

**Change**  
Sunil Sharma

On weekdays, lonely and bored, Smita would do what she could always deftly do — turn herself into a *boy*. An instant change she could easily effect before a mirror or bare wall or on the bed. An empty home was a perfect stage for any dramatic mid-afternoon gender-reversal. She would become a boy in a jiffy. A boy who was an *absent* sibling. And a trusted companion and confidante.

‘I am Deepu,’ Smita would announce to all the denizens populating her universe. And roam the house as a boy, firing invisible pistols in the air, producing guttural noise as a sound-track to the entire mayhem. She feared none during such moments of metamorphosis. Except her dad.

Dad was perpetually angry. Commanding hoarsely, ‘Smita do not do this. Do not do that. Sit here. Do not dance. Study hard.’ Always after her.

*Never likes me whatever I do!*

After returning from work, Dad hardly smiled or hugged or looked at her. Just sat in the den. Sometimes Smita ventured into his dangerous territory, on tip-toes, holding her breath but Dad never looked up, from gazing out of his barred window and drinking dark liquid in a glass. The content emitted a bad smell; it was called Dad’s evening juice by Ma. Once she insisted on drinking the tempting juice but was pushed outside by angry Dad, saying, ‘only men drink such a costly stuff’. After taking that mysterious water with lots of ice cubes, Dad would come out of his den, singing occasionally but mostly cursing. Fights erupted. Dad screamed; Ma also, after turning on the volume of the television to confuse the curious neighbours. Smita would go and hide in a cupboard, holding her old doll. These were regular scenes. Afterwards Ma served him a hot dinner. Smita was terrified of his eyes. Blood-red. She was scared of his round bulging eyes and tall, gaunt frame. A picture in a fairy-tale book, of a cruel king, looked exactly like Dad!

She avoided his eyes. They spewed fire-balls that scorched her whole being. Reduced her to *nothing*.

Ma was perpetually busy. She did not have time.

‘Look, Ma,’ Smita once exclaimed, trying to draw her out, on a long summer evening.

Ma ignored such friendly requests when tired after work and ready for the evening chores.

Smita had tiptoed to her side and shown her the picture. ‘Dad’s picture is in this book,’ she told a mother busy with pots and pans in that little space she called hell.

‘What is this book?’ demanded Ma.

‘Fairy tales.’

‘You are now a big nine-year-old girl. At your age, I assisted my ma in the kitchen. Such a big family! Twenty-two mouths to feed. You never do anything. Just sit and read fairy tales...BAD!’ Her voice grew loud, almost screaming.

The little kitchen, full of smoke, was a hot furnace. The smell of the fried spices, trapped inside, made Smita choke. Ma perspired badly. Preparing dinner —

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her hands automatic; grinding, mixing and stir-frying at a speed that always left her only girl-child speechless. Bad!

Smita's face fell.

'Life is NOT fairy tale. UNDERSTOOD?' Ma looked through her.

'Leave me alone.' The chastened child slipped away, ghost-like.

Deepu came as a helping friend. Smita would stand before the mirror and say to her, 'Ma does not love me, Deepu. Nobody does. They wanted *you*, NOT ME.'

It was a fact drilled into her small head by paternal aunts and her coughing grandmother. 'Your Pa was expecting Deepu only. But, look, we got you instead!'

How desperately, Smita wanted the *change*. She prayed to a little statue of Goddess Durga kept on a wall-mounted shelf in her room — their shrine. 'Please, divine mother, turn me into the boy that everybody, including Ma, wanted. You are a goddess. You can do miracles. Please, Mother, change me into Deepu, my brother who could not come here. This will make my family HAPPY.'

Goddess Durga's eyes smiled always at her pleading self. Then, one long afternoon, Smita converted herself into a boy by strapping a toy pistol to her waist and wearing a hat. It became a daily ritual; a diversion. She transformed into a he. Sometimes, hurt and crying, Smita would say to Deepu, 'Why do not they love little girls here?' On holidays, afternoons, with her parents asleep, she would say softly to her brother, 'Only you hear me out and never complain. Such a lovely brother! I know you love me. Others do not even talk to me.' Or, she read comics or fairy tales. 'The Crying Princess' was her favorite fairy tale.

*A king who never smiled at his daughter, imprisoned her in a golden cage the size of a castle, on an island guarded by dragons, and surrounded by choppy sea that listened only to the gruff commands of an ageing one-eyed regent. With her mother dead and a cruel stepmother hating her, the lonely princess cried copiously, her tears adding to the rising levels of the perilous sea. The king never wanted to see his dark-complexioned princess. Step-mother wanted her murdered but the gentle creature was saved by kind angels. The daughter loved her father, the king, so much that she would cry daily from morning until night. Then lulled by a kind sea breeze, she would fall asleep. One night, poison sent in a fruit salad put crying princess into a coma.*

*The good fairy, her god-mother, got so annoyed that she put a spell on the entire kingdom. 'Freeze,' said the angry fairy.*

*They all froze. Tended by the good fairy, crying princess was restored to good health. 'Please do not punish them,' she said. 'Spare my father, mother and all his subjects, please.'*

*Touched by her innate goodness, the good fairy said, 'When you stop crying and start smiling, the spell will be lifted.'*

*'When will that be?'*

*'A kind man will come by and claim you as his wife and give you happiness, and then it will happen,' revealed the fairy and disappeared.*

*Years rolled by. Many men, enticed by popular accounts of her innocence and pure beauty, tried to reach her in her gilded prison but were devoured by the*

*hungry sea or fiery dragons on the prowl, until one day a handsome commoner, assisted by kind angels, came down to claim her heart in the frozen kingdom.*

*As soon as love struck, the princess stopped crying and smiled. The moment she did that, the spell was lifted and normalcy returned. A repentant king put the step mother in the dungeon and gave away her share of the kingdom to the princess as a dowry. After becoming queen, she released her step mother and pardoned her. All lived happily after.*

Smita loved the story very much but the eye of the king in the illustration frightened her. He always stared hard. And he would change into her Indian dad...Oh! So scary!

Every day, after her parents left the flat in suburban Mumbai, its sixth floor would change into a huge fort. The 550-sq-foot house — so tiny and crowded with furniture — locked, eerily silent, looked vast, unfamiliar, *threatening*, with dangers lurking within and without.

*Do not ever open the door for any stranger. We will come and open it with our duplicate keys. In emergencies, call up Manju Aunty. She will come and help. Never open the door or respond to the bell, OK? There are wolves that prey on little girls in Indian cities. They kill them. The thirsty wolves.*

The deserted apartment contained many surprises for the little girl. Every corner turned into a dark spiral staircase, every closet filled with wild creatures; the little balcony became a wide terrace, and few potted plants grew into full trees. She became a crying princess needing to be rescued by an adventurous hero.

At those trying moments, Smita would change into Deepu, firing pistols, charging at the guards, fighting the fiery dragons and sailing back across the hungry sea. Ready to swallow human beings. Deepu became the braveheart, the brother everybody missed in the family. Deepu would do what she could never do as a girl.

‘I am Deepu now. I will do what Smita cannot. I have changed into a tough boy.’ This became her war cry before plunging into difficult expeditions. Her boy would slay monsters and tame unruly waves. Nothing was impossible! She constantly desired to be Deepu.

*...and, on Saturdays, returning early from Mumbai, Ma would find the thin child lying sprawled on the old sofa, sound asleep, a toy pistol in one slim hand and a faded doll, in the other. Ma’s eyes would moisten and she would gently lift the lonely child and tug her under a sheet in the bed-room, without fully waking her; her daughter so tender in her grasp...*

Smita’s daily excursions suddenly ceased. Dad stopped going to office. He would remain in the bed-room only and hated any sound.

‘Do not disturb Dad. He is not feeling well.’ That was the strict order from a concerned Ma who returned late. She went to far-off Andheri, on the western line, a journey of almost 90 km. Her office was some distance from the railway station. Before returning exhausted, she would buy greens for the family, haggling with the vendors on the platform; then take a crowded bus home. Ma looked tired, almost

ready to drop dead. Fortified by hot tea and a quick wash, she would start dinner preparations. Dad would be sipping his dark evening juice, unconcerned.

Two different worlds, Smita thought. Alone, in her room, she would produce Deepu as her companion invisible to the rest.

Dad was not well. Long afternoons, post-school, Smita would hear him talking on the phone about jobs — any job, anywhere, for any pay. *She had never heard him sound so sad!* He stopped shaving, got up late, threw tantrums and sometimes drank evening juice in the afternoons also. He listened to dark music during this time. He stopped going out except to buy his juice and packets of cigarettes.

‘What has happened? Why does he not go to office?’ Smita asked.

Ma said nothing.

Smita persisted. It was a Sunday evening. Dad was listening to music in his den, alone.

‘He will soon. Trying hard. Might go to Dubai also,’ Ma said.

But Dad’s moods varied. They alternated between gloomy and aloof.

She wanted her dad to smile, not sulk.

How could she do that?

She prayed often but his moods remained. He stayed in his room. She saw him circling marking spaces in the papers with red pen and searching something on the computer.

But nothing made him smile.

Smita started feeling sorry for him. She wanted to bring cheer into his life. But how? She felt like her favorite crying princess...helpless. She wanted her dad to change from sad guy into a happy one. Then the idea came: If I become Deepu? She was so sure. This plan would make him happy. Deepu. The sibling that was not. That he desired. It surely would work.

One afternoon, unable to bear his loneliness, a desperate but bold Smita turned into Deepu in order to please Dad. She burst into the bed-room, shouting and firing the toy pistol at the same time, muttering, Bang! Bang! She had seen her cousins, all boys, doing that. Firing pistols, fighting each other, ripping apart girls’ dolls and pillows in gleeful destruction. Their mothers and fathers never scolded the violent boys. They approved of the demolition work carried out by the little emperors. She was mimicking those noisy cousins but her mission was noble.

A different reception awaited this act of imitation and loud acting. A dormant volcano erupted on that humid afternoon! Dad looked at her, his eyes red. She saw *the cruel king*.

‘Why are you creating so much noise? You mad?’

The harshness was shattering. A cannon-ball exploded in her ears. Smita did not reply. Lost her thin voice. Grew mute.

‘Why are you firing a pistol? You, a boy? You, crazy girl! Acting as a tomboy,’ he asked, his eyes appearing redder, his voice stabbing her tender heart, his index finger pointing.

Smita shrank into herself, growing smaller by the second, eyes un-seeing.

Then, Dad, the cruel king snatched the toy from her yielding hands, threw it out of the window and dragged her out of his room, shouting, ‘Give me a break. Do not ruin my life. Already I am tired of life. Leave me ALONE! Understood, you silly girl. Leave me ALONE. Now LEAVE.’ He pushed a shocked he/she out of the room,

his breath smelling of stale tobacco, and he shut the door against her wide-eyed face...with a violent sound that could be heard miles away on that hot summer afternoon in their quiet neighbourhood.

Smita sobbed loudly; then a piping wail issued from her throat as if a spring had once suppressed it. She sat down against the drab white wall of the sad house and cried and cried, her voice unheard in that small suburban Indian home in a working-class neighbourhood. Warm tears covered her frock and drenched her slim body in a deluge that came from the depths of her aching heart.

...and when Ma came home tired and sweating from the long harrowing commute on the local train and bus, carrying groceries and greens in two bags, she found little Smita in high fever, lying unconscious on her narrow creaking bed; a contrite father nearby, applying ice-packs, his eyes red, his face flushed. Ma cried throughout the long night and prayed constantly to Goddess Durga. But Smita never woke from her sound sleep of peace and happiness and drifted away slowly to another world of light and eternal joy called heaven...

After they cremated their only child with the support of close friends, the shattered Sonis could not sleep. Towards the grey dawn, Ma drifted off into a fitful sleep and experienced a strange dream. Terrified, she woke her husband. 'I had a disturbing dream.'

'What was that?' he asked, shaken and withdrawn, hair dishevelled.

'I saw an angry Durga leaving. It was an omen. A furious Devi deserting her devotees.' she said, sounding still scared.

'What else?' he asked, benumbed by grief.

'I saw Smita smiling in the oval face of the divine mother. Leaving. Fading gently into the night.'

He listened, eyes wide, an unbidden tear escaping his right eye, searing his sunken cheek. 'Smita?'

'Yes. Smita appearing in the image of the goddess. Clear-eyed, smiling shyly, as she always did when I returned home. Her face looked at me from behind the painted face of the idol. As if beckoning me.'

'Then?'

'Then, suddenly, I see the goddess mother getting very angry and quitting our home forever. It is not good. We are doomed...' and Ma began crying at this double loss. Her frail body clad in a cheap saree shook. It was a bleak morning sans the usual sense of joy that dawn always brings. The sun was obscured by drifting clouds and humidity was high. Not a breath of fresh air. The city lay asleep in drab houses tucked away in old buildings along broken roads. Decay was in the air.

A freak summer storm was building up fast on the horizon. The heat became oppressive. Grey clouds were moving from some place in the sky, a menacing mass, moving fast. Lightning struck miles away.

'I too had a frightening dream,' he said, finally, tone low, eyes vacant.

Ma's body shook with her sobs. Silence almost killed her.

'I saw a huge country...miles and miles of blazing plain, featureless, bereft of trees and people. No soul. Nothing. Only a burning desert. And the sound of my beloved Smita's happy laughter echoing, turning into a loud dirge. Then receding slowly across the baked plain...' Dad could not finish. He went to Smita's room and

clutched her doll; eyes dimmed, he began, pleading in a broken voice, 'Smita, come back to your dad who misses you so much...'

The summer storm that descended on the suburb, swiftly and angrily snapped off electrical wires, blew away the tin roofs of the nearby shops and sign boards and knocked down several trees in a single mighty blow. The velocity of the wind was high, rattling window-panes. Then a dust-storm arrived, followed by heavy rain that fell on the rooves of high-rises; thunder crashed in the inner urban areas. The world became brutal, a place where innocence could never survive.