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Chitti: Butterfly

A lone bulb over *Kisaan Ghar* glows in hope of better times. The train leaves at 4am, when most of the village is still asleep. Chitti has packed her bundle- of a few clothes and a rich assortment of *bindis*.

“Dwarfs don’t need *bindis*. In fact, they don’t even need a face”, her best friend Binya shouted when Chitti mistakenly punched her over an innocuous fight about whose *bindi* was more beautiful. It wasn’t an unusual event; they often compared their *bindis* and other students voted in the competition. They loved to wear *bindis*, and wore them even though they were confiscated by the headmaster. They were *bindi*-wearing rebels. But Chitti was wrong. Rebellion is a luxury afforded by normal people; it isn’t for those whom life has rebelled against. She couldn’t be a rebel; she stood out. Her friend Binya resembled everybody else. Chitti wanted to be like everybody else.

Around her 12th birthday when Chitti’s parents began telling her she was normal that she realized she wasn’t. She started bribing the gods to make her tall. She would pretend she could no longer squeeze herself through that tiny window in the class, just like her classmates. She became desperate for normal people’s failures and the pride they felt in their defaults. Soon she did not even have to try. She flunked her exams and withdrew from school- and life. At 17, wearing clothes she wore at 7, she sits by her window, looking out at the world with a detached interest of a philosopher.

Villagers often joked that Chitti was born in the wrong village. There was a family of rich dwarfs in the other village- jewellers and landowners- who sometimes came there to inspect their land. Chitti once saw the girl from the family who was said to be her age, but she did not look like her. She spat betel juice on the ground where Chitti stood. Perhaps her gold made her look like everybody else.

One day a circus troupe came to the village. Last time when they were there, Chitti was about seven years old. Like most children, dwarfs were her favourite. One of them, she remembers, threw an apple for her. She had felt special amongst other children, though Chitti’s parents forbade her from eating it. They said that dwarfs knew magic, like eunuchs. She looked at her tiny hands. Could there be magic in them? Memory of the circus had come with a beckoning of a lost child. Her yearning turned into an imagined nostalgia, and a feeling that she has been around longer than she remembers enveloped her. She felt older. For hours she would stand on the roof and watch the elephant mascot revolve on top of the tent in the *maidaan*. She was consumed by the image of the two dwarfs, who must have grown so old now, their skin wrinkly and hair grey. Or do dwarfs age differently? She wanted to see. Entire village was abuzz with the tales of the moody lion and fair-skinned, agile acrobats, but in Chitti’s family there was no mention of it.

On the last day of the circus, she dressed up in her favourite frock. That evening her parents were away on a weekly trip to the city to buy supplies for the convenience store. Ironically, they had sold their farm to serve as a site for a government agency meant to fetch farmers from being forced to sell their land. They had traded in their leftover hope for a newfound hopelessness. Two years later, profit was still elusive. In time both learnt to stop fighting their fate and gave in to a silence that resembled peace.

Chitti peeped through a slit in the back tent, looking for dwarfs. But they found her before she could. They were both girls. Or women, she couldn't tell. They looked at her feet, and her toes squirmed inside the ill-fitting, raggedy shoes. The one dressed as a man said, "Everybody loves a bickering couple". The wife dwarf lit a cigarette. It was their last day, half a show at discounted rate. The other half was being loaded in trucks. Chitti was arranged for behind the wings, from where she looked at the circus below- faces eager to laugh, chuckling at truths as long as told as a lie, and gasping at spectacles of human stretch. She liked the stage.

First whistle blows. An owl leaps for a cat. Chitti turns to her mother standing with a tiffin box and father weak with pride. Father looks up, "Well, we'll see you in six months, isn't it?" Mother is relieved, "You are our saviour." The two dwarfs come waving at them from the other end of the platform, holding a cardboard box. Chitti opens it to find a pair of shoes. Surprised, she slips into them. The three nod at one another sharing something unspoken and familiar: a rare feeling. They weren't just shoes that fit but a promise that fits. In that moment Chitti left behind all the normal people she once wanted to be, oscillating between what belonged to them and what they belonged to. She realized that there is no threshold for feelings. She felt like the sea and the mountain, both at once. She was not going to be a doctor; she was going to be a joker, in a world of alternate hope and ordinary bravery.

Second whistle blows and they hop into the train. Engine starts. Parents wait for her to turn back, but she does not. She was going to be who she was, a butterfly with shoes.