

THE BANGLE SELLER

A short story

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With a platter full of crystal bangles on her head, a bangle seller, almost always, passed before a big beige bungalow whose front wall groaned with a bulky tangle of red bougainvillea. The gate of the bungalow was manned by an old-school sturdy watchman. His gaze romantically chased the bangle seller till she had turned the corner. And then he would perch on his rickety stool and twirl his handlebar moustache. He wanted to talk to her but he could not invent a pretext. The thirty-five years old watchman was always in dark shalwar kameez and a peaked cap but did not tote a gun.

The bangle seller retraced the path in the afternoon, worn-out, her dark oval face beaded with sweat. One day she asked the watchman for a glass of water and he was too pleased to oblige.

After that day, on her return, she would make a stopover at the gate. She would chuck her stick down, place the bangle platter on the ground, and plop down under the massive green pipal that stood in the bungalow but threw its shade outside. When her sweat had dried, she would drink water from the man-size water cooler that had been planted, for the passersby, on the behest of the master of the bungalow. The bangle seller and the watchman chit-chatted in the background of chirping of the exotic songbirds that scampered in their aviary on the other side of the thick wall. One day he bought bangles from her. Then every week he would buy bangles from her.

Some days she dug into her clothes, brought out stale crumbly bread and ate it with pokaras or pickle she carried in her straw platter. She would ask the watchman to

join her but he would say that he had eaten his lunch. Sometimes he would put away something from his lunch for her.

One afternoon she was glugging water from the aluminum tumbler that was tethered to the cooler with a thin rusty iron chain when a young man pulled up his iccream trolley to drink water. The bangle seller asked the iccream boy about the prices of all the ice creams and then told him to move ahead. ‘If you did not have the money then why did you ask the price of each and every item?’ ‘Well I sell bangles, my customers not only ask the price of each type of bangles but they order me to show them the bangles. But in the end they say, “Ok. We were just checking.”

The watchman bought her a vanilla ice cream.

Two months had passed by.

One day when the bangle seller had eaten her lunch under the cool pipal the watchman asked her to sell him some bangles. ‘Who do you give the bangles to?’ she asked.

‘No one.’

‘Then who are you buying the bangles for?’

‘For you.’

‘For me???’

‘Yes.’

‘What!!! You buy bangles from me for me? This is ridiculous!’

‘Yes, I can show you, they are there in my cabin.’ He ducked into his cabin and brought a big shopping bag that was bulging with bangles. She had a good look on them, and with a thoughtful smile on her face she twiddled her beaded necklace

that was clamped around her ebony shapely neck. She stood up and dusted her faded frock.

‘You are going...wouldn’t you sell me some bangles?’ the mustached man chuckled softly.

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know...by the way why do you buy bangles for me?’

‘Because I love you.’

‘But but I am married.’

The ground shook under his soles but he managed to put a wide grin on his parched lips, ‘married...ok...well...but you look you so young. You maybe only fifteen or sixteen.’

‘Yes, I was married to my cousin two years ago.’ ‘Ok does not matter, you are still the queen of my heart.’

She did not change her routine. As usual she would come for a cool drink of water, rest in the leafy shade and chat with her appreciator and then move away.

She was not seen for four months and the watchman was worried sick and he did not know how to find his soul mate. He thought they must have moved to another city to sell their bangles. Then one grey afternoon she turned up, she was in rags and her haggard face was lined. She plonked on the ground littered with stale bougainvillea bracts. He offered her water. ‘What is wrong with you?’ he asked. ‘Nothing...I have a headache. A touch.’ She stared emptily at the ground before her. Then, with her stick, she started sweeping the papery, bougainvillea petals into a small heap. He proffered her jaleebis which the mistress of the house had given

him earlier, she pecked at the syrup-filled rings listlessly. He tried to engage her in a light talk but she looked lost. A thick sullen silence hung between them like a carrion stench and lasted for a quiet some time. Then averting her dark heavy-lidded eyes she blurted out, ‘would you give me my bangles?...the bangles you bought from me for me.’

‘No, I don’t have them on me.’

‘Did you give them to someone?’

‘No.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Will...will you marry me? My hubby died from drinking bootleg booze.’

‘Well I would have loved to but but I got hitched. Just a week ago. She is the widow of my brother, I had to say yes...he left a string of kids...’ He gave a girly giggle. She lashed the ground with her stick for a while, then stood up with a groan and placed her bangle platter on her head. ‘Ok then, goodbye,’ forlornly she wandered off and the watchman’s gaze followed her till she had turned the corner.