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## The Boy Who Loved to Dance

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# The Boy Who Loved to Dance

I was five when my mother signed me up for lessons at the Maharashtra Lawn Tennis Association.

But I was scared of my coach, who was critical of my sissy handling of the racket.

One day, I was in tears and his fellow instructor bought me a bottle of Pepsi.

My mother drove me home in silence. When we were in the living room, she began to beat me with my tennis racket.

“We paid so much for these lessons and this is how you repay me?” she yelled as I sobbed.

Later, my maidservant held me and made me a cup of tea when I was finally cried out. She let me play with her brightly-colored bangles.

When I was eight, I scored above 90% on my final exams.

My mother took me to buy a book.

When we got home, she took the book from me.

“I feel you didn’t put in your best effort,” she said. “What do you think?”

I went to the bathroom to cry and she stood behind me.

“I have no sympathy for you,” she said, “crying over spilt milk. Dry your eyes and come and do your lessons.”

I often cried those days. When I was five, I was brave and bold and bright. But by the time I was eight, I was scared of everything.

My father was unable to protect me from my mother’s slaps. He was a quiet man.

But he often took me out for a drive and something stirred in me as I saw maidservants returning home from shopping, clad in yellow or red or pink tunics.

I told myself I was attracted to them. But I knew I, too, wanted to be a bright bosom, to be crushed in some man's strong arms.

I began crossdressing that year.

My father was often on tour for his engineering firm and my mother would join him.

While they were away, I would sleep by my maidservant's side.

She would let me wear her blouse and petticoat and sing to me until I fell asleep.

This took me a while because I loved the feeling of her soft, worn garments against my skin.

Sometimes, in the morning, before I went to school, still in her blouse and petticoat, I would don her bangles and her silver anklets and dance for her in the style of the heroines of the old Bollywood movies we watched together. She was loud in her appreciation and would kiss me when I finished.

My maidservant and I were allies. My mother was angry with her all the time because she used to invite her lover, a security guard, into the house while the rest of us slept. I was only four when my mother caught her letting him in.

Even now, I like to imagine my maidservant's slenderness in the ardent embrace of her lover, melting into the rough body that smelt of tobacco and sweat and oil.

When I was twelve, I was sent away to boarding school. My mother worried about my dreamy and soft ways and the tendency of my early friends to dismiss me as a *hijra*.

My friends were really teasing me for my clumsiness, for my inability to catch the ball during our interminable cricket games. They despised me and thus threw the word at me to criticize my useless girlishness. After all, to be a girl in India is to be a burden and the sum total of the dowry with which one is transferred into another family.

But the word *hijra* really referred to India's transvestite community, a group of men who eked out a living by begging and by dancing in *sarees* and *salwar* suits at weddings and other occasions. Even then, I felt these "degenerate" men were women because they saw themselves thus.

I confided to my maidservant, who cooked me all my favorite dishes before my departure, that I longed to be a *hijra* myself, to break free, as these once-men had, from the constraints of their unsympathetic families, and lose myself, in dance and song.

At boarding school, I was a failure. I could not play sports. In class, I dreamt of being transformed into a woman by some act of courage and winning the adoration of a tall and muscular man. When my seniors scolded me, I dreamt of kissing their rugged faces.

I was often beaten up for my untidiness, for my poor marks and horrible sports performance, for my tendency to dream, for my effeminate ways.

When I was eighteen and just finished with boarding school, my mother threw my maidservant out. She said that she was too inefficient and lazy.

I cried for days until my mother slapped me.

I slapped her back and for the first time in my life, yelled back at her.

But my father took her side and threatened to put me in a mental hospital if I didn't calm down.

I went to the only engineering college I could get into with my poor marks. I felt guilty about my behavior with my mother and I studied hard.

I was lonely, but my effort paid off, and I made it into a reasonably good engineering firm after my graduation.

The three years that followed were hard.

At home, my parents and I rarely spoke. I was still a coward, but I made it clear I would no longer tolerate my mother's constant criticism. To taunt me, she complained about my ingratitude to the neighbors when I was within earshot.

At work, I was taunted for my quietness, my excessive neatness, for the way my eyes would fill up with tears whenever I was criticized.

When I was twenty-four, I'd had enough. I locked myself in the bathroom and slit my wrists.

At the hospital, my parents didn't visit me. I was placed in a psychiatric ward and among the other unhappy souls who'd found their way there, I made many friends. They saw me as a woman because that's how I saw myself and one of them told me I was so beautiful he'd like to take me out on a date.

My mother took me home when I was discharged and mocked me in front of our neighbors. But her words had ceased to have an effect on me and I laughed at the ridiculous woman.

The next morning, I left my house for the last time and went to a shopping mall. I bought myself a *salwar kameez* and changed into it.

People stared and called after me as I walked down the street. But I didn't care.

I felt beautiful. I felt finally myself.

At the intersection near Victoria Memorial, I found the two *hijras* who normally begged on that route.

I knelt before one of them, a tall and wise woman, who must have been kind and beautiful even when she was an unhappy man.

"Guide me," I begged. "Teach me to be beautiful."

She kissed me and I felt myself blessed.

I won't say that the last year has been easy. My parents still live in the same city as I do and often try to drag me home, or to have me committed.

One day, I was in a train on the way to a shrine beloved to the *hijra* community in a new floral *salwar kameez* when some of the passengers took offense at my presence.

A man caught hold of me and took me to the carriage door.

He was about to throw me out when the ticket collector saved me. He sat me down next to me and put his arm around me. He told me how he, too, had always felt trapped by his own body. That was why he took so little care of it.

I think he did see me as a woman. Bless him, dear man.

The police frequently raid the house in which ten other *hijras* and I live. If we don't have enough money to give them, they beat us with their canes.

Once upon a time, all of this would have made me miserable. But even if there are hard days, I am always myself. And thus, I know happiness.

My maidservant, now married, has been to see me and has gifted me with some new *salwar kameezes*, as well as those bangles and anklets I always loved.

I wear her bangles and anklets and sing and dance to earn money.

I was always creative, but my parents saw my creativity as another example of my sissyness.

In the evenings, I tell my sisters, I mean my fellow *hijras*, the stories I used to tell my maidservant. Sometimes, the children from the neighborhood join us. And sometimes, their mothers and their aunts join us too.

When I was a terrified and captive boy, I was scared of the world. But now I have been set free by my flowing *sarees* and lovely *salwar* suits and know there is much to love everywhere.

I carry my anklets and bangles wherever I go, so I can dance to the beauty of the world.