

Doctorow, Cory

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#11

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#11

1 Mala woke early, after a troubled sleep. In the village, she'd often
risen early, and listened to the birds. But there was no birdsong
when her eyes fluttered open, only the sussuration of Dharavi --
cars, rats, people, distant factory noises, goats. A rooster. Well,
5 that was a kind of bird. A little smile touched her lips, and
she felt slightly better.

Not much, though. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, stretched her arms.
Gopal still slept, snoring softly, lying on his stomach the way
he had when he was a baby. She needed the toilet, and, as it was
10 light out, she decided that she would go out to the communal one
a little ways away, rather than using the covered bucket in the room.
In the village, they'd had a proper latrine, deep dug, with a pot
of clean water outside of it that the women kept filled all the time.
Here in Dharavi, the communal toilet was a much more closed-in,
15 reeking place, never very clean. The established families in Dharavi
had their own private toilets, so the public ones were only used
by newcomers.

It wasn't so bad this morning. There were ladies who got up even
earlier than her to slosh it out with water hauled from the nearby
20 communal tap. By nightfall, the reek would be eye-watering.

She loitered in the street in front of the house. It wasn't too hot yet, or too crowded, or too noisy. She wished it was. Maybe the noise and the crowds would drown out the worry racing through her mind. Maybe the heat would bake it out.

25 She'd brought her mobile out with her. It danced with notifiers about new things she could pay to see -- shows and cartoons and political messages, sent in the night. She flicked them away impatiently and scrolled through her address-book, stopping at Mr Banerjee's name and staring at it. Her finger poised over the send button.

30 It was too early, she thought. He'd be asleep. But he never was, was he? Mr Banerjee seemed to be awake at all hours, messaging her with new targets to take her army to. He'd be awake. He'd have been up all night, talking to Mrs Dibyendu.

Her finger hovered over the Send button.

35 The phone rang.

She nearly dropped it in surprise, but she managed to settle it in her hand and switch off the ringer, peer at the face.

Mr Banerjee, of course, as though he'd been conjured into her phone by her thoughts and her staring anxiety.

40 "Hello?" she said.

"Mala," he said. He sounded grave.

"Mr Banerjee." It came out in a squeak.

He didn't say anything else. She knew this trick. She used
it with her army, especially on the boys. Saying nothing made
45 a balloon of silence in your opponent's head, one that swelled to fill
it, until it began to echo with their anxieties and doubts. It worked
very well. It worked very well, even if you knew how it worked.

It was working well on her.

She bit her lip. Otherwise she would have blurted something, maybe
50 He was going to hurt me or He had it coming or I did nothing wrong.
Or, I am a warrior and I am not ashamed.

There. There was the thought, though it wanted to slip away and hide
behind He was going to hurt me, that was the thought she needed,
the platoon she needed to bring to the fore. She marshalled
55 the thought, chivvied it, turned it into an orderly skirmish line and
marched it forward.

"Mrs Dibyendu's idiot nephew tried to assault me last night, in case
you haven't heard." She waited a beat. "I didn't let him do it.
I don't think he'll try it again."

60 There was a snort, very faint, down the phone line. A suppressed
laugh? Barely contained anger? "I heard about it, Mala. The boy is
in the hospital."

"Good," she said, before she could stop herself.

“One of his ribs broke and punctured his lung. But they say he’ll
65 live. Still, it was quite close.”

She felt sick. Why? Why did it have to be this way? Why couldn’t
he have left her alone? “I’m glad he’ll live.”

“Mrs Dibyendu called me in the night to tell me that her sister’s
only son had been attacked. That he’d been attacked by a vicious gang
70 of your friends. Your ,army’.”

Now she snorted. “He says it because he’s embarrassed to have been so
badly beaten by me, just me, just a girl.”

Again, the silence ballooned in the conversation. He’s waiting for me
to say I’m sorry, that I’ll make it up somehow, that he can take
75 it from my wages. She swallowed. I won’t do it. The idiot made me
attack him, and he deserved what he got.

“Mrs Dibyendu,” he began, then stopped. “There are expenses that come
from something like this, Mala. Everything has a cost. You know that.
It costs you to play at Mrs Dibyendu’s cafe. It costs me to have
80 you do it. Well, this has a cost, too.”

Now it was her turn to be quiet, and to think at him, as hard as
she can, Oh yes, well, I think I already exacted payment from idiot
nephew. I think he’s paid the cost.

“Are you listening to me?”

85 She made a grunt of assent, not trusting herself to open her mouth.

"Good. Listen carefully. The next month, you work for me. Every rupee is mine, and I make this bad thing that you've brought down on yourself go away."

She pulled the phone away from her head as if it had gone red hot
90 and burned her. She stared at the faceplate. From very far away,
Mr Banerjee said, "Mala? Mala?" She put the phone back to her head.
She was breathing hard now. "It's impossible," she said, trying to stay
calm. "The army won't fight without pay. My mother can't live without
my pay. We'll lose our home. No," she repeated, "it's not possible."

95 "Not possible? Mala, it had better be possible. Whether or not
you work for me, I will have to make this right with Mrs Dibyendu.
It's my duty, as your employer, to do this. And that will cost money.
You have incurred a debt that I must settle for you, and that means
that you have to be prepared to settle with me."

100 "Then don't settle it," she said. "Don't give her one rupee. There
are other places we can play. Her nephew brought it on himself.
We can play somewhere else."

"Mala, did anyone see this boy lay his hands on you?"

"No," she said. "He waited until we were alone."

105 "And why were you alone with him? Where was your army?"

"They'd already gone home. I'd stayed late." She thought of Big
Sister Nor and her metamecha, of the union. Mr Banerjee would be

even angrier if she told him about Big Sister Nor. "I was studying tactics," she said. "Practicing on my own."

110 "You stayed alone with this boy, in the middle of the night.

What happened, really, Mala? Did you want to see what it was like to kiss him like a fillum star, and then it got out of control? Is that how it happened?"

"No!" She shouted it so loud that she heard people groaning

115 in their beds, calling sleepily out from behind their open windows.

"I stayed late to practice, he tried to stop me. I knocked him down and he chased me. I knocked him down and then I taught him why he shouldn't have chased me."

"Mala," he said, and she thought he was trying to sound fatherly

120 now, stern and old and masculine. "You should have known better than

to put yourself in that position. A general knows that you win some fights by not getting into them at all. Now, I'm not an unreasonable man. Of course, you and your mother and your army all need my money

if you're going to keep fighting. You can borrow a wage-packet from me

125 during this month, something to pay everyone with, and then you can

pay it back, little by little, over the next year or so. I'll take five in twenty rupees for 12 months, and we'll call it even."

It was hope, terrible, awful hope. A chance to keep her army, her flat, her respect. All it would cost her was one quarter of her earnings.

130 She'd have three quarters left. Three quarters was better than
nothing. It was better than telling Ammaji that it was all over.
"Yes," she said. "All right, fine. But we don't play at Mrs Dibyendu's
cafe anymore."

"Oh, no," he said. "I won't hear of it. Mrs Dibyendu will be glad
135 to have you back. You'll have to apologize to her, of course. You can
bring her the money for her nephew. That will make her feel better,
I'm sure, and heal any wounds in your friendship."

"Why?" There were tears on her cheeks now. "Why not let us go
somewhere else? Why does it matter?"

140 "Because, Mala, I am the boss and you are the worker and that is
the factory you work in. That's why." His voice was hard now, all
the lilt of false concern gone away, leaving behind a grinding like
rock on rock.

She wanted to put the phone down on him, the way they did
145 in the movies when they had their giant screaming rows,
and threw their phones into the well or smashed them
on the wall. But she couldn't afford to destroy her phone and
she couldn't afford to make Mr Banerjee angry.

So she said, "All right," in a quiet little voice that sounded like
150 a mouse trying not to be noticed.

"Good girl, Mala. Smart girl. Now, I've got your next mission for you. Are you ready?"

Numbly, she memorized the details of the mission, who she was going
155 to kill and where. She thought that if she did this job quickly, she could ask him for another one, and then another -- work longer hours, pay off the debt more quickly.

"Smart girl, good girl," he said again, once she'd repeated the details back to him, and then he put the phone down.

160 She pocketed her phone. Around her, Dharavi had woken, passing by her like she was a rock in a river, pressing past her on either side. Men with shovels and wheelbarrows, boys with enormous rice-sacks on each shoulder, filled with grimy plastic bottles on their way to some sorting house, a man with a long beard and kufi skullcap and kurta
165 shirt hanging down to his knees leading a goat with a piece of rope. A trio of women in saris, their midriffs stretched and striated with the marks of the babies they'd borne, carrying heavy buckets of water from the communal tap. There were cooking smells in the air, a sizzle of dhal on the grill and the fragrant smell of chai. A boy
170 passed by her, younger than Gopal, wearing flapping sandals and short pants, and he spat a stream of sickly sweet betel at her feet.

The smell made her remember where she was and what had happened and what she had to do now.

She went past the Das family on the ground floor and trudged up
175 the stairs to their flat. Ammaji and Gopal were awake and bustling.
Ammaji had fetched the water and was making the breakfast over
the propane burner, and Gopal had his school uniform shirt and knee-
trousers on. The Dharavi school he attended lasted for half the day,
which gave him a little time to play and do homework and then a few
180 more hours to work alongside of Ammaji in the factory.

"Where have you been?" Ammaji said.

"On the phone," she said, patting the little pocket sewn
of her tunic. "With Mr Banerjee." She waggled her chin from side
to side, saying I've had business.

185 "What did he say?" Ammaji's voice was quiet and full of false
nonchalance.

Ammaji didn't need to know what transpired between Mr Banerjee and
her. Mala was the general and she could manage her own affairs.

"He said that all was forgiven. The boy deserved it. He'll make
190 it fine with Mrs Dibyendu, and it will be fine." She waggled her chin
from side to side again -- It's all fine. I've taken care of it.

Ammaji stared into the pan and the food sizzling in it and nodded
to herself. Though she couldn't see, Mala nodded back. She was
General Robotwallah and she could make it all good.