

“Chinkara”
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Like a fiery arrow flying from a bow, the gazelle blazed across the desert. Billows of hot sand clung to its smooth, glossy fur as it went, galloping past tall, spindly trees, hurdling the smaller shrubs. Its orb-like black eyes gleamed in the hot Indian sun.

It was the Chinkara.

And it was on the run.

Chinkara shuddered and heard the howl in the distance – the cheetah. As the spotted death-bringer of the Thar Desert, it had long fangs that glistened in the crimson sunlight – dusk was its favorite time for murder – and huge, yellow ears that perked whenever Chinkara’s hooves brushed the sandy ground. It was a merchant by trade. And what did it sell? Death.

Because of the beast, Chinkara was constantly on the run. Many nights it would flee to the nearby village in hopes of escape. Desperately, Chinkara wished for it all to end, wished for freedom.

It was as if the gods frowned down and said, “Too bad.”

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I was two years old when I realize my father hate me.

I not speak, but I see. I feel. My vision blur – tears – the first time my father hit me. The second time, I scream. He shove me to the ground, and I feel the desert hot sand burn on my legs. I scream again. Then my mother rush out from our hut, like the man Jesus on his white horse.

That is what I read. The white man teach me much about Jesus. A savior. Like my mother. Then, just like that man Jesus, my mother die.

No explaining. Just die.

My brothers, they go to school in the village. Both younger than me – five years and eight – but at least my father loves them. They get to sleep inside the hut. On a bed. Me? My mother gave me a pillow when I little. I guess that not so bad, since some girls don’t got a pillow. But when the desert winds come blowing, and my father tell me I cannot go inside – that is when I hate my father. Sand

blows to my eyes. I cry. I bury my head in my pillow and lay there, against the wall, and try to sleep. I usually do.

But bad men come.

The hut is small, see. Cramped. Mud walls. The roof has holes. But it is nice inside compared to where I sleep – on outskirts of the town. Right along the dirt road, many men come. Most bad men. They try to get me, but I run. Once a man grab my neck. I bite his arm, taste his blood. Blood not taste very good. After that I run, like always.

To the white man.

His hut is not far. Some say those white men very bad. Some say they come to our country and bring more bad thing. But this white man? He like Jesus. He like my mother, except not dead. He let me stay in the hut. He teach me the Bible, but say if I tell anyone, my father find out. My father would not like that very much. Not talking? That make me sad, because I like to talk. Not to father. Not to my brothers. Not to friends – I have no friends. So I talk to Chinkara.

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It was dusk.

Gray clouds swam in the crimson skies. In the desert, sunset was the bloodiest event of the day. The black silhouettes of mud huts huddled on the horizon – the village. Wind whistled in the bushes. Somewhere a bird cawed. All this Chinkara saw, lying in the warm sand. She looked up.

The cheetah's howl rang in the air.

Chinkara saw it, prowling atop a huge, faraway rock, staring off into the flat desert plains. It sulked so much it disappeared into the shadows, but Chinkara heard a loud growl. It was there. It would always be there. And so would Chinkara.

Soon it would leap off the rock, begin its nightly hunt for Chinkara. It always did, and always, Chinkara would somehow escape it. Hiding in the village usually worked – Chinkara would crouch beside a young girl there. The girl would talk. Chinkara would not. And then, fast as lightning, the sun would rise over the desert. And Chinkara would clop away, down the quiet dirt road.

But Chinkara had a bad feeling about this night.

Then the cheetah leaped off the rock and started dashing across the sand.

It was headed straight for Chinkara.

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The gazelle hasn't come 'round for a couple nights. I miss her – in the dark, when all is still, she march down that dirt road, nose sniffing the ground. The first time I saw her I was lying awake, fearing those bad men would come. But she not a bad Chinkara. She came, fell at my side. Slowly I reached out my hand and petted her, and I start conversation. Whispers. I not let my father hear me talking to an animal.

What we talk about? Our fathers. That Chinkara, she no say much, but I could tell her father had abandoned her, too. She all alone. And being hunted, by some bad man cheetah who wanted to –

I look up.

A man stagger down the road. Murmur something to himself, he did. He very fat, and short, like my father. As he come close, I realize yes, that man be my father. He carry a broken green bottle called – I practice my reading, here – Kingfisher. Why carry 'round a broken bottle? Did not make sense, I thought, but – oh, this not good.

Nothing is ever good when my father is drunk.

I look 'round. Father send me and my brothers to bed early tonight – the sun still up. He'd gone to a restaurant for dinner. Never had I been to there. Sound nice, restaurant. But right now it did not matter – my father, he come towards me. Too close.

"Go 'way," I say to him, loud as I could.

He no hear. He only lurch forward, toward me.

"I say, go 'way," I repeat, scramble to my feet. I back against the mud wall of the hut. At that moment I realize once again – yes, my father hate me. But I hate Father back. "Go 'way!" This time, I yell it.

My father growl something, then lunge at me.

But the white man taught me to be quick. I roll, do a somersault, and jump to my feet. I glare at him. He glare back. "I say, leave me alone."

This time he hear me. "Shut up." He raise his green bottle like he gonna hit me with it.

Oh. So that is why you carry 'round a broken bottle.

He lunge at me again. "Come here, you –"

I duck under his arm. I start running.

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Chinkara too started to run, galloping across the desert, towards the village on the horizon. The cheetah didn't like it there. All Chinkara had to do was outrun it.

There was one problem. The cheetah was faster.

Hearing his panting breath only yards behind her, now, Chinkara leaped over a cluster of bushes and darted to the left. Maybe Chinkara couldn't outrun it, but outsmarting it might work. A small creek of muddy water lay up ahead – could Chinkara jump across? Worth a try. Hopefully the cheetah wouldn't follow.

That was when Chinkara heard the engine.

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I had doubted, but once Father hurl that broken bottle at me, I know he would kill me if he had chance. The bottle hit my back, tore through my dirt brown shirt.

Shards of green spray everywhere. I scream. My father, he laugh – I hate his Bylaugh – and lunge at me again. Yes, this had happen more than once before, but for the first time wonder, I do: Is he allowed to do this? To pursue me like I am Chinkara itself, hunting game in the desert?

I think not.

Still, I keep running through that sandy village. Hide behind quiet mud huts, I did. Night fell, an axe on my throat, and soon I see nothing. Where do I go?

“You stupid girl,” my father roared. “Just come here! I just want to give you hugs!”

He lie. He always lie about hugs.

I crouch behind a few shrubs – he no see me, not yet. Then, I wait.

I could not run no more. That shadow pass over me – the shadow of death, they say – and my father’s fist come down. I hear it crash on my forehead, and my eyes go red.

That bad idea kept hitting me over and over like I was a drum: my father hated me. Blood spatter everywhere – yes, he had punch me hard this time, but I no scream. I just wait. Wait for my father to pounce like that bad man cheetah.

But that never happen.

Because I hear the engine. Like thunder I hear. I squint to see a car, bouncing across the dirt road – later they tell me it called Jeep. And I here, sprawled under a bush, with a bloody head and my father about to hurt me bad.

Yet somehow, everything okay.

Because in that Jeep, I recognize the man. Don’t know his name, but I know him well – the white man. The Jeep skid to a halt, when the white man see me there. I still crying, of course, since I can still feel the broken bottle in my back. I can’t see nothing because of blood everywhere, but when I see White Man? Everything okay. Like that man Jesus, he step off the Jeep. Like my mother, except not dead.

But my father did not see White Man. He aim his fist at me. I block with my arm. Out of my eye’s corner I see the white man take a knife from his belt, and he start running.

“Close your eyes,” he say.

Still my father did not notice him. The white man keep charging at my father. I close my eyes.

One scream.

Two scream.

My father collapse on the sand, breathing loud. Red came out his leg. I look at White Man, who shove his knife to his belt and kneel beside me.

"Stay still," he say. "It's all going to be okay."

I nod. He flip me over, and my guess is he saw the glass in my back. Pull it out, he did – it hurt worse than when my father hit me, but I no scream. I no cry.

Instead, I smile. And a moment later, I am in the Jeep. White Man bandage my back and my head, look me in the eye. He smile, too.

"It's not a safe place, here," he say in a strong voice. "Do you want to leave?"

"And go where?"

"To the city."

"To Delhi?" I say. He nod. Never been to there. "Why?"

"We won't stay there long," he reply. "There is a new family waiting for you, somewhere faraway." He hand me a picture. Nicest picture I ever see – two people, gray hair. White skin. They smile big, and look happy more than anyone I ever see.

And behind them, I see green grass.

"They not look like India," I say.

"They're not," says the white man. "Are you ready to go?"

I nod. This be very exciting. "Can we go now?"

"Yes." Then I hear a moan, in the back of the Jeep. I wonder what it is, and I turn. In the back, lying there, I see Chinkara. Bleeding. Red all over her side.

I reach out. "Chinkara! Why you here? Why, you coming to new country, too?"

Chinkara only moan again.

I turn to White Man. "What the matter with her?"

"I rescued her," he say. "A cheetah was attacking her."

“Bad cheetah,” I mutter, stroking Chinkara’s smooth fur. “Can Chinkara come with me?”

The white man smile, and so did the people in the picture. That night, everything smile. Even the stars. They flash in the black sky, and I feel the engine shake again. White Man starts to steer down the dirt road, and I say goodbye to the village. I never come back to this place. I hate this place. I not know ‘bout this new country, yet, but all I know is that I am safe. No more bad men. Just the big smile people. And Chinkara, of course.

Always Chinkara.