

FAHMIDA RIAZ

A Selection from
Godavari

BOMBAY!—Where do all these people come from! And likely they all make it to Johu Beach at least once, too.

Children were busy playing with big colorful beach balls. Boats of different colors lay moored on the shore, their hulls dug into the soft sand. Inflated inner tubes lay all about; the boys and girls who had come to enjoy the beach would run alongside them, rolling them down to the water, throw them in and jump on, and begin to bob up and down on the waves. Seeing the waves, baby Kikly began chirping like a bird.

Getting off the bus, under a sky full of clouds, scanning the soft sand for a place where they all could sit, Ma's entire family had already scattered. Pa, noticing two Bombay girls in mini-skirts making their way to the snack stall, announced that he was going to get some snacks for the kids, and without waiting for anyone's answer, had already made his way off into the distance. By now he was a tiny dot on the wrinkled shawl of the horizon, a horizon of peacock feather-green palm fronds.

Noticing a delicately built flower cart pulled along the edge of the water by two handsome ponies, Barki screamed with joy. "The flower cart! Ma! Look there! There! Neetu Singh was riding the same cart in that movie! With Kunal Kapoor? Didn't you see it? When they sang that song?"

Smacking her lips like a monkey, dying with eagerness and singing Neetu Singh and Kunal Kapoor's song, the girl ran off to take a ride in the flower cart.

Crawling on the sand, Cheeku had peed in his shorts and was starting to cry. Filling both fists, he then began eating the pee-soaked sand.

And Kikly

Ma turned and looked behind her. Checked to her right, then her left. Kikly wasn't there.

All the air escaped from her chest.

“Where’s Kikly!? Where has she gone!?”

Ma was looking all around, trying to keep control of her pounding heart, but Kikly was nowhere to be seen.

Right then, far off ... she spied a red and blue ribbon in the distant white froth of the waves, bobbing in the translucent blue breeze. It was Kikly’s ribbon.

Dropping the sand-swallowing Cheeku on the beach, kicking over baskets of food and dishes, pulling off her head-scarf and throwing it to the breeze, Ma ran wildly to the waving ribbon. Her arms thrust out like a bird, she tore through the air running with all her might. Kikly had run off without asking anybody; she had taken one of the inner tubes lying about and had run it down to the water. Copying boys and girls much older than herself, she had jumped on the inner tube and started rolling on the waves.

Seconds later Ma was in the water; *shrap, shrap*, she started bounding through it. First up to her knees, then to her waist, then her chest—it was like carrying thousand-pound bags of sand. Could water be that heavy? Ma was at a loss. Her clothes were soaked and seemed to weigh a ton. Salt water filled her eyes and mouth.

Loading her lungs with all the air they could hold, she shouted, “Kikly!” but her voice was lost to the wind. A wave slapped her hard on the face. Her knees buckled.

Kikly’s inner tube was bobbing at arm’s length from her. As though tearing through the heavy water, Ma lifted her arms to grab Kikly.

Voices and shouts, rising through the wind above the din of the sea, stopped her. “No, Bai, no! Don’t take the kid off!”

Ma put her arms through the hole in the inner tube and held on, turning around to see. Scores of people were running and swimming up behind her. Seeing her running and screaming with panic, the vendors, tourists and others standing nearby had come running to help. Many arms, supporting the inner tube and pushing it gently forward, began bringing it in toward the shore.

Had Ma pulled Kikly off the inner tube in such deep water, they both could easily have lost their balance.

Far from crying, Kikly was splashing her legs in the water and chirping like a sparrow. Safely ensconced in the inner tube, she looked like some water nymph—Oh! her impishness! her loftiness!—being drawn in her water-carriage by a multitude of tawny, lean bodies, their blue, yellow and red swim suits rising and falling in the dark grey waves.

Soaked with salt water, Ma slipped through the throng of naked

bodies, partly walking on her own, partly pushed by others. Amid the jumbled sounds of laughter and the sea, she realized something, slowly, as sand gently settles through water to the bottom: Kikly—who until now had never given her any trouble, had never upset her at all,—Kikly had never seen the ocean before! But now ...

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“My turn now!” Ma said.

Turning over Kikly and Cheeku and the pot on the stove to Barki, Ma had come to take a walk on the beach by herself. The night before Barki had rubbed some cream on her face; by the morning her skin felt soft and fresh. She looked at herself in the mirror, and approved of what she saw. Ignoring the burden of worldly cares—as though tying them in a small pouch and leaving them at home—Ma had taken a day that was due her. Hiding it from the entire world, and practically from herself as well, she had purchased a bright and colorful dress for herself which, out of embarrassment, she had kept hidden in her bag.

With complete confidence, Pa had brought her to Johu. Ma changed her clothes in the ladies’ cabin at the beach. When she came out, Pa was amazed to see her brightly colored clothes. She had left her handbag, her shoes—everything—in the cabin, and had come out feeling light and easy.

They ate peanuts on the beach, and standing arm in arm they immediately had a man take their picture.

They looked at themselves in the photo. Pa’s face gave the impression of embarrassed timidity, and the look of dejection on Ma’s face completely negated the cheerful brightness of her clothes. They were both ashamed to look at it, and Pa put it away in his wallet.

Ma started walking in the water. *Shup shup, shrap shrap*. She turned around and looked toward Pa.

“Come on!”

“My clothes’ll get wet,” he said.

“So let them!”

“But my wallet’ll get wet too. And where should I put my shoes?”

“Just leave everything there on the beach.”

He rolled up the bottoms of his trousers, held his shoes in his hands, and started walking with Ma. She felt sorry for him. He was carrying a heavy burden, and he just wasn’t prepared to stow it in one of the small lockers on the beach. Ma began to bound through the water. She started waving her hands and began to make up a song on the spot:

When you come to the sea,
Always come empty-handed.
The sea will give you
Something or other.
But unless your hands are empty,
It will give you nothing at all.

This last disdainful threat she had uttered looking at Pa.

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“You’ll meet me in Bombay?”

“Yes, of course.”

“We’ll take a little walk, see some sights, maybe go to Johu.”

“But... what about your wife?”

Ma wasn’t sleeping. She lay there with her eyes closed, her face turned toward the wall. She was listening to everything Pa was saying to the woman reporter who had come to see Ma.

“Yes, what about her? She wants to keep an eye on everything I do. Not a chance.”

Ma stared at Pa. Did she really want to keep such tight reins on him? she asked herself. As she splashed some water she felt that yes, that was exactly what she wanted.

But why?

Water had now come up to her hips and the waves were getting more powerful. Indulgently, she was enjoying the feel of the waves lapping at her body. Her heart was reeling with the sheer delight of it. She felt her abdomen collide with a large wave, and her feet slipped from under her. She flung her arms out and grabbed hold of Pa.

When she looked up she was struck by an unexpected wistfulness in his eyes. She looked back down again.

Pa wanted to come to Johu, but he wanted to come without her. He wanted to have some fun. If, instead of Ma, he had come with that anonymous woman, he would have put his shoes and wallet in a locker in the rest room. Away from Ma’s eyes, he would have played in the waves without a care. Today, Ma was the largest of the burdens from which he was simply unable to gain release. She was a huge weight on his consciousness—why?

She turned and looked at Pa. He stood behind a wall of human sadness, stronger than steel, yet more transparent than glass. They both just stood there—gazing at each other through the clear glass, yet not

crossing over, not *able* to cross over...

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Another large wave came. She felt countless small fish slide over her arms and through her hair. And all thoughts of Pa vanished from her mind. For a brief moment she thought of Godavari, the Marathan woman, and in her mind's eye she saw her climbing the red mountain, her tall staff in hand. Then she heard Usha, the servant girl from the rest house, who stood with her head leaning against the door of the dark servant quarters, laughing her quick, brittle laugh, as though someone were strumming a sitar; behind her, shining in the yellow light, the red chalk images of gods and goddesses drawn on the wall. Pulling from her chest a strand of seaweed borne by another high, salty wave, she began to drift into other weighty matters, matters tied to death and life. She considered how dissimilar the labor pains for Barki, Kikly and Cheeku had been—how one had been born breech, how because of her hypertension they had had to break her water for her and induce another's birth two weeks early. Splashing through the waves, she moved on into the distance. Alone.

Translated by Faruq Hassan