

The Benediction

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The voice murmured softly again: "I am hungry. Please give me some money". Sohrab tried to shut out the voice but it now acquired fingers and plucked at his shoulder: "I am hungry.." He pulled away from her grasp and tried to pull down the window, but it was stuck. It would not move.

"Hey Ram! Those *Bawajis*. They are so rich, why don't they look after their poor?"
"Yes, yes they have so much money in their charities. It is a disgrace. The poor woman. Here take this".

Sohrab turned around to look at the men in the seat behind him but they had returned to their own conversation. The bus was still immobile in the traffic. The woman reached up again and touched his shoulder. The bus moved forward with a lurch just as Sohrab got to his feet and started making his way to the exit.

"What do you think you are doing Mister?" The bus conductor shouted in his ear as he pushed past him. "You cannot get off here. Wait for the stop to come":
Ignoring him Sohrab jumped off the slowly moving bus and dodging the traffic he reached the comparative safety of the pavement. The woman's eyes followed him from the other side of the road and before he turned away he saw her spitting.

He decided to ignore her, as he had been doing for the last three months, when she had first started begging at that traffic signal. But his gorge rose even as his fleeting glance took in her ragged dirty frock and the grimy hair tied in a pig tail. He self-consciously smoothed down his white shirt which had suffered from the strains of the bus commute and the day's work at the office and started walking home. Thanks to the importuning woman he was now at least two bus-stops away from his home and would have to walk for at least ten minutes.

He smoothed down his shirt again, adjusted the tie which had got lodged in a fellow commuter's bag in the bus as he had pushed his way out and started walking. Head down he focussed on the pavement and fastidiously avoided the rubbish, strewn there. As he reached a particularly big hole in the paving stones he looked up to see if he should jump over it or skirt it and his eyes met those of the huge idol of the elephant headed God, Ganesha, that had been installed yesterday in the *pandal* by the side of the road.

The god looked into his eyes and Sohrab looked back at the favourite deity of Mumbai, who was being worshipped in a ten day frenzy of music flowers and incense. The group of young men who were tending to the god and getting him ready for the evening *aarti*, noticed him.

"What are you looking at *Bawaji*? Give him some prasad boys" Their laughter broke the eye-lock between him and the god. With what he thought was a withering look of contempt at the men, he moved off quickly.

"Is that you Sohrab?", the voice floated out from the inner room as he turned the key in the lock.

He did not answer and went instead to the bathroom where he stripped off the shirt and soaked it in a bucket of water to which he carefully added a quarter teaspoon of washing powder – the good Surf powder and not the usual Nirma. He then wiped his hands on the towel that hung on the rail next to the wash basin with a clip on it to stop it from sliding to the floor and went to the kitchen.

“Is that you, Sohrab?”

“Yes, *Maaiji*. Can I make you some tea?”

“Not for me but your father will like some”.

“Where is he? Has he gone down again to chat to those *ghaatīs* at the *paan* shop? How many times have I to tell you not to let him do that?”

“I can’t stop that man. Why don’t you tell him yourself?”

He turned away from her and took his cup of tea to the small balcony and lit his second cigarette of the day. From behind the building in front of him he could see the pandal put up by the Ganesh worshippers. He put the cigarette out and went back inside just as his father turned open the latch and came in.

Mahiyar’s shirt hung outside his trousers and there was a slight smell of *bidi* smoke around him. Sohrab heard himself shrill out: “How can you smoke *bidis* with those *ghaatīs*? You a Parsi!”

The older man went inside to his wife and as he pulled off his shirt, said to her: “Rati, why don’t you ask your son to mind his own business?. I don’t smoke *bidis* with his money!”

She said nothing and went into the kitchen to prepare the evening meal.

Sohrab went back to the balcony where he lit another cigarette and as he exhaled the smoke he noticed that from the gap between the buildings opposite him, he could if he angled his head in a certain way, catch the eye of the elephant headed god.

Ganesha towered fifteen feet above the ground and his bare body had a huge paunch that rested in his lap. In three hands of his four arms, he held flowers, and quills. The hand that was free was raised, palm out, in front of the god. At his feet sat a little mouse, who was supposed to be his favoured vehicle. Piled up in front of the statue, made of plaster of paris and brightly painted, were plates filled with sweet meats of the god’s choice.

Even as Sohrab saw the rest of the god in his mind’s eye, his devotees turned on the music for the evening prayers and soon the throbbing rhythms of the drums and cymbals amplified many times over by the huge speakers, set up on either side of the god, hit Sohrab and he turned back inside his flat and shut the doors leading to the balcony.

“Tell that boy not to shut the doors. We need some fresh air”.

“Why don’t you tell him yourself? I am busy cooking”.

“Doesn’t he realise how loud that bloody music is? Is he deaf?”

“What’s wrong with them playing that music? They are only worshipping Ganapati”.

“The bloody heathens! Worshipping an elephant!”

“Rati, tell that boy I will not have him blaspheming and swearing against God in my house”.

“God? He a God? How can he compare that elephant to Ahura Mazda?”

“Allah, Ishvar, Ahura Mazda, they are all one. Tell him to get that into his stupid head”.

“Stop that Gandhian nonsense. These bloody Hindus will destroy us. We’ll have nothing left to call our own. They have taken away our banks our airlines..”

“Tell him to stop being so melodramatic. Those banks belonged to the rich *sethias*, not to us middle-class Parsis and the Tatas are not his uncles!”

“Dinner is served. Will you have two chops or one Sohrab?”

Sohrab averted his eyes from those of the god’s as he went past him to work next morning but he still caught sight of the raised hand from the corner of one eye. The giant god was mounted on a truck in readiness for the Ganesh procession. The Elephant-headed would soon be in another part of the city, Sohrab realized with relief. He just managed to avoid stepping into the hole on the pavement. At this hour there was no rubbish yet as the sweepers had just gone by but the muck in the hole remained.

The woman was more difficult to avoid and she came up to him as he stood at the traffic signal, waiting to cross the road....

[The workshop students were asked to write an ending; how close were their endings to Prof. Bharucha’s “real” ending??]