere in the world," she said. Even in Moscow, Bulgaria, Denmark, Canada, Swin-der-land, Indonesia, London, Japan, Paris, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Dubai. She twirled her fingers, and he did a little dance.