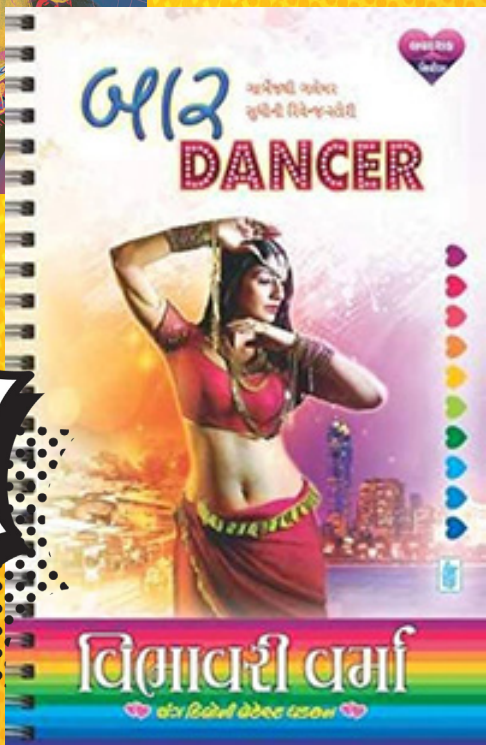




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An Excerpt from

BAR DANCER

by Vibhavari Verma

translated by Vishwambhari S. Parmar

~ 1 ~

“The lift is under repairs,” said the Marathi liftman, revealing tobacco-stained teeth. Parvati felt like punching them out of his mouth.

She had to go through shit like this every day. Her knees had been aching for the past week. Now, as if that weren't enough, there was the broken lift to deal with. And Usha Madam, who lived on the seventh floor, would be after her the moment she reached: “Why are you late again, Parvati? How many times have I told you, if you want to keep working here, you need to manage your time...”

Today, she was almost ready to tell that bitch that she could settle her account and keep the bloody job! *The same nonsense every day... Your house isn't the only one I work at. There's Sharma Madam on the fifth floor, Gupta Shethani on the fourth, and that creepy bastard Chowdhary from D Block as well.*

Parvati started climbing the stairs of the apartment building. What other option did she have?

Despite sweeping floors and doing dishes at dozens of houses, Parvati barely scraped a living. Her own 10-by-12 foot *kholi* cost her seven thousand in rent. And in addition, she had a daughter to raise.

By the time she reached the seventh floor, she was panting. Her knee had begun smarting. She knew Usha Madam would start eating her head the moment she opened the door. But she had no choice other than to listen to her carping. After all, she was the one who paid Parvati the most.

Wiping her sweat with the loose end of her sari, she rang the bell. The door opened, but apparently, the mistress of the house wasn't in a mood to bicker today. From what Parvati could tell from her expression, she was fuming with anger.

What the hell was the matter?

Parvati went inside, took a broom and began sweeping the drawing room. Usha Madam was very particular about cleanliness. If she spotted even a tiny mote of dust, all hell would break loose. Perched like a hawk on the ornate swing-bench suspended from the ceiling, she would keep a keen eye on you as you cleaned.

But today she was engrossed in the newspaper, reading something intently. Her eyebrows were furrowed. What could it be about? Parvati inched closer to her as she cleaned and peeked at the paper. But she had only studied till the seventh grade, and that too in Marathi medium. She couldn't make any sense of the Gujarati newspaper that the mistress was reading.

Just then, Usha Madam folded the newspaper and said, "Parvati, did you hear? Mumbai's dance bars are being reopened..."

Parvati, startled, stopped what she was doing.

Could this Usha Madam have learned that I too was a bar dancer at one point of time? It had been eight years since all the dance bars closed down... Usha Madam knowing was one thing, but if the residents of the other flats learned about her past, she would lose *all* her jobs!

Usha Madam still seemed to be angry. "Fine, do it," she mumbled to nobody. "Open them up again, those bazaars of degeneracy, go right ahead..."

Parvati had never seen Usha Madam in this state before. She often got angry, of course, but her face would usually remain as hard as a plaster of paris statue. Today, the veins in her temple looked close to bursting.

Parvati kept the broom aside.

“What’s in the news, Madam? *Bole toh*, is it something concerning?”

“Not concerning – devastating!” Usha Madam crumpled the newspaper and stood up. “My husband was crazy for a bar dancer, you know. He would lavish tens of thousands on her every day! We used to have two apartments more luxurious than this one. That too, not here in Borivali, but in Juhu! And he squandered them on that whore! He was so infatuated, he bought her a new flat in Ghatkopar. Even today, that... that... *snake* lives there.”

Parvati couldn’t understand why Usha Madam was venting to her as if she were a close friend. *Perhaps she doesn’t really have any other friends...*

“At long last, I managed to free him from the clutches of that nautch girl.” She wiped the corner of her eye with her starched white cotton sari. “But Parvati, if the dance bars open again...”

Parvati didn’t say anything. She continued working in silence.

Yes, she too had been a bar dancer. She had had a lot of male attention, but she had never done... *that* kind of work. On the contrary, she herself had fallen into a trap laid by one of her admirers.

She moved from mopping the floor to washing the utensils, still troubled by memories of how her life had been before. How she had made one mistake after another...

“Listen, Parvati.” Usha Madam stopped her just as she was leaving the house, after finishing all the chores. “There’s a new lady who has moved into B Block—Tarana Madam. She’s looking for a new maid. You understand? I’ve given her your name. Go and meet her today.”

“Alright, Madam. Which floor?”

“Three. *Trije male*. Third floor. In the B Block,” she repeated. “Will you remember or do I need to write it down for you?”

“Why wouldn’t I remember?” Parvati mumbled, as if she were replying to an entirely different question.

* * *

Her knee was still throbbing. Sharma Madam, who lived on the fifth floor, had a house not unlike a dunghill. Clothes strewn about wherever you looked. You'd find toys scattered on the ground, shoes lying in the bedroom, socks in the kitchen... and every 10-15 days, the dustbin would mysteriously disappear.

As you entered the house, you'd see Sharma Madam in front of the telly, munching on something. Whether it was morning or afternoon, both her serials and her mouth would be continuously switched on. Thankfully, it wasn't necessary to be quite so careful with the cleaning here. Parvati just had to quickly tidy up the mess, mop the floors, and wash the dishes under the tap. Then she would make half a cup of tea for herself and a full cup for Sharma Madam.

And as she sipped her tea, Sharma Madam would tell her the plots of all the shows she was watching. It would all get mixed up in Parvati's head. She didn't have a TV at home, so this 15-to-20-minute-long entertainment suited her quite well.

Today, though, she wasn't as interested in entertainment as she was in the news.

As the commercial break started, Sharma Madam put the cup to her lips and drew a loud sip from it. "Why, Parvati," she said in Hindi, "you've added ginger and all to the tea! Even the masala is just perfect. How come?"

"Nothing special, Madam," Parvati replied, straightening the *chhedo* of her sari. Her Hindi was much coarser than her employer's. "I hadn't been able to find the bottle of ginger the past four days, na? Well I found it today. From Chhotu's school bag!"

The fat woman began laughing, her paunch shaking. "From the school bag!"

Encouraged by her good humour, Parvati began, "Um... Madam, the dance bars are going to open again, right? That's what I heard. Is it true?"

Sharma Madam made a face in disgust. “How does it matter? You can watch even lewder dances on the TV itself! I make my Sharmaji sit here in the drawing room and serve him beer! The kids also dance alongside...”

After finishing her tea at Sharma Madam’s, Parvati went up to Gupta Shethani on the fourth floor. This woman was lounging on the bed as usual; she seldom talked to Parvati. But Parvati’s mind was still buzzing with questions. Were the dance bars really going to open again?

There was no way around going to that pervert Chowdhary’s place in D Block. The ache in her knees had subsided a little, but Chowdhary was a pain in her brain. Whether she was taking the trash out or mopping the floors, his lustful eyes would be trained directly towards her chest... The sleaze! Fortunately, the 50-55 year old man hadn’t done anything beyond gaping at her. He had never even dared ask her how she was, let alone try to grab her hand or anything. He was a widower who ate from tiffin boxes that were delivered every day, so there were never any dishes to clean; but Parvati would do his laundry for him. Chowdhury had never made any suggestive comments while she worked, but still, that stare...

Parvati was again reminded of her days at the dance bar. Back then, under those colourful lights, there were many who would stare lustily at her undulating body. What’s more, those assholes would grab her hand, inch up close, shower her in banknotes, send flying kisses her way, wink at her, and ask: *Wanna come home with me?*

But those stares were different from Chowdhary’s. Whenever she entered his flat, she felt like she was a pigeon and Chowdhary a tomcat waiting in ambush. Who could say when he would pounce?

At least Chowdhary was honest in terms of money. He would pay her without complaints. Two months back, when her daughter was seriously ill with pneumonia, he had been the one to extend her an advance of 5000 rupees for the medication, that too without her having to ask for it. No other maid was willing to work for him. They’d say, “He’s a vulgar man, the bastard...” But Parvati needed the money.

After finishing the work at Chowdhary's there were four more households to visit. By the end of it, she was bone-tired. The pain in her knee was unbearable. The Sindhi madam from the fourth floor of C Block had given her the leftovers from last night—some spicy and sour *kadhi* and some *poori-chat*. Parvati was very hungry, so she sat on her haunches against the wall and wolfed it down. But just half an hour had passed when she began to regret eating it. Sour food always affected the joints. A painful throb passed through her knee.

Parvati couldn't stop herself from moaning in pain.

* * *

It was already one in the afternoon by the time she finally reached Tarana Madam's flat on the third floor of B Block and rang the bell. In half an hour, she would have to do the rounds again, this time to clean the afternoon dishes. There was no time to rest her leg.

As the door opened, she couldn't help but stare at the woman who was supposed to be called Tarana Madam.

Arrey, this was Tahira! A close friend from back when she used to dance at Shetty's bar!

She was about to greet Tahira with "*Saaali* Taahi!" but stopped herself when she saw the calmness of Tarana Madam's face. The Tarana of today was drastically changed from the Tahira that she used to be. The old Tahira used to be quick as a slippery fish and as chirpy as a bulbul. But this woman? She was cool and collected, like a "ma'am" from some high-fi society. She wore a milky-white embroidered kurti paired with blue capri pants. Having opened the door, she stood in the doorway, gathering her hair into a bunch at the back of her neck.

"What do you need?"

"You needed a maid, didn't you say?" Parvati said, softly. "Usha Madam from C Block told me to come meet you."

"Hmm... what's the name?"

"Usha Madam."

“Arrey, not her name, yours!” Tahira leaned against the wall and playfully looked her up and down.

“That I haven’t told you yet,” Parvati chuckled.

“So tell me na?” Tahira laughed as well.

“I am... Parvati. *Bole toh*, Paro.” Parvati deliberately let slip her old name: “Paro.”

The name did have an effect, though rather slowly. At first, Tahira looked her over from head to toe again, and then intently stared at her face. She looked at the places where Parvati had accumulated some fat, then looked at her face again and almost screamed:

“*Chyaaila!* Parooooo?” Tahira pinched Parvati on her exposed waist. “The Paro from Shetty’s Diwana Bar?”

Parvati lowered her face and draped her sari over her head. “Yes, Madam.”

“*Abbey*, *Madamwali*’...” Tahira dragged her inside. “How many years has it been? Where do you live? What do you do?”

“Well, you can see,” Parvati said dully. “This is what I do. A maid’s job.”

For Tahira, it was a surprise. Both friends had been dancers together; one was now working as a maid, and the other owned a luxurious flat. There was bound to be a gulf between them.

Tahira laid a hand on Parvati’s shoulder and asked, “And where’s that lover of yours? That Zulfi?”

Parvati lowered her eyes in shame. “Tahira, he left me and ran off to Dubai ages ago.”

“Oh...” Tahira patted her back. “But you were expecting, na?”

“It was a girl,” Parvati’s eyes were glistening now. “She’s with me. Jamuna goes to school.” She pronounced it *iskool*. “She is five years old now. She’s all I have to live for.”

By the time she finished, tears were streaming down her cheeks. Tahira pressed her close. She let Parvati cry a while.

Later, as she poured Parvati a glass of lemon juice from the fridge, she asked, “Tell me then, wanna become a dancer again? The bars are going to re-open...”

“What even, Tahira,” Parvati gave a hollow laugh. “Have you looked at my body? How will I be able to dance?”

Tahira sat down beside her. She put a hand on Parvati’s shoulder and looked her in the eyes. “Parvati, do you want Jamuna to study or not?”

At that moment, a fledgling hope sparked to life in Parvati’s eyes. Could it be actually possible?

✎ 2 ✎

Tahira’s question put Parvati deep in thought. It had been eight years since they had danced together at Shetty’s Diwana Bar. But today?

Today, Tahira was calling herself “Tarana”—*melody*. And she was the owner of a lavish flat, while Parvati lived from hand to mouth, cleaning people’s houses. She had put on weight and there was a constant ache in her knees. Her lover, Zulfi, had fled to Dubai, leaving her all alone. All she had in life were poverty, hardship, and her sickly five-year old, Jamuna.

“Dance?” Parvati looked at Tahira and gave a weak smile. “Just look at my body. How can I dance with this?”

Tahira looked into Parvati’s eyes and asked, “Do you want your daughter to study or not?”

At that moment, a vibrant dream sparked to life in Parvati’s eyes. Jamuna as a grown-up... as a graduate... with an important job, maybe an officer...

“But—do you really think we could make it happen? Tahira,” she said, “my bad luck is very bad. It’s sure to ruin everything!”

“Your bad luck?” Tahira faltered, getting sentimental. “Parvati, did I come to Mumbai carrying any good luck with me? *You* were my good luck, Paro...”

Parvati was reminded of that fateful night about ten years ago. It must have been around 1:30 AM; Shetty’s Diwana Bar had just closed for the night. She’d been making her way home through a deserted street in

Andheri—“home” being just a kholi that she rented with two other girls. They all made their livings as dancers, working at three separate bars.

She had just followed a turn in the road when she heard someone scream: “Help...!”

She turned around and saw a delicate girl in a Punjabi dress being chased by two men. As soon as the younger girl neared Parvati, she clung to her desperately. “Save me! Please, save me! Or else these men will—”

Before the girl could say anything further, two men clad in black T-shirts had caught up with her. One of them levelled a blade at them. “Ay saali, move aside. This is our *maal*.”

“Maal?” Parvati lost her cool. “*Abey bhadve*, who the hell are you calling a maal?”

“That girl hiding in your lap? That’s our property. Now, let her go, or else...”

“Or else what?” Parvati barked, pulling the girl behind her and placing her hands on her hips. “What are you gonna do, huh?”

The fellow answered with his knife, moving to attack Parvati. But she was ready for him. She closed her fist around the blade and pulled it towards herself. Blood gushed out of the wound, but Parvati braced herself, her jaw clenched. She forced the knife out of the man’s hand and then slashed at his stomach.

The attack left an eight-inch-long gash in his belly.

His eyes widened in fear at the deluge of blood pouring out of his midsection. He began running away, and as soon as his companion saw him running, he made for it too.

“Abey wait, saale bhadve!” Parvati chased after them, clutching the knife in her bloodied hand.

Tahira had begun living with Parvati from that night onwards. Her story was a weird one. A promise of marriage had made her run away from Muzaffarabad with her lover, Shakeel. After some colourful nights in a cheap hotel, he had sold her off. Tahira had overheard him making the deal over a call, so she had run away. She had been running for her life in this strange city for over four days now. Had she not run into Parvati that night, then... She shuddered to think about it.

The next day, Parvati had taken her to Jagannath Shetty, the proprietor of Diwana Bar. “Shetty Sa’ab, please take her on. Or else she’ll be ruined...”

Magnanimously, Shetty had engaged her as a dancer at the bar. But later, Parvati was to learn that he wasn’t playing quite as straight as he pretended. On the one hand, he had lodged a police complaint on their behalf against Tahira’s pursuers; but on the other, he had bullied a broker from the red-light district into making a deal with him. And for the next four years, he would deduct an extra 10% as commission from Tahira’s earnings.

“Just think, Parvati. If you hadn’t been there that night then, saali, where would I have ended up?” Tahira said. “You were the one who brought some good luck into my life...”

Parvati was yet again consumed by her thoughts. *Is this even a life?* While Tahira had turned into Tarana Madam, Parvati had come seeking employment as a maid to the very flat that Tahira owned! *What good luck? And, saalu, what bad luck?*

When Zulfi had been going mad after her at the Diwana Bar, she had thought her luck was great. Tahira would warn her time and again, “There is no trusting the male species, Parvati. That Zulfi is a fraud. Do you really think he’ll agree to marry you?”

But Zulfi did marry her. *Bindaas*, just like that. He was Muslim, she was Hindu, but it didn’t matter. That night, all the dancers at the bar had collectively thrown a party for her. They’d danced away the entire night, out on the streets. Shetty had said, “Parvati, do visit the bar sometime...”

Then Zulfi had grabbed Shetty’s throat in a mock chokehold and said, “Saale Shetty, if I spot Parvati in your bar again, you’ll be dead.”

Parvati had bid her final adieu to Diwana Bar and the world of bar dancing. She’d moved in with Zulfi to a cheap flat they’d rented in Mahim. Though he had given up his visits to the bar after their wedding, he couldn’t let go of his drinking. He worked with a pharmaceutical company, but as time went on, his commissions became less and less.

Even as Parvati stayed home pregnant with their child, Zulfi took to spending more time on the streets.

One day, Parvati learnt that the cops had taken him away. It turned out Zulfi had begun dealing illegal drugs instead of medicines! Even worse, he had become an addict himself. When Parvati was in the eighth month of her pregnancy, her husband was moving in and out of jail.

The day she gave birth to Jamuna in a government hospital in Mahim, Zulfi hadn't even made an appearance. She'd learnt a week later that the worthless jerk had fled to Dubai.

Marriage had ruined Parvati's life. Meanwhile, Tahira? She had somehow become Tarana Madam! Who could *she* have married?

While these questions swirled around in her head, clouds had begun gathering in the sky outside.

Just as Parvati was about to say something, Tahira's expensive phone began chiming a musical ringtone. As soon as she saw the name that appeared on the screen, Tahira instantaneously transformed back into Tarana. A mischievous smile began playing on her lips.

"Hi, Jaanu... where are you?" She spoke in English, a mock petulance in her tone, then switched to Hindi. "I've been waiting so long for your call, sweetheart..."

Tarana walked outside to the balcony as she talked. Parvati stared at her, feeling envious. What a sweet and affectionate act she was putting on for the person on the call! She would call him "Jaanu" at times, and at others it would be "Munnuuuu" or "Dear Darling" or even "My naughty animal," all the while making kissing noises into the phone. Sometimes love, sometimes annoyance, sometimes anger, and sometimes an overflowing tenderness... There were so many different *taranas* in Tarana's voice!

It was half an hour later when Tahira got off the call. The glow hadn't receded from her face yet.

"Who was that?" Parvati asked. "Your husband?"

"*Nahi re!*" Tahira made a face in disgust. "What husband? When did I get married, huh? That *toh* was my lover."

"Lover?" Parvati's eyes widened in disbelief.

“Well, he’s the one who gave me this flat.” Tahira’s eyes reflected mischief. “So I should give him this much attention at least, right?”

Parvati was baffled. “You mean –”

“Arrey, you won’t understand... I have four lovers, currently.” Tahira got up and went into the kitchen. “*Bol*, what will you have? Tea? Coffee?”

Parvati still couldn’t make sense of things. Tahira hadn’t married, had four lovers, and one of them had bought her an apartment which couldn’t have cost less than 30 or 40 lakhs. So, what was it that Tahira did for a living?

Tahira could sense her confusion. “Parvati, didn’t I always tell you? The male species is not to be trusted. But you were in love with Zulfi, no? Meanwhile I was well acquainted with the *halkataai* of the likes of Shakeel. And even Shetty just sold me off, didn’t he? There was only one thing that I could see in all the men who frequented that bar—lust. And Shetty profited from all that lust. I learnt the entire game from the bar itself. Parvati, you were naïve at the time. You thought that the customers were showering coins on you because they were impressed by your dancing. And even from all that money, we were only allowed to keep 40% for ourselves while Shetty would snag the rest. Besides, each lecherous customer kept trying to make direct contact with us dancers anyway. That’s it. I saw a chance there, and grabbed it!”

“You mean that you traded away your body during the day...?”

“Not the body, silly, the attraction for the body!” Tahira smirked. “Every man’s mind operates in the same direction. Saalo, he could become a husband, a father, even a grandfather, and there would remain the very same itch in the back of his head. Just keep bothering that spot and you can drive them mad! A man who’s crazy with lust is ready to give you anything just to get that itch scratched. You need to understand one thing, Parvati: a lust-crazed man will readily spend lakhs of rupees on you. But once his desires have been met, you won’t be worth two peanuts to him.”

“That means, Tahira, you...” Parvati spoke, with great effort. “You earned so much simply by playing this game of lust?”

“Men don’t want love. They just want the appearance of love.” Tahira poured steaming hot coffee into two cups. “Once the wedding’s over, have you seen any wife make a show of love? As soon as her husband comes home, she’s ready with seventy different things to complain about! If he dares go out, she’ll call him dozens of times. ‘Where are you? What are you doing? When will you get back?’ Saali, is this the way to talk? Parvati, the dude I was talking to right now, he calls me four times a day. If he fails to, then I call him. I don’t just talk about love, Parvati. I also talk about sex over the call! What wife would ever talk about such things? Parvati, I’m not selling my body; I’m selling a falsehood. They get my body only after I’ve made them suffer long enough!”

Parvati was speechless. Had Tahira—as in Tarana Madam—been minting money this way for the past eight years? If she had four lovers right now, how many men had she ensnared in the past? Even Usha Madam’s husband must have fallen prey to some other Tarana or Tarika like this one, right?

“Tahira, you’re saying that the dance bars are being reopened and that I should become a dancer again... But is all of this what I’m becoming a dancer for?”

“You are crazy... *ekdum yedi!*” Tahira couldn’t help laughing. “Can’t you even do this much math?”

“What math?”

“Just try to understand this,” Tahira gestured for Parvati to sit on the sofa. “How much do you earn, even working ten jobs a day? Half of that must be spent in paying off the bills. How much do you get to keep for yourself from what’s left? Not even a new sari every two months, I bet. On the other hand, even if you just perform at the dance bars—no need to get involved in any other *jaffa*—even then you’ll end up earning 500 to 1000 a day! Just use your brain, *yaar!*”

Parvati began mulling this over. She’d only studied till the seventh grade; her calculations were bound to be off. But even if she were to earn what she used to eight years ago, she’d easily save a thousand or two each month. On the other hand, who would look at her arthritic knees and heavy figure and decide to employ her at a dance bar?

Parvati was about to voice her thoughts when Tahira's phone began ringing again. "Yes, yes... you got it... alright... done." She got off the call and grabbed Parvati by her shoulders, eyes gleaming with mirth.

"So tell me, Paro, will you come along for a dance tour to Dubai?"

"Dubai?" Parvati asked, uncomprehending.

"There's a wedding happening. With a lot of pomp and show, apparently! They're sending six girls from here. You go on a plane, return on a plane, enjoy yourself at a hotel and just put up a dance for four nights. And then you come home! So, will you do it?"

"But... do you think I'll be able to?"

"Why wouldn't you be able to?" Tahira was bouncing with excitement now. "I will teach you, na. We still have fifteen days before the trip."

"All that is fine, but a foreign country... what if some *aisa-vaisa* business happens?"

Tahira read the fear in Parvati's eyes and threw the phone on the sofa. "There's no chance of any *aisi-vaasi* baat happening. After all, it's your Zulfi who is getting married!"

Just then, lightning flashed across the cloudy sky.

"Zulfi?"

"Yes. Get this into your head, okay? All men are just the same."

Outside, the clouds burst into a heavy downpour.

✎ 3 ✎

Just as a booming thunderclap shook the overcast sky, realisation shot through her like lightning.

"Yes, Zulfi!" Tahira said, "Your lover, your darling, your husband, Zulfi! He's getting married in Dubai..."

Parvati went numb. *Saalo, that scoundrel Zulfi! Didn't turn up even when I was giving birth in that government hospital, and a week later he left for Dubai without the slightest care or concern for me or our sickly child. In*

all these years, I haven't received a single phone call from him... and now it turns out the pig is getting married again!

"You need to understand one thing," Tahira said, laying a hand on Parvati's shoulder, "men are all the same. Your Zulfi wasn't some romantic Majnun from the old tales either..."

"But Tahira," her voice shook with suppressed pain and rage. "What can I even do?"

Parvati's eyes had filled to the brim with tears of helplessness and disappointment. Tahira wiped them off with the palm of her hand.

"There's so much you can do!" Tahira said. "You can spit on his face, kick him in the crotch, pull his pants down in front of all his guests in the middle of the celebration! Parvati, this is your chance... a once in a lifetime chance..."

Once in a lifetime, Parvati mused, a bitter smile on her lips. What sort of life was this? What sort of time?

"So, Parvati, what do you say?"

Tahira's voice was getting lost amid the thunderous downpour outside. Parvati was deep in thought. She desperately wanted to go to Dubai as a dancer, and at the very last instant give Zulfi a stinging slap in front of all of his guests. But was that even possible?

"Tahira, just look at my body," she said, defeat in her voice. "This bloody knee is always aching. I can't dance anymore. I've forgotten everything."

"But I'll teach you, na."

"But passport also I don't have."

"You just say yes, and leave the rest to me." There was an enthusiastic glimmer in Tahira's eyes. But Parvati was still unsure.

"Tahira, yaar..." Parvati broke down, "I... all this is just not in my destiny..."

"Destiny?" Tahira took Parvati's hands in her own. "You see all these fate-lines on your palms? There's one more crease in the mix. And that, Parvati, is the line of my fate."

Tahira pointed out the scar that had been left behind by the knife-wound from that fateful night. "You grabbed the blade with your bare

hand in order to defend me against those goons. You remember, right? And just like that, my fate turned around completely. That's why, Parvati, your palm holds the line of my destiny as well. I, too, have a claim to that line."

"But Tahira, how will we arrange everything within fifteen days?"

"I'm here na?" Tahira reassured her, taking Parvati's face in her hands. "All you need to do is say yes..."

Parvati couldn't help but stare at her friend. This woman who could make a dozen men dance on her fingertips – what did she really want? Was this some twisted revenge against Shakeel for manipulating her and selling her to those bastards? Or did she plan to show Parvati the real character of men so that she would join her in the kind of life she was leading?

"Tahira... I need some time to think. Give me till evening to make up my mind."

When she exited the B Block lift, her mind a whirlwind of emotions, the rain-heavy clouds were still raging against the sky.

* * *

She had to pick up Jamuna from school.

She fetched her umbrella from where she had stowed it in the security guard's cabin, and opened it to shield herself from the rain. Water dripped through a hole in its fabric. The roads were flooded with streams of gushing water from overflowing gutters. Parvati tucked her sari in the back, Marathi style, strung the handle of her umbrella through her slippers, and started on the path to Jamuna's school.

When she reached the municipal school, she found the grounds filled with rainwater. There was no noise to be heard. All the doors and windows were shut. The watchman sat on the platform outside the office, smoking hash from a chillum with a few other men. Upon seeing Parvati, he gave her a questioning look.

"My daughter Jamuna...?" Parvati asked.

“Don’t know. All the kids left ages ago...” He took a puff and let out a thick cloud of smoke.

Thinking that Jamuna must have gone home, Parvati started towards her basti. The storm was getting wilder by the minute. Till now she’d been walking on asphalt roads, but as she drew nearer to the basti, the condition of the road worsened. Usually, it was a rough path pockmarked with pits—that would have been fine. But now, in the rain, she could hardly make out a road at all!

There were rows of tents and *kuchcha* huts on either side, and in the middle a brown stream of dirty, sloshing rainwater. The water dripping through the hole in her umbrella had almost drenched her torso, and sheets of rainwater had soaked the rest of her clothes. The water in the street came up to her thighs.

With great difficulty, Parvati managed to reach her kholi at last. About a foot and a half of the wooden door was submerged in the water. Parvati scanned the street for her daughter for as far as her eyes could see, but to no avail. *Where could that weakling have gone?* Just two months ago, she’d fallen ill with pneumonia and cost Parvati 5000 rupees in medical bills. *Must have gotten drenched today also... another 5000 gone just like that...*

Hands shaking with anger, she opened the second-rate lock of her kholi. The scene inside worsened her spirits. Every object in the room was soaking wet. The roof was leaking from seventeen different places. Kitchen utensils floated at one end of the room, and at the other were pages from Jamuna’s schoolbooks...

Oh God! Where is that girl?

Leaving the room she saw Ismail Chacha who lived across the street from her. He was standing in the rain, holding Jamuna in his hands. The child’s head and legs were covered in bandages.

“Haay haay! What happened to her?”

“The school had closed early...” Ismail Chacha replied. “Your daughter must have run to cross the road to avoid getting wet, but a bike crashed into her...”

Parvati was feeling dizzy.

“The bastard got away, and none of the passers-by even stopped to check on her. Good thing I was heading home from that direction...”

Parvati took Jamuna into her own hands. The poor thing was drenched to the bone, shivering from fear and cold. “Jamuna, how did this happen?”

“Her head isn’t too bad, but she’s broken her leg,” Ismail Chacha said. “The doctor put on some bandages, but you’ll have to take her to the hospital to get the plaster done... I already paid for the bandages, don’t worry.”

Ismail Chacha had taken care of the bandages, but how would she manage the hospital bills? Jamuna’s teeth had begun chattering. Poor child! She was already so weak to begin with, and now she comes home with a fractured leg!

Parvati came back inside and stood staring at the mess in her room. Her daughter’s skeletal body was slumped in her arm, and around her, the pots and pans bobbed in the rainwater.

This was the last straw.

“Saaalo Zulfi, you bastard!!!” she screamed.

But amid the thunderous downpour, her voice couldn’t even reach her neighbours’ doors.

* * *

It rained the entire afternoon. Jamuna’s state was worsening. Parvati had somehow managed to sit her down on a plastic chair with the fractured leg resting on a teapoy. She was shivering more and more as time passed, and her teeth wouldn’t stop chattering.

After a frantic search through her tin suitcase, Parvati found a set of her daughter’s clothes that had escaped getting soaked, and somehow managed to get Jamuna into them. The floodwater had risen by another half foot. Jamuna’s eyes had a bewildered look in them.

Parvati was afraid that the child might faint anytime now. But where could she take her amid such heavy rains? There was a Bihari doctor down the lane who sat at his clinic from 5 PM every day...

The rain slowed down around 4 o'clock, but continued in a steady drizzle. After another half an hour, when it had stopped completely, Parvati opened the door and stepped outside. Dirty, mucky water filled the streets as far as she could see. Everyone in the neighbourhood was carrying their belongings on their heads and preparing to find some other accommodation. A padlock hung from Ismail Chacha's front door. Her next-door neighbour Mohan, and his neighbour Ramlakhan, had also already left with their families.

An eerie silence filled the street. Muddy water soundless lapped at her feet.

That Bihari doctor must have opened his clinic by now. Parvati contemplated taking Jamuna to the clinic. But how? One of her legs was practically useless.

There was only one way left. Parvati hefted her daughter onto her back and began walking.

By the time they reached the clinic, Parvati was exhausted. Bad enough the streets were flooded; on top of that, she had no way to make out if she was about to step into a pit or a drain. And the child on her back kept losing her balance and flailing in the most unexpected ways.

The doctor made her lie down and gave her a useless injection. Then, handing Parvati four packets of different-coloured tablets (12 each), he simply said, "150 rupees."

Parvati loosened the knot in her sari and took the amount from a plastic bag.

"Bring her tomorrow morning for a follow up," the Bihari said, taking the money.

"Dagtar Babu, I have a request," Parvati joined her hands before him. "Can you keep my daughter in the hospital for the night? There's nowhere for her to sleep at home."

"Arey no no... is this a dharamshala or something?" he said in Bhojpuri, making a face. "If I agree to keep your daughter, then the entire mohalla will be clamouring to get in."

That left one solution. Tahira.

Setting Jamuna down on the hospital bench, Parvati tied her sari Marathi-style again, and set out. She cursed her fate. After all these years she had finally met her dearest friend again, but she was stuck working as a maid in her flat! And then, before she was even assured of that employment, she would have to beg Tahira for help with her daughter!

Parvati reached the apartment, ruminating on the games her bad luck was playing with her, when her destiny took yet another unsavoury turn. She hadn't even crossed the main gate when she saw Tahira in an expensive car with a man in a suit, sitting as close to him as was humanly possible.

Parvati was looking not at the car, but at Tahira. And Tahira? Her gaze was glued to the man's chest. Expert in seducing men as she was, Tahira-Tarana sat nestled in the man's arm in such a sexy fashion that Parvati immediately understood...

Yes, Parvati understood that the rain had awakened the man's lust with such a fury that it would be morning before she could expect Tahira to be back home.

The car had left the gate. Now what? Parvati didn't even have Tahira's number.

It was 10 in the night when, after finishing all her chores in the various apartments, she finally returned to the basti. Poor Jamuna was still sitting on the wooden bench on the platform outside the clinic. But at least her fever had come down.

Parvati heaved her onto her back. There was no way to light a cooking fire at home. She packed vada-pav from one of the basti's tacky eateries.

But upon reaching home, Parvati had no answer to the question that kept nagging at her... the question of where to sleep.

In the end, she managed to make it through the night sitting in the plastic chair, with Jamuna sprawled in her lap.

* * *

Parvati was up the whole night.

The rain had made the temperature fall all over the city, but a fire burnt in her mind. Who the hell was responsible for this situation? Her finances were shit, the kid's doctors were shit, even her own body had gone to shit...

She had somehow survived the day, even with that ache in her knee. But how long could she go on like this?

Burning with rage, her mind kept bringing up the same face again and again: Zulfi's face.

Tahira had been right. "Saale, all men are just the same..." She hadn't hated him as much when he'd left a week-old Jamuna behind and fled to Dubai as she loathed him today.

"This is it. It's enough, Zulfi." By dawn she had made up her mind. "I am coming to Dubai... to get some answers from you!"

to be continued...

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