

BIPIN AURORA

-

*THE GIRLS IN THE WAREHOUSE*

I would close my eyes, try to make sense of the world. But I was not able. Sometimes I would fall asleep. Sometimes I could not do even this. I fretted, I frayed. No ideas came to me, no sense was made of the world.

But once in a while an idea did come. Or it was not so much an idea as an image. A child, a girl, a man—some memory, or smell, from the past. The memory led to other memories, the smell led to other smells.

I felt then, in these instances, that my life had not been a waste. But could the memories and smells really be enough? What did they add up to? “What *do* they add up to?” I asked myself more than once. “What is the bigger picture, the larger point?”

I sat in my room, I thought of June.

Was she one of these smells, these memories?

She was twenty-six years old (or perhaps twenty-seven). She was from Korea, she ate Korean food. She worked in a small place. She wore a long black dress.

They had told me that there were black girls there. They had told me that they wore anklets, bracelets. I had gone to see them—to see them with their anklets and their bracelets.

But once I had gotten there, I had found that there were no black girls. Only June was there (or girls like her). She wore a black dress. And she served you tea.

-----

I went to the place—I went there for the first time in 1998. It was a warehouse. Some said that it was not a warehouse, but a “whorehouse”: a place of ill-repute.

How crude they were.

There was a sign outside. It said that they had rooms—clean rooms. They had girls—girls in long robes. They had girls—girls who served tea.

I went, I entered; I paid the money. I asked to see these girls—these girls who served tea.

In the receiving area was an older woman—well dressed, friendly. But she did not wear any bracelets, she did not wear any anklets.

I paid more money, I asked to see the rooms inside.

The first room was empty. There was a table there, a chair. There was a bed in the middle of the room.

I came outside, I went to the second room.

In the room was a woman—nondescript, white—peering over some numbers in a ledger.

I greeted the woman, I introduced myself.

She did not seem very interested. She said that she was hungry, it was already time for lunch, but who cared about her.

I offered to go outside, to bring her a sandwich.

“The numbers in the ledger,” she said. “Pore over the numbers. That is all *they* care about.”

I bowed to the woman, I walked out graciously (or as graciously as I could, walking backwards, still facing her); I walked to the third room.

In the third room was a woman—but she was hardly young, or pretty, either. She was in her twenties, perhaps even her teens. But she had wrinkles on her face (what a strange thing). Her back was bent, she was wearing a white scarf over her head. When she walked she limped, her back bent—she limped from one side of the room to the other.

She was looking for something. But what, I could not tell.

“May I help you?” I said.

She shook her head.

“May I help you?” I said.

“I am not like the others.”

“The others?”

“The others that you have come to examine—or is it admire?”

They were strange words, I did not know what to say. So I remained silent: I said nothing.

“There are others in the world—others just like you. They have come before, they will come again.”

She spoke her words clearly, without criticism. At least I did not take them as such.

Her voice was soft, mellifluous. It was in some ways (do I overstate it?) a *religious* voice.

“Other people have come before you. They have come from Taxila.”

“Taxila?”

“From the high mountains.”

“The high mountains?”

“They have come from the high mountains—where the goats live.”

Her words were strange, but they were not without wisdom.

“They have come before. They will come again.”

-----

I went to the warehouse, I went there many times.

It was cold outside, it was raining. I felt alone, lost. I had this urge—this great urge—to go.

The old woman came to the door, she greeted me. She led me in.

There were some steps in the back (the door had been closed, I had not seen them before). They were dark steps, they were winding.

The woman went down the steps, I followed.

We came to a room. A girl was on the other side. She wore brown lipstick, a black robe.

“The hostess,” she said.

The girl was twenty-six years old, perhaps twenty-seven.

“June,” she said.

“June?”

“It is my name.” June went to the corner, she made some tea. She took the tea, poured it into a cup. She took the cup, she brought it to me.

I lifted the cup, I brought it to my mouth.

“It is nice,” I said.

She smiled at me, smiled briefly.

She went to the window, she lit a candle. She came back.

“You are from India?” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Indians like tea—they like the taste of tea.”

Her words were neutral (or perhaps wise). Who was I to dispute them?

She went to the window, she went there again. She took some incense, she placed it on the table in the corner. The smoke rose from the incense; and the smell, it rose as well.

-----

Some days passed. I went to the warehouse, I went there again.

It was cold outside, it was raining. The old woman came to the front, she greeted me.

I went inside.

*(continued in the issue)*