

Saturday Date

A Short Story

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Saturday Date

THE SHUTTERS ON the Irani restaurant allow only a trickle of light to spill onto the pavement, illuminating Mary's feet as she passes by. She stays in the shadows, hugging the battered concrete wall that borders Mazgaon Terrace. The girl trailing behind her clutches at Mary's cotton dress.

The city's night-time haze bathes the courtyard in a pallid light. A few of the surrounding windows still glow—a checkboard pattern of yellow incandescent bulbs broken in spots by the ghostly white of a fluorescent tube. Mary's hands begin to tremble and her back stiffens. She looks as if someone has tied her to an invisible sheet of plywood.

Fighting the pain, Mary raises her head. As she expected, the lady shimmers above her like vapor from a kettle, smiling encouragement. Spittle runs down Mary's chin as she takes a deep breath and throws her head all the way back. She raises her hands and cups them around her mouth.

"I went to see my dah-ling, last Saturday night."

Then the tremors begin, and flashes of light pierce her eyes. An unseen force grips her chest, squeezing air from her lungs as she continues singing words she does not know and cannot remember afterward. Her raspy vocals rise in the confines of the courtyard, ricocheting off the crumbling stone, shooting upward, aiming for the stars.

The pulsating agony in Mary's temples fades. When her vision clears, the lady is still there. Her white robe smolders with cold fire, and her blue mantle flutters in the gentle breeze. She raises a hand. Mary lowers her head and makes the sign of the cross.

The coins begin to fall, clinking on the rough concrete. The girl swoops down like a bird of prey and gathers them with swift, practiced movements. Some hit the ground near Mary's feet and roll, spinning before they come to a stop. Mary waits, trusting the child's unerring instincts.

Satisfied at last that she's gathered everything, Mary takes the girl's hand. They turn into the narrow alley that runs between the older section of Mazgaon Terrace and Prasanna, past the Bank of Maharashtra. A few of the residents of B block linger in the communal balconies, sharing drinks and cigarettes.

Mary clicks her makeshift castanets—bottle caps glued to cardboard strips—a few times before finding a rhythm. Once again, she looks up at the heavens but this time, the lady has vanished. With a slight frown, Mary begins.

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.”

A few of the onlookers whistle as they fumble in their pockets for change. As she wraps up the song by repeating the chorus, Mary realizes that she's remembered all the words.

As before, the girl sets about her task just as a boy emerges from the entrance to B block. He approaches Mary, eyes wide. She judges him to be five or six, about the same age as the girl. He stretches out his hands, which hold a newspaper-wrapped bundle.

“Mommy sent this,” he says, not raising his head.

Mary thanks him and he scampers back to the pool of light at the entrance. He throws a glance over his shoulder and manages a tentative smile. She unfolds the oil-stained newspaper to reveal a handful of *batata vadas*, still steaming, and a generous mound of green coriander chutney.

While she waits for the girl to finish gathering the coins, Mary squats on the ground outside one of the few garages that the building holds. The cool steel of the shutter provides some relief for the tense muscles in her back. She eats two of the *vadas* and offers the rest to the girl, who stuffs one, whole, into her mouth.

“Don’t do that,” Mary says, shaking a finger. “You’ll choke.”

The girl pays no heed, but her jaws work with an animal intensity. She extends two fingers, dips them in the chutney, and puts them into her mouth. Juice dribbles down on her chin, and she wipes it with her sleeve.

Then Mary hears it: the clack-clack-clack of the night watchman beating his *lathi* against the walls as he makes his rounds. He nods as he spots her cowering against the garage, and she sighs with relief. Raju Bahadur. Not Lokhande, who chased her out of the building a few weeks earlier.

“Mary aunty, how are you?”

Mary is grateful for the courtesy Bahadur extends her of speaking in his accented but clear English. The other one,

Lokhande, would always scream at her in Marathi. Her gaze follows the jagged line of the scar on Bahadur's cheek, and she shivers just a little, but the warmth in his narrow eyes comforts her. She wonders how he must have looked in his Gurkha uniform when he was stationed at Shillong. One night, in an unusual burst of talkativeness, he told her about his early retirement from the army and how he moved to Bombay, looking for a job that would supplement his pension.

The girl tugs at Mary's dress, and she gets up from her half-crouch, tensing and then relaxing the muscles in her back.

"Namaste, Bahadur ji. It's a good night." A residual ache in her temples reminds her of the lady's recent appearance. She rubs at her forehead with calloused fingers.

"I have some medicine for headaches," Bahadur says. "Very good Ayurvedic treatment. It may help you. Should I get it?"

Mary thanks him but declines. "I'll be okay. Just need some rest."

She takes the girl's hand, and they slip through the open gate. Behind them, the clack-clack-clack resumes, resonating through the alley.

Mary spreads a tattered blanket on the pavement outside a tobacco stall now closed for the night. The owner tolerates her presence as long as she leaves before he opens at dawn. She positions the girl's head on a pillowcase stuffed with the few clothes they carry and lies down beside her. After several minutes, the girl squirms and kicks Mary in the stomach. Mary begins to croon a lullaby, making up some of the words. On nights like these, she is grateful to the lady who helped her find her voice.

The visions started almost a year ago but increased in frequency over the past few months. One night, Mary crouched on the floor of the Bandra bandstand, wrestling with a stale loaf of bread. The girl lay beside her, shivering. Mary set the bread aside and cradled the girl's warm head in her lap, rocking with a gentle rhythm. The lady appeared in front of them in a flash of light. As Mary watched, she opened her mouth. Mary shivered with excitement—the lady would speak to her at last. Instead, the lady began to sing. For some reason, Mary expected to hear the *Ave Maria* or one of the hymns she'd sung at St. Magnus Church on Sundays. But the song poured forth in a language she couldn't understand. Mary knew a few words of Latin, from the older priests at the church, but this didn't sound like Latin.

The lilting melody soared, lifting Mary's spirits with it. As the girl's thrashing subsided, and her breathing grew more regular, the lady bowed her head. She extended a hand and touched the sleeping child's forehead. Mary summoned enough courage to look into the lady's eyes. Without knowing what she was doing, Mary cleared her throat and began to sing a childhood tune, as the lady nodded encouragement. As she went along, her voice gained strength, rising to a peak at the chorus.

After the vision faded, Mary saw a handful of coins and a one-rupee note at her feet.

Now Mary strokes the girl's tangled curls and reverts to the familiar song. In minutes, the girl's gentle snores reassure her, and she lies down on her rock-hard bed.

The next Saturday, Mary begins her rounds at Prasanna. She opens her performance with her trademark number, and the

scattering of spectators keep time on the wooden railings of the balconies. As she belts out the chorus, Mary shudders, and her vision blurs. The smiling lady is standing in front of her this time, feet planted on the ground, the robe billowing around her waist. She extends a hand toward Mary.

Mary reaches for it, but the lady fades into nothing. A searing pain, like a kebab skewer through her skull, brings Mary to her knees. She rocks back and forth in silence as convulsions rack her body. At length, the pain subsides to a dull ache.

“Mary aunty, are you all right?”

She opens her eyes. The boy stands in front of her, once again bearing a package in one hand. In the other, he clutches a portable radio.

Still trembling, Mary rises to her feet. She manages a shaky nod, and the boy’s expression brightens. He thrusts the food at her, as he did the week before. This time, he gazes at her from under thick eyelashes.

She calls the girl to her as the jingle of coins begins to subside. Together, they pry open the newspaper and uncover a stack of *chapatis* with a generous portion of potato *bhaji*. As the girl tears off a piece of the warm flatbread, Mary thanks the boy, who has raised the radio to his ear.

“What’s that you’re listening to?”

The boy smiles and puts the radio down, turning up the volume. “Saturday Date, aunty. Every Saturday night at ten o’clock. This is the only program on the radio that plays English music.”

Mary remembers it now. Peter used to listen to it too, when he was sober. Which wasn’t often.

“What’s your name, son?” With a twinge of guilt, she realizes that she never asked him the last time, after she accepted the food.

“Matthew.” He cocks his head at the radio. “Can you sing any of these songs?”

Mary listens to the hypnotic beat for a few moments. She shakes her head. “I’m sorry. I don’t know that song. Who is it?”

“The Bee Gees. From Saturday Night Fever.” The boy begins to dance, swiveling his hips and making awkward, thrusting gestures with his bony hands. The girl, until now focused on the task of devouring her food, pauses. She gets to her feet and walks over to Matthew, then begins to mimic his movements. Matthew claps his hands and begins to sing along with the music in a nasal voice.

Mary shakes her head but smiles. She jumps up and joins the children, stomping her feet and gesticulating with abandon. The pain has evaporated, leaving no residue. A sudden lightness overtakes her, and she convulses with laughter, something she hasn’t done for a long time.

She used to laugh a lot, before Peter started going out every night to the liquor dens. Her last memory of him surfaces, and her pulse begins to race. The dull thud of his body hitting the floor echoes in her ears.

He staggered home early that morning, cursing as he stumbled over the doormat. Some nights, Mary hoped he’d lose his way among the winding streets of Matharpacady, and completely miss their tiny flat on the upper floor of a decrepit, century-old house. She had woken moments earlier and checked on the girl before she climbed back into bed.

The bed groaned as Peter slumped beside her. The odor of stale sweat and country liquor made her gag, and she fought the urge to get up and run down the stairs, away from the flat, into fresh air.

A hand reached over, heavy on her shoulder, and fumbled at her breasts. Her body stiffened. She curled tighter so that her knees almost touched her forehead.

A growl erupted from Peter's throat. He pawed at her, mumbling something she couldn't make out.

Mary rolled off the edge of the bed onto the bare floor. She didn't know whether Peter was conscious enough to beat her, but she wasn't going to take the chance. She crept out of the bedroom into the kitchen. A diffuse beam of moonlight cast amorphous shadows on the tiled floor.

As she cowered in one corner near the trash can, light flooded the room, making her blink. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. The soft outlines of the lady gradually came into focus.

Unlike the previous times Mary had seen her, a frown creased the lady's broad forehead. She raised her right hand above her head. Light glinted off the blade of a sword. With a sudden, arcing movement, she sliced downward, severing the head of the serpent that writhed at her feet.

Mary gasped. The lady's lips compressed into a thin line as she brought the sword to rest at her side. The serpent's head rolled toward Mary and stopped. Beady eyes stared at her and its ribbon-like tongue lolled sideways from a half-open mouth. Mary shuddered at the sight of its fangs, now frozen in a snarl.

"Mary? Come back to bed, damn you!"

The vision faded. Peter's hulking shape grow larger as he stumbled toward her.

"No," she said. "I'm not coming back. Not until you sleep it off."

Peter cursed, switching to Konkani. "You'll do what I bloody well tell you."

Mary got to her feet, squeezing her body against the countertop so far that the edge bit into her back. As she groped in the shadows, her outstretched fingers found the handle of a cast-iron saucepan.

Peter's breath overwhelmed her as he reached for her. "Come back now, or I'll beat the shit out of you."

As Peter raised his fist, Mary kned him in the groin, then gripped the saucepan with both hands and brought it crashing down on his head. The crunch of metal on bone jarred her senses. Peter collapsed on the floor. She raised her hands again and delivered another blow with as much energy as she could summon.

Mary's heartbeat echoed in her ears as she raced out of the kitchen. Within a minute, she collected a few clothes and stuffed them into a pillowcase. She gathered the sleeping child into her arms, reassured by her heavy breathing, and propped her against one shoulder.

She thought about checking on Peter. A quick glance into the kitchen showed her that he hadn't moved. She slipped through the door, the girl still asleep on her shoulder.

The first week was the worst. Mary managed to make enough money begging to buy food, but she lived in constant fear that Peter would track her down as she moved from

neighborhood to neighborhood, putting as much distance as she could between herself and Matharpacady.

Over time, the fear subsided as she realized Peter would not pursue her. Less than a month later, she received word through a neighbor that the landlord had evicted Peter from the flat. Although the story was unclear, being relayed through several intermediaries before it got to her, it appeared that he'd taken the little money they had saved and used it for a bus trip back to Goa.

Only then had she returned to that part of Bombay, walking the familiar streets of Matharpacady and the rest of Mazgaon. A few who recognized her offered food, clothes, and even a few rupees. But none could provide shelter.

Now the deejay's voice breaks in, dousing the flames of Mary's memory, as he recites the names of listeners who have requested the next song. The children wait, tapping their feet. At last, the music begins, and they resume dancing, giggling with delight. Mary watches them twirl and bounce for a few more moments before a voice calls out from a window three stories above. Matthew waves goodbye, with the radio once more pressed to his ear, and disappears into the shadows near the stairwell.

A few days later, Mary pauses outside St. Magnus School, near the paradoxical rear entrance to the church that is also the front. Her slender frame slips with ease between the gates that are held ajar by a heavy chain.

Uneven stone pavers lead her to a grotto where a rusted iron tray stands. Its spindly legs seem incapable of bearing its load

of misshapen candles. The wax curls over the lip of the tray at the lowest point, frozen fingers pointing at the ground.

Mary bows her head, then raises her eyes to the statue nestled in the charcoal-gray stone. "Why?" she whispers. "Why are you doing this to me?"

The statue remains mute, her expression as cold as the marble from which she is fashioned.

"What do you want from me?" Mary asks, her voice growing louder.

A sudden light pulsates around the statue, and Mary covers her face. She falls to her knees as the stone melts away, and her familiar companion stands before her, hands outstretched.

Pain radiates through Mary's temples as she backs away. "No," she says, her voice breaking. "Tell me what you want. Why won't you speak to me?"

The lady smiles and shakes her head. Her eyes bore into Mary's.

Mary's stomach heaves, and she rises to her feet, clutching the tray for support. It yields under her weight, and she lifts her hand, fearing she will knock it free of its moorings. The lady watches, head inclined.

"Tell me," Mary shouts, as she smashes her fist on the tray. Shards of wax take flight, and the tray gives way with a nervous shriek. "Talk, damn you!"

The lady shakes her head once more and fades into the recesses of the stone wall. Once again, the marble statue watches Mary with unseeing eyes.

Mary steadies herself on the railing that surrounds the base of the grotto. She takes a few shaky steps backward. Raucous cawing breaks the silence as a flock of crows burst from the

branches of a rain tree overhead. With a last look at the statue, Mary turns away.

Outside the gate, street vendors are gathering for the school's lunch recess, and Mary spots a familiar face. Hassan, a tall man with a luxuriant mustache beckons to her. He holds out a page ripped from an old textbook that bears a handful of ripe, reddish-brown *boras*. Mary thanks him with a shy smile.

"The girl is not with you today, Mary aunty?"

She shakes her head. "She wasn't feeling well. I left her with my friend Ammabai, who also begs near Bandra station. She'll be all right. I just need to get something for her fever."

Hassan waves as she begins the next leg of her journey up Nesbit Road. She pauses at a bus stop and rests against the wooden railing for a moment. The snaking line of passengers parts to let her through with indifference. She unfurls the paper and puts a few of the plump berries in her mouth. At first, the rock salt assaults her tongue, but it is soon overpowered by the sweet, sticky juice.

A dull rumble makes her look up her as she eats the last of the *boras*. Angry clouds swirl across the sky, and the aroma of damp earth makes Mary lengthen her stride as she leaves the bus stop. As she nears Prasanna, however, the skies burst open, and she rushes through the main entrance. Beneath the shelter of the awning outside the Bank of Maharashtra, she waits. Raindrops batter the corrugated tin, loud enough to muffle the incessant honking of car horns and the roar of BEST buses on Nesbit Road. She pushes a straggling lock of damp hair out of her eyes and shuffles her feet, glancing at the others around her who have also gathered to seek refuge.

She wonders if Bahadur will be on duty tonight. Her spirits lift as she recalls the last time she saw him—Sunday night, when Lokhande was off duty.

After she finished singing, Bahadur beckoned to her. He held out a *khara* biscuit and a steaming glass of tea. The small act of compassion touched her heart, as much as Bahadur's evident discomfort did when she thanked him several times. She broke off a piece of the biscuit and handed it to the girl, who devoured it in an instant.

"Was it a good night?" The light glinted off his gold tooth.

Mary looked at the coins in the girl's cup and spread her hands. "Not good, not bad. I'm grateful for whatever I get."

Bahadur leaned closer, and his expression softened. "Have you thought about what I asked you?"

"Please, don't ask me," she said, almost spilling the tea. "It would be nice to have a place to live again. Especially for the girl. But how can I do this? Living in your flat, a single woman—*baap re*, what would your neighbors say?"

Bahadur shrugged. "They can say whatever they want. It is my flat, and I can do whatever I please with it. I will tell them you are my cousin, from Rae Bareli."

"I don't know about this thing, Raju." It slipped out before she realized she'd used his first name. Thankfully, the shadows hid her face. She adjusted the neck of her dress. "I'm very grateful for such a generous offer. But I don't know."

The Gurkha's face showed no signs that he'd noticed her blunder. He straightened up and held out a hand. "Bas. We won't talk about it. You will tell me when you are ready."

As sheets of water pour off the awning now, splattering Mary's ankles, she brushes aside images of a dry bed and a

kettle boiling on a stove. A man squeezes past her, folding his dripping umbrella and spraying her dress. With a muttered apology, he continues into the bank. Flies buzz around Mary's head, also seeking refuge from the rain, and she swats at them to no avail.

After almost an hour, the storm breaks, and a watery sun attempts to penetrate the dark monsoon clouds. The huddled mass of bodies under the awning disintegrates, and Mary steps off into a puddle. She grumbles for a moment but continues on her way, heading toward Mazgaon Circle. As she passes a faded cross chalked on a wall, she offers a silent prayer of thanks for Ammabai. The old woman is like the girl's grandmother now, and Mary, for a moment, considers just leaving the girl in her care. It would be easy enough, to head for the train station, beg for her fare, and leave the city...

She shakes her head, angry with herself for even thinking about it. She forces herself to walk faster, hoping that the pain in her calves will blot out such reprehensible thoughts. As she rounds the circle and continues up Mount Road, vendors on the pavement wag their heads and call out to her, offering children's toys, cookware, and a variety of clothing. With a glance over her shoulder—no mysterious lady is watching—she steps into the shade and comfort of Hira Medical and General Stores. The man behind the counter glares at her, his eyes taking in the stained dress with the hem hanging in tatters at her ankles. She hasn't seen him there before and backs away, clutching the glass-fronted counter at her side. Then another man, heavier and with a full-toothed grin, emerges from the depths of the storeroom.

“Ah, Mary aunty, welcome. We haven’t seen you for some time, no?”

She lets out her breath. Dadachandji, the store owner, has known her for many years. He asks about the girl, and Mary reveals the nature of her mission.

“Yes, yes, we have aspirin syrup for the childrens. Very good for the fevers. First-class, made by Alta Laboratories, here only in Khopoli.” He rummages in a cabinet and holds up a white box.

“How much?” she asks, her voice dropping to a whisper. She fingers the coins in her hand.

“Three rupees fifty paise,” he says, pushing the box across the counter.

Mary’s heart sinks. She reexamines the coins, then drops them on the counter with a clatter. “I only have two rupees ten paise.”

Dadachandji smiles again, exposing crooked yellow teeth. “No problem, aunty. Special price for you only. Two rupees ten paise.”

Her hand trembling, Mary grabs the box and stashes it away in the cloth bag—salvaged from a trash pile—that hangs from one arm. She thanks Dadachandji, who clicks his tongue and presses her to make additional purchases, even if she cannot pay at present. She declines his offer of a cup of tea. Next time, she promises.

After fighting her way through the crowds on the pavement again, she realizes she will not have enough money for the train back to Bandra. When she reaches the pedestrian bridge at Dockyard station, she settles down on the first step and extends her hand.

*

The girl's fever abates the next day, and she recovers enough of her strength by the weekend for them to return to Mazgaon.

The *kaleji-wala* outside Mazgaon Terrace is extinguishing his charcoal brazier as they approach. He tells Mary it's been busier than usual that night and offers her the scraps he would normally take home for himself. They savor the pungent mix of goat liver and udder meat, garnished with generous amounts of raw onion and lemon wedges. Mary allows the girl to lick the last of the juices from the banana leaf that serves as a plate, before they head for the side gate at Prasanna.

Mary gives the girl a signal and she scampers to the middle of the alley. Meanwhile, Mary fills her lungs and begins to sing.

At the chorus of "You Are My Sunshine," she hears a sharp cry and the crack of a *lathi* on the pavement.

"Stupid woman! Didn't I tell you not to come here again?"

Mary's pulse thunders in her ears, and she flings a hand up in front of her face. A figure emerges from the shadows, *lathi* raised above his head. Mary backs against the wall.

Lokhande towers over her. "Run, you *bhangi*," he screams, his *paan*-stained teeth bared like an angry dog. He raises the *lathi* once more and brings it down with a muffled thwack on Mary's shoulder. The girl cries out and Mary turns to her, but her foot catches on a seam in the concrete and she falls to the ground. Again the *lathi* whistles as it slices through the air. Lightning explodes in Mary's head. The world around her begins to melt away with unnerving fluidity until merciful darkness claims her.

"Mary, Mary, wake up," she hears, far away. She blinks, trying to focus on the face floating in front of her. From somewhere

behind her, the girl's ragged sobs fill her ears. They act like a bucket of cold water, and Mary jerks upright, leaning against the muscular arm that wraps around her shoulders.

"Bahadur ji?" The blurry face nods, and the arm pulls her closer. She raises a hand to the sticky patch behind her ear, then leans back against the Gurkha's chest. "What happened?"

"Don't worry," he says. The girl snuggles closer to them, and her sobs diminish. "That *bhenchod* Lokhande was on duty when I had a break. I took care of him, though. He won't be showing his face here again if I can help it. I will talk to the management first thing on Monday."

Mary sighs and tries to stand but has to lean on Bahadur for support. "Come with me," he says. "I'll get your head bandaged up."

In the wavering light of a bare bulb, Mary winces as the Gurkha cleans the wound with a clear liquid that smells like coconut arrack. She looks around the boxy room that serves as makeshift quarters for the night watchmen. A single charpoy and the folding chair on which she sits are its only furnishings. Bahadur searches through a suitcase under the charpoy. He emerges with a gauze bandage that he presses to her head, then wraps it with a strip of bright red cloth. "This will be okay for now. I should take you to a doctor, just in case."

"Bahadur ji, don't take so much trouble. Who will see me at this time of night?" She leans back in the chair, one arm around the girl.

"Dr. Rebello is home tonight. Second floor, close by. He won't mind."

Mary shrinks back at the thought of disturbing the doctor, but Bahadur insists. He turns out to be right, as the doctor

welcomes them like family. The sharp yet soothing smell of antiseptic fills the room that the doctor uses to see patients when not at his clinic. The window overlooking the courtyard admits a gentle breeze that provides transient relief from the oppressive August humidity.

Bahadur hovers over Mary as Dr. Rebello examines the bandage on her head. He mutters to himself for a moment, then compliments Bahadur on his handiwork.

“Any pain, blurry vision?” he asks, as he shines a pencil-thin light into Mary’s eyes.

She shakes her head but hesitates. Bahadur lays a hand on her shoulder and squeezes gently.

“Doctor, I do have this one problem. Hope you don’t mind, but I don’t want to trouble you...”

The doctor waves a hand. “Not at all, no problem. Please tell me.”

Once again her resolution wavers, but Bahadur tightens his grip. Warmth radiates across her shoulder.

“I have these headaches, off and on. I don’t know what causes them.”

The doctor frowns, checks her eyes again. “How long have you had them?”

“A few months. Maybe more. Sometimes, they are very severe.”

“You should have come to see me before, Mary. Anything else? Do you notice strange sounds or smells?”

She glances at her feet. “Well, I see...I have these...visions.”

Bahadur’s breath catches in his throat, and Mary turns her face away. “Never mind,” she says as she runs her fingers over the bandage. “I shouldn’t waste your time.”

“Mary, you aren’t wasting my time.” The doctor crosses the room to a cabinet above a refrigerator. “Please tell me everything you can. I may be able to help, or I can refer you to someone who will. Have you ever had any seizures?”

“I don’t know. I think, maybe a few times.” She fumbles with the hem of her dress, rolling and unrolling it between her thumb and forefinger.

The doctor returns to his seat across from her. “Now tell me about these visions.”

Mary bites her lower lip and takes a deep breath. “It sounds silly, I know, but sometimes Our Lady appears to me.”

The doctor’s expression doesn’t change. Bahadur removes his hand from Mary’s shoulder.

“Go on,” the doctor says. “How often does this happen?”

“A few times a week. Sometimes, more than once a day.”

“Any pain or bright lights during these visions?”

“The lady is usually surrounded by bright light. Often, I have pain here.” She points to her temples. “And afterwards, my back is stiff. Most of the time, it’s very peaceful. The lady smiles at me. She seems happy.”

“What does she say?”

Mary sighs. “She doesn’t talk.”

The doctor continues asking her questions, and Mary responds as best as she can, her spirits lifting a little when she finds him taking everything seriously. Not once does he laugh or tell her she’s just imagining things, as she feared at first.

He asks them to wait for a moment and leaves the room. Mary can hear the strains of a radio playing somewhere in the flat. She recognizes the voice of the deejay. It’s Saturday Date, she tells Bahadur.

The doctor returns with a glass bottle of pills and a notepad. He scribbles on the pad, tears off a sheet, and hands it to Mary.

“This is a referral to Dr. Narasimhan. He’s a neurologist at Jaslok Hospital. You know where that is?”

Mary nods. “A neurologist?”

“He specializes in studying the brain. Tumors, diseases like epilepsy.”

Mary’s pulse ratchets up and her eyes grow large. “Tumors? You think I have—”

The doctor pats her hand. “I don’t know, Mary. It’s probably nothing. But definitely get a checkup. Don’t worry, he won’t charge you anything. He and I went to medical school together—we’re old friends.”

He hands her the medication with instructions to take one pill in the morning and another at bedtime. They will help if the seizures come back, he says.

Mary rises to her feet, but her knees begin to give way. The Gurkha offers an arm, and she clings to him, her eyes moist. “Thank you, doctor. Sorry again to disturb you so late at night.”

They walk down two flights of stairs, Mary still leaning on Bahadur’s arm. When they reach the ground floor, Mary turns to him. She wipes her eyes.

“Bahadur ji—Raju?”

“What is it, Mary?”

“Yes. I will move into your flat. If you still want me.”

A broad smile creases the Gurkha’s rugged face. He throws his arms around her, crushing her against his chest. She gasps, then pushes him away with one hand, reflecting his smile.

She looks up at the night sky and the lady is there, bathed in soft light. She raises her hand in blessing. As Mary watches, her lips part.

“Go in peace,” the lady whispers.

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About the Author

Ken Doyle was born in Bombay, India, into a family with Portuguese and Anglo-Indian roots. He moved to the USA for graduate studies and currently lives in Milford, Delaware with his wife, daughter, and dog. His first collection of short fiction, *Bombay Bhel*, was published in 2013. His other projects include literary fiction and science fiction for young adults.

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