

SHORT FICTION

The Gang of Four

Subhash Chandra

Creative writer and Literary Critic
Associate Professor (Retd.) of English
Shaheed Bhagat Singh College,
University of Delhi
chandra.subhash24@gmail.com

They froze into marionettes for a few moments; then had a collective outburst.

Tinti: "Balls and bullshit!"

Zeeta: "Pure crap."

Gigi: "A bad joke."

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We were a gang of four fast, furious, zippy girls.

Trained in martial arts, each one of us could inflict a heavy cost on the street Romeos for their misdemeanour. We had sent several audacious eve teasers scrambling away with a cut lip, a broken finger or a painful crotch. However, when any of us took a fancy to a bloke, we went whole hog. Virginity and chastity were bullshit -- tools to deprive women of their share of joy of living, while Casanovas went around laying women at will.

We believed flesh does not take taint; it remains pure forever. But we knew flesh is vulnerable to wrinkles; its glow is impermanent. *So drink life to the lees, man!*

Zita was the fastest and the smartest of the lot. She could deftly multi-manage up to three men at a time – each one drooling and wagging his tail. We often saw somebody or the other on her leash at a party she attended. She used her literary background quoting Byron or Keats to catapult a guy on to the Moon and summon a yearning look in her eyes!

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I was known for my slow pace, though I was the prettiest of the lot. Not that I had dearth of chasers, but I was short-tempered and too choosy. I would chuck boyfriends for reasons the others found flimsy.

I joined an Ad firm. The Boss fell for me -- lust at first sight! On the first day he sent for me. Just to brag about his professional achievements. Bloody Braggadocio! He pressed the buzzer and the peon placed two bottles of Pepsi before us. Now, I am a cold drink freak and guzzle half a dozen a day, be it summer or winter. But I could not touch mine, as I had to hold my breath, through Pranayaam. The blighter was a leaking gas cylinder.

The next day, I sent him two emails: My one-line resignation; second a one-line advice, "Stop wolfing on food and fast thrice a week."

Once I got attracted to a dapper young man at my cousin's wedding Reception at India International Centre. He started calling me persistently for a date. We met at a posh Central Delhi hotel -- appropriately made semi-dark during the sweltering hot day. He ordered a pizza and coffee for both of us. He was the CEO of a company. At least that is what he told me.

We got to whispering sweet things. After a few minutes, he started picking his nose. Felt creepy. But much worse followed. Each time he would sneakily roll up the dried up muck into a ball and stick it on the underside of the table, thinking I was engrossed in conversation.

Yucky!

As pizza and coffee arrived, I shot up from my chair. I told the waiter, "Get the table scrubbed clean... on the underside!" and strode out of the hotel.

I did not turn back to look at his expression, much though I wanted to.

Most men are dirty, if you ask me!

Once I pushed a fellow out of the bed in the dead of the night because he referred to my genitalia. He became pathetic.

"How shall I get conveyance at this time?" he whined. Radio cabs had not appeared yet.

"Sprint," I said. "The chasing dogs will spur your speed."

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When we met at Big Chill, our regular haunt, the three of them perforated me with their barbs.

"Are you joking?" said Zeeta, a corner of her upper lip lifting in scorn.

"Have you gone mad?" Gigi hissed.

“So your parents have prevailed,” Tinti said.

“You are a coward.”

“And a hypocrite to boot!”

“I think it’s horribly wrong. It’ll lead to no good.”

“What’s that, “*Sau choohe khake* ... umm ...whatever.”

“She’s had an epiphany to clean up her slate.”

“She’s going to turn into divine Mother Anusha.. You will soon see posters with halo around her head and hand raised in Benediction.”

“Have you trapped a millionaire goof?”

“Don’t you know she is the foxiest of us all?”

All the three nodded in unison.

I stayed calm and silent through their rants. After an hour we dispersed. I did not tell them that actually the two of them were responsible for turning me off the zippy life. Zita and Gigi had married smart, wealthy men, but soon returned to the single-women gang.

Zita had told us, broiling in anger, “He had married only to shut up his pestering parents. Actually, he was interested only in rambunctious adultery. No love *shov*. He would bring dubious-looking gals home and introduce them to me as models, artists, journalists. To me they looked like soliciting women who lounge around Connaught Place after dusk. I put him on an ultimatum. He insisted he needed space ... freedom. I gave him both by kicking him out of my life.

Gigi had plunged into depression in three months of her marriage. It took intensive treatment and counselling to come out of the pits.

“You know, the bastard is a pervert. He only wanted unnatural sex. It was so bloody demeaning!”

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“I am glad you agree to an arranged marriage, Anu? But are you sure?” my asked me.

“Yes Papa.”

“Good. Arranged marriage has worked for us, you know. Your Mom and I are the happiest couple in the world. Our romance continues even today,” he smiled.

“I know, Papa.”

“You are grown up now. You can take responsibility for your decisions.”

“I’ve learnt it from you.”

A smile flickered on his face again.

After a week, Mom and Pop came into my room.

“He is an only son of an old friend of mine. The boy is nice, hardworking and gentle, holds a good position in a multinational. But not great to look at.”

“That’s okay. But we’ll get to meet for a chat before we marry?”

“Of course!”

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His eyes visibly widened when he saw me. I had a curvaceous figure, with a chiseled face. No male head on the road could help a second look. Some salivated unashamedly.

“Any questions?” he asked.

“What would you like in a girl?”

“Steadfastness... faithfulness,” he said and added with a smile, “in this life and beyond.”

I could guess what was preying on his mind. He had never talked to such a Khajuraho beauty from so up close.”

“Oh.”

“What happened?”

I rolled it over in my mind and toned it down, “There was a boy in my life when I was at college.”

I did not tell him, however about my multi-mating.

He went quiet.

I thought it was all over. “Okay, good to meet you,” I extended my hand.

“Wait, I have to ask my question.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“What would you expect from your husband?”

“Love ... he should love me here ... and hereafter.” Mouthing this cliché sounded funny to myself, though that is what I wanted in my life-partner.

We both laughed.

Then he said seriously, “But one- sided love is meaningless. And I know I’m nothing to look at.”

“Looks have little to do with love. And love can grow over time.”

“What about my past affair?” I asked.

“Past is dead and gone!” he said and added, “But I would like my future to be secure.”

“Fair enough.”

In two months we were married. I had taken the best decision of my life.

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“Why do you pamper me so much?”

“I like it,” Maanas would smile, while standing with the cup of tea by my bedside in the morning. His office was nearby, in Connaught Place -- just about five kilometres from New Rajendra Nagar, whereas I had to travel long distance to Indira Gandhi International Airport, where I worked for Air India as Public Relations Officer. He left for office after I did. Without fail he would stand on the balcony and wave me Bye. In the evening too, he welcomed me with a steaming hot coffee. I felt embarrassed at being spoiled. But liked it, nonetheless.

He did all the marketing. In addition, he helped me in household chores. When the Bai did not come, he would push me out of the kitchen and did the dishes. He was terrific in bed. Perhaps, celibacy had made his libido intense and effusive. I forgot the skunks in my life who carried Viagra in one pocket and condoms in the other. Maanas was a peach!

But had I begun to love him?

On Sundays, we would have our breakfast on the balcony, not talking much, but sharing each other's warmth. We took in the scene unfolding on the street – men bringing milk and veggies from the Mother Dairy booth, the old trooping into the small park for their gossip, women doing Yoga, kids running around and squealing and the young men whizzing past and performing stunts on their MV Augusta F4 motorbikes with girlfriends on the pillion.

“Did you ever do such things in your youth?” I asked Maanas once.

“No. I've been a wet blanket. That is why no girl ever got attracted to me.”

I gave his hand a squeeze. He blushed and turned away his face.

Our life was a song. Someone had scribbled “Eternal Marital Bliss,” on the envelope attached to one of our wedding gifts. I never believed in rituals and superstitions. However, I treasured the envelope.

Maanas was extremely sensitive and empathetic. He would look at my face and know if I was stressed, or feeling unwell and that would worry him to distraction and insisted on cooking.

“I am a reasonably good cook. If you don't like the taste, I will not cook again.”

He would inform Air India and confine me to bed. I enjoyed being fussed over.

But had I begun to love him?

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It was a public holiday. We had finished tea and I was lazing in the bed and talking to my aunt (mother's sister) living in the U.S. Suddenly, I heard a loud thud from the bathroom. I rushed out but the door was bolted from inside. I thumped on the door, but there was no response. I grew frantic and madly banged on the grill-door of our front-door neighbour.

Phanish was young, tall and muscular – a powerhouse of strength. He lived alone and had turned one of the rooms into a gym. He brought an iron rod with which he hit the door a few times. The bolt gave way and the sight I saw petrified me.

Maanas was slouched against the wall, his head lolling on one side, and a bit of vomit on his shirt. Phanish felt his pulse and said, “He is alive. It seems a heart attack. He dialed a few numbers, and soon an ambulance arrived. Phanish completed all the formalities at the hospital. Maanas was rushed to the ICU.

A doctor who came out after half an hour told us, “It was a massive cardiac arrest. A little more delay would have been fatal.”

Phanish was with me in the waiting lounge all night. Early morning, I told him to go home and rest. But he continued to be with me for two days and nights. He went home just to bathe, change and bring food for both of us.

“What about your work, Phanish,” I asked addressing him by name for the first time. Till then he was only a neighbour with whom we exchanged greetings when we ran into each other.

“No deadline for the project I am working on, so you don’t need to worry,” he said in a tone that sounded intimate. He was an architect who worked from home.

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Maanas was in bed, resting at home. Phanish and I were on the chairs.

“You are my savior,” he said to Phanish in a weak voice.

“You are not allowed to talk,” Phanish admonished him.

“I am really grateful to you for all the help to Anusha.”

“Please don’t embarrass me,” he said colouring.

In about a fortnight Maanas had considerably improved. He could move around the house, but was advised rest for a month more. One day, he suggested we invite Phanish to dinner on a Sunday.”

“Umm ...Okay.”

“Find out his favourite dish.”

“Okay.”

The dinner knitted us closer together. We seemed to be one family warmly chatting post-dinner.

“Good that we have a Hercules as our neighbor,” Maanas said and we all laughed.

“Anusha, cooking for two or three makes no difference, isn’t it? Phanish, why don’t you join us for dinner daily?”

Both Phanish and I kept silent, which Maanas treated as acquiescence.

“Fine. So let it be from tomorrow.”

Phanish was a trekker and an engaging raconteur. He narrated his adventures in the jungles with flair. We would finish dinner and keep sitting at the dining table, until the food congealed on our fingers.

One evening, Maanas retired to bed early.

“Okay, the two of you carry on. I’m feeling sleepy.”

Suddenly, Phanish held my hand and kissed it. I did not object. From then on things happened fast.

Maanas’ medicines included a sleeping pill. When he was in deep slumber, I was with Phanish in his house. It went on for months. Instead of feeling guilty, now I would be scared.

Then one morning the sky crashed on my head. Maanas lay inert in his bed.

There was a piece of paper by his pillow: *Love does not grow. It happens.*

BIO- NOTE

Dr. Subhash Chandra retired as Associate Professor of English from Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi. He has published four critical books and several research articles. He has also published short stories in several major national and international fora. His maiden collection of short stories titled “Not Just Another Story” was published by LiFi books in early 2017. His second collection of short stories appeared in 2018, titled “Beyond the Canopy of Icicles” by Authorspress. Both received glowing reviews. He is on the advisory board of the e-journal, “Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific” (ANU, Canberra).