

Tulsi Baug

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“Tulsi Baug, Tulsi Baug, Tulsi Baug!” Susan screamed at the back of the rickshaw driver’s head. “Jesus, it’s your damn word. Can’t you understand? TUL-SEE B-OWG!” She leaned forward now. There was a moment of realization that she could grab a clump of his black hair and squeeze. The violence of the thought surprised her only a little, for she hated this stupid country more than anything. If it weren’t for the job that took her husband to India, she would have taken the first plane home, but she wasn’t a quitter.

She looked down then at Gretchen, who was running her tiny white fingers against the brown window. “Don’t touch that! It’s dirty.”

Gretchen pulled her hand back into her lap and smiled up at her mom in that way that sometimes caught Susan off guard, making her almost feel she couldn’t get enough air. She hardened to the feeling knowing she needed to be vigilant in this insane country of beggars and chaos and dirt. “Just don’t touch anything. I don’t want you to get sick.”

“Tulsi Baug Zaitsu. Aré Bapre,” the driver said. Susan perked up hearing the very words she had been trying to make this deaf moron understand.

“Yes, yes. Tulsi Baug. Go!” She said this as she pointed forward though she had no idea what direction it was in.

“Ho Ho, tulsi Baug. Lekin Mall kup chan ahe. Mall! M-A-LL.” Susan was annoyed that the rickshaw driver actually turned to smile at them as he spoke. She knew when she was being railroaded. She had read about the rickshaw drivers in India taking Americans to places they didn’t want to go. She read how they sometimes took advantage of white people. She reached for Gretchen and pulled her close, knowing her baby’s floating blonde ringlets around

her angel face made her a prime target for the sex trade industry in India. She had read about that too. How girls as young as Gretchen, just 5 years old, would get bought by a pimp and how men wanted things like that. “Tulsi Baug!” She yelled again. “Go!”

If she had to be in this God forsaken country for another week, she wasn’t going to be screwed by the ignorant locals. She would go to the shopping street, what the guidebooks called the *ultimate shopping experience for ladies*, and she would barter. She had been practicing it in her head. How she would say, “No, too expensive,” and walk away. Then they would run after her and beg her to buy more jewelry and clothes for mere pennies. She would show them not to screw white people just because she had more than they. After all, she reminded herself, she worked hard for what she had.

She leaned back in the seat slightly and looked out. “Okay Sports”, vegetable sellers, and magazine vendors lined the narrow road they bumped along. She thought it was ridiculous and unclean how everything was out in the open, how everything would get grimy and smell of smog.

Gretchen reached out to touch the air because it was smoky and she thought she might be able to feel it—that this air would feel different than the air feels when she runs with her hands outstretched through their backyard. She loved that the car was open—that she could fall out if she wasn’t careful. But she tried to be careful, especially around Mama. But the air did feel different here—it felt like what it feels like to run into spider web when she explores in their backyard shed—kind of spongy and sticky. She never minded spider web. Mama did though. She would scream crazy like even if her fingers just brushed one squishy thread.

But Mama wasn't watching, so Gretchen let her hand dangle out the rickshaw and watched the ground speed by. She let her eyes go to all the stores and all the pretty ways the fruit and vegetables were lined up on carts, and the way the clothes and toys from a store spilled out to the street, like they were too special to be kept inside. The toys called to her. Even though they were dolls and cars like she had at home, they seemed different, magical, like these toys might actually be alive and that she just needed to love them for the magic to happen.

Then she smelled something new as they turned. She looked further and saw they were going over a bridge. She saw water and lots of green grass and was surprised because it was the first time she had seen grass like they had at home. Most of what she saw in this new place was buildings and people and smoke. She leaned further out the rickshaw to see if it was because of the water and grass that it smelled different. It was, and she smiled.

But then Mama's hand was pulling her back into the rickshaw.

"What are you doing?" Mama was mad. "God, I turn away for a second and you fall out the rickshaw! This place is so unsafe. I don't know how anyone makes it beyond their 5th birthday."

"I didn't fall, Mama," Gretchen said quietly. "I didn't." She didn't even try to explain the feeling of the air to Mama.

Susan was silent as she held Gretchen tightly by her side.

When the rickshaw finally stopped, the driver said, "Tulsi Baug" and began to turn back toward them.

Susan didn't give him time to speak his gibberish. She read the meter—15 it said. She took out the exact change—15 rupees, and shoved it into his hand, but the driver was shaking his

head no. He held a small laminated paper and was pointing at it. Susan knew what he was trying to do, and even as he yelled after her, she walked away pulling Gretchen behind her.

Gretchen looked back at the man who was still yelling at them and he looked so mad that she wondered what Mama had done to him. It made her sad.

Ranjun quieted when he saw the little girl's tears. He had just taken less money from the mother than it would cost him gas for one block, but he knew she had the power—speaking with that kind of voice, the sound of money. People like her could buy their way in or out of anything, so it wasn't worth calling for help—no amount of explaining to the woman about the meters and how the drivers are paid would result in money for him and his family. Time was wasting. He needed to make up what he had just lost. He knew he should go, but he didn't.

Ranjun sat in his rickshaw and watched as the little girl staring back at him with tear-stained cheeks disappeared into the crowd.

Susan walked in a furious quest to find something, anything, she could buy, but all she saw were shoes too small and towels of the cheapest cotton weave. She walked in spite of Gretchen who stopped continuously pointing at this or that. It wasn't until Gretchen stopped and pointed at a huge display of fake gold and jeweled earrings and neat rows of colorful bangles that she too felt compelled to pause. The colors of bangles bled from reds to oranges to yellows. The next row was greens, blues, and purples. For a moment, she simply stared.

“Glass, Madam,” a young man behind the table said. “The best quality, Madam.” He pulled with a flourish a pack of gold and red speckled bangles.

Susan snorted. “Yeah, that’s what they all say.”

“They, Madam?” He said as he flicked each bangle one at a time into the air and let it fall back, landing beside the others on his outstretched finger with a slight “ting.”

“Yes, they,” Susan said, but she could not take her eyes off the young man’s agile hands tossing the small glittering circles into the air so delicately. Two he felt did not land correctly, and he broke them without ceremony with two fingers, tossing them to the ground onto the pile of colorful glass shards. “You,” Susan continued in a bit of a daze. “You all say yours is the best quality.”

“I believe they are,” he said, continuing to test and toss one bangle after another. “In your country people do not believe in what they sell?”

Susan paused and thought about the women who sell her cosmetics at Macy’s. “Yes, I suppose they do.”

“Isn’t it?” said the young man, reaching out for Susan’s own arm, grabbing it quickly and pushing the bangles onto her fingers now held tightly together by his hand.

Susan tried to pull away. “Wait. I didn’t say I would buy…”

“You don’t need to say, Madam,” He smiled, then narrowed his eyes and gave her arm a hard shake. “Relax. Relax your arm.”

Susan tried to, but she had never before experienced such a forward young man shaking her arm as if it were a stiff sock. He pulled her hand while simultaneously scrunching it together at its widest point. He slid on the bangles and before she could respond, Susan had two inches of red and gold on her arm, picking up, she noticed, the reddish gold freckles that covered her entire body. It was the first time she remembered seeing her freckles and thinking they sparkled, but they did, and it reminded her of her honeymoon and the way her husband had threatened to kiss

every freckle, and truly by the end of the two weeks in Hawaii, he had succeeded. She was smiling down at her arm when she realized that Gretchen had not spoken or pulled or pushed at her for a while. She looked around but couldn't see her daughter's telltale golden curls in the sea of black.

"Gretchen," she said in a whisper, unsure of her own voice.

"Madam?" the young man said.

"My daughter," Susan said loudly now. "She was just here. Where is she? My daughter!"

"Madam, I do not see a daughter with you. Are you sure?"

"Am I sure? Am I sure? You moron. My daughter was right here beside me." Susan was yelling now, desperate to be heard above the roaring in her head. It was as if a thousand voices were screaming.

So she screamed above the roaring. "Gretchen! Gretchen! Gretchen!" and then the world tunneled and all she could see was the young man's face staring at her with concern. "You," she said before only a pinpoint of light remained and she collapsed, taking the row of yellows, oranges and reds with her in a crash of glass and gold.

Gretchen heard the crash where she stood in the crowd just as she had heard Mama's frantic cry for her. When Mama had let go of her hand and left her, she found herself surrounded by people, tall people, dressed in colors she had never seen big people wear. At first she let herself be carried by the crowd, enjoying the warm, unfamiliar smells. But then she began to notice people staring at her, pointing. One woman even reached out and tugged a curl on her forehead, making it long and then letting it bounce back—the woman and the others around her

laughed and Gretchen began to feel like she couldn't breathe. When she heard Mama calling her name and then the crash, it sounded so far away; she thought there could be no way back, and she began to cry again.

It was then she saw the little boy, hair straight and black and almost covering his eyes, feet bare and dirty. She looked at him, and he reached out to her with one small hand, which she grabbed without hesitation. He pulled her, and she followed, weaving through the legs of big people until they settled under a rack of hanging clothes.

With her free hand, she reached up—silk, she recognized as she brushed her hand along the edges of the colors. Once, when her mama and her were shopping at home, she had briefly touched a pretty scarf in the store, and Mama had said, “no, don't touch that. It is silk.” Now, her hand remembered and ran along the cloth above her, and it felt new and delicious. She kept running her hand back and forth, back and forth, as she and her new friend caught their breath and stared at each other.

She realized she was still holding his hand, so she moved their clasped hands up to the silk, rubbing it back and forth over both their knuckles. He smiled then, freed his hand and with both palms up, began to hit the silk ends. Gretchen smiled and tried it. The material felt different like that—like the edge of a thousand webs.

Susan woke in a dark room, and immediately began to struggle. She felt bound and gagged, but as she exerted herself to rise, she was able to sit up. There were no ropes, and the room wasn't as dark as she had thought at first. Actually, they were sitting outside, in the shadow of the bangle table with bangles scattered behind her on the ground, and there was the young man kneeling in front of her. “Madam, are you okay?”

She wondered if she would have to pay for the bangles, but then the memory of her daughter came back to her like a heavy curtain falling over her. “My daughter,” and then the breath came out of her in a whoosh and she retched.

“Head between the knees madam. I am a doctor, well, not really, but I know these things. Head between the knees.” And he shoved her head down between her raised knees.

“My daughter,” she said again between gasps.

Bare feet appeared beside the young man, and she looked up into the eyes of a young boy carrying a plate of dirty glasses filled with brown liquid.

“Chai, Madam,” said the man. “You must drink, and then we will find your daughter.”

Susan wanted to refuse, but he held out a cup to her and seemed to want to help, and hadn't he said he was a doctor? She took the glass in a shaky hand and took a sip of the warm, sweet liquid, and it tasted good, but then she felt guilty that she was enjoying a drink as her daughter, her poor daughter was...”Oh God, my daughter.”

And then her head was between her legs again, and the retching became something more, and she began to throw up their last meal of fried rice and chicken. And the young man held her body out from her shoes, and yelled at the crowd to scatter. He said something urgent to the young boy with bare feet, who ran off.

Gretchen and the boy had both hands and feet in the silk shawls when the lumpy woman found them. The silks parted suddenly and there she loomed, a big woman with an ugly bump on the tip of her nose. She wore pink silk wrapped around her waist and shoulders. Gretchen wanted to reach out and touch the pink, but she didn't—the woman's frown stopped her. This woman looked mad. Plain mad, like Mama looked when she talked to her daddy.

Susan stood shakily as the policemen took her statement from the young man, who was acting as translator. The policemen didn't take notes, didn't call anyone, didn't do anything really, and it infuriated Susan.

“Madam, they want to know again. Can you describe your daughter?”

“Describe her?” Susan screamed; her face was red from the ten minutes of questions—the same questions over and over: What does she look like? Where did you last see her? What are you doing in Pune?

“She has blond, curly hair. She is wearing...wearing...God, I don't remember what she is wearing!” Susan slumped over and put her hands on her knees, feeling the world close in around her again.

“They only want to help, Madam,” the young man put a too familiar hand on the small of Susan's back.

Something snapped in Susan. No one touched her that way. No one! Not even her husband. She stiffened to her full height and looked down at him, ready to hurt him. Somehow, he had to be involved. She couldn't trust this man! He was nothing to her. In fact, he might be responsible for this whole thing. He might be a pimp!

Just then, the boy with the bare feet came running up to them and said something quickly. Before Susan could ask what he said, she saw the curling blond ringlets of her daughter's head attached to the hand of a large woman dressed in a pink sari. The woman had Gretchen's ear twisted a little and was pulling her along; the other hand was around the ear of a dirty little beggar boy. Susan saw that Gretchen wore her yellow eyelet sundress and that one strap fell from a slender shoulder. How could she not have remembered?

Gretchen's eyes were huge and scared as the woman yelled "Choti si Chor!" to the policemen, who began to laugh.

Before Susan could yell at the policemen for laughing at the woman who held her daughter captive, she looked again into Gretchen's eyes and saw relief. Gretchen was relieved to see her mom, and that was a soothing balm to Susan's anger. Nothing else mattered.

Within seconds, she had Gretchen wrapped within her arms. She could sense the crowd watching them but didn't care. She held her daughter, and then stood, smoothing Gretchen's dress down and pushing the slender strap over Gretchen's tiny shoulder. Then she began to walk, holding Gretchen's hand, toward the entrance of Tulsi Baug.

"Madam?" the young man with the bangles called to her, gesturing to the pile of broken glass at his feet.

But Susan didn't turn. She kept her eyes ahead and walked until she saw the rickshaw still waiting for them.

When he saw them emerge from the crowd, Ranjan wanted to speed away. He didn't need this. His family couldn't afford this. But then he saw the mother's eyes were red, her face pale and her hand gripped firmly around the little girl. The little girl was reaching out and smiling at a young boy who ran beside them. The children joined hands for a brief moment, and then the mother wrenched the girl away and swung her into a tight embrace. She said nothing as she climbed into the rickshaw and fell into the seat with the girl on her lap. Ranjan simply started the engine and slowly drove away.

Gretchen reached an arm out the rickshaw since her mother wasn't paying attention,
letting her hand drift in the spider web air.