

UNTOUCHABLE

By

Trent Lewin

Daya rubs her feet. With a steel sponge, she takes off the grime. The heat loosens the black stuff and brings up smells of diesel, refuse, burnt wood. When she is done, she turns to her hands.

Her father Jawarlahal shifts in the bed and moans. One of his arms is slung across the bed, useless where it lies numb. Daya takes a glass and holds it against her father's hand so that he can feel its coolness.

When Daya is done cleaning herself, she empties the basin onto the street. It is two hours before midnight. She wonders if she should take food. In a few hours, she will be in the street again.

Some nights, like these, she knows that there is a question that eludes her. At times, she finds the answer on the rooftop of a neighbour's home. At others, it comes from a field whose stalks are brown and crisped by the sun. Once, she saw it in the back of a rickshaw, dressed in foreign clothes and pointing a camera at the street.

Daya removes her clothes. She puts her back to the wall and allows herself a moment in the coolest place that she knows. Instantly, it is winter in Jammu, the snow jammed in fissures as a wind looks for the hot-lands where Daya was born. Then she is back in the room and there is her father on the bed, breathing badly. Hacking. Daya wonders what he imagines in his drowsiness. Probably, it is a railroad steaming its way to the south, over the old wooden bridges to an ocean that he has never seen.

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Outside, the lights are on. There are people in doorways, smoking. Others are drinking and reading from their poetry books. The wagons and rickshaws are finished for the night, which makes it easier for Daya to trace her way along the street. No one bothers her, not even the beggars who cling to the spots they've won in alleys and gutters. She knows every patch of the street: where the cobbles have come undone, where the children like to play, where the merchants choose to set up dhabas to boil their oil.

“Oho Daya, why are you here?” comes a voice. It is Pinder and his gang, smoking and passing around a bottle. “This is not a safe place for a sweeper.”

The men are wearing pyjamas. The white fabric rustles as they surround her.

A memory of her father comes to Daya. He is sitting on the side of a hill and looping blades of grass together until they form all the creatures of the jungle. Daya plays beyond him at the base of the hill, one eye looking for flowers, another for the holes where snakes would live. The image blurs and reforms into that of an old man lying in his bed, diseased, parched by a thirst the river itself could not quench.

Pinder takes her by the hair. “Get on your knees.” Daya abases herself, palms flat upon the cobbles. “If you look up, I will crack this bottle on your head.”

There are sounds of drinking. A fleck of ash from a cigarette on her foot. The men do not touch her, but they are close. She can feel their heat. Their stares. If she closes her eyes hard enough, she can feel their hands upon her, the places they would go, the things they would take. Daya wishes for a memory to transport her into the girl she had been, but the memories have gone to sleep with the beggars or been washed away by the liquids that drain down the street.

It takes her a moment to realize that Pinder is speaking again. “...take you there again? Well, Daya? Should we find that same place? That night you certainly spoke, no? Maybe you are not a mute after all.” She remembers the night he speaks of, how they’d put their hands over her eyes as they’d crouched behind her. She remembers screaming, until yes, it might have sounded like words. They’d left her naked in a pile of dogshit. Two of them had urinated on her before they’d moved on with their clinking bottles.

“You do not speak now, Daya? Not even to spare yourself?” Pinder is very close. He is studying her back. As his finger touches her, Daya forces herself to stay still.

“Dirty bitch,” he says, and the others agree. “You are not a mute. You speak. I have heard you.” He turns his back on her. “Go. Get out of here.”

Daya keeps her eyes on the ground as she scurries down the street. Behind her, Pinder and his gang return to their drink.

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Daya moves along the wall of a dark alleyway. She reaches a place where a brick has crumbled, creating a hole. She puts her eye to it and looks into a courtyard. It is lit by bulbs of different colours. There is a large tree in the middle. Ropes and swings hang from its great branches. It is an orange tree, and Daya can smell the ripened fruit. A path of marble tile extends from the house to a collection of chairs canopied by swaying fabric.

Beneath the canopy sit two girls. They are the sisters who live in the house and are always here during the night. They are dressed in saris, slid up to their knees so that they may receive relief from the warmth. Tonight, the sisters are drinking from steel cups. On a table under the canopy sits a flask of milk.

A moment later, two more girls enter the courtyard. They sit with the sisters and take milk. Daya has seen paintings of things like this, where everyone is at home and at ease. In the paintings, someone must always be smiling, and someone must always be teasing - and there must always be the serious one who holds their head to the side. One of the sisters, the one in the green sari, stares at the wall. The other three talk and drink.

More girls arrive, until the chairs underneath the canopy are taken, and some of the visitors are sitting on the ground. A few listen to a girl who is reading from a book.

Later, Daya picks out the movement of another girl. Her feet are bare, toes curled against the heat in the marble. Her hair is loose over her red sari. Daya has seen her before. The first time she came here, she saw this girl alone in the courtyard. She had decided to dance. Something about her movements had said to Daya that the girl had never tried it before. She had danced for an hour, laughing at her own audacity, and pleased by the suddenness of her success. And then she had fallen into one of the chairs, exhausted. There had been no breeze that day, nothing to ruin the image of her lying there.

Several times since, Daya has seen her, for the girl is a common visitor at the house, a friend to the sisters. She is near Daya's age. Her skin is lighter, arms thinner. Tonight, the red sari sweeps behind her as though it does not understand how it could be attached to such a creature.

The girl walks to the canopy. The quiet sister in the green sari smiles to see her. The new girl kneels before her and takes her hands in her own. They say something to each other which Daya cannot hear. The girl moves her face towards that of the other. One arm reaches into the sister's black hair and pulls her closer. Lips meet. Around them, there is poetry and laughter, and a night so heavy with heat that the monsoon could not wash it away. But Daya...Daya can hear the ocean. Daya can feel the sea. She tries to speak, but no words come out. No words have ever come out. She presses herself against the brick as though she could

squeeze through the small opening and appear in the courtyard, a shade in the corner that someone would eventually see and invite into the circle of light, to a place under the tree. When the kiss ends, the new girl takes a place at the feet of her lover.

Daya finds that her fingers are bent. There is a pain in some part of her, but she does not know what limb she has inconvenienced. Eventually, the girl in the red sari rises, moves out of Daya's sight. The other girls clap softly, urging her to dance.

Daya moves back from the hole and looks up at the sky above the wall. It is not so high to the top. She starts with the foothold of the missing brick. Up she rises, until she feels the ledge. She has an instant to find a handhold that will support her weight, but what she finds instead are the glass shards that are meant to protect the inhabitants of the house from the outside. They are glued to the brick, immobile. Shards cut her, and as she pulls herself up, glass breaks under the weight. Her hands bleed into the glue. Her other hand searches in vain for a place clean of glass, but there is none. She feels the glass impale this hand, too.

She pulls herself up.

Daya can see into the courtyard. The girl in the red sari is there, dancing. She moves, sways, the same thing as the wind, no different from the tree in the courtyard. If there had been music, she would have been better than it. If she had been wearing a shawl, it would have risen and fallen with the sea. Daya watches the steps, the places where those bare feet go, the way the silk attaches itself to motions that were not born in this world. It is the same dance that Daya has seen before, but she watches until it is finished. The girl in the red sari bows to the others and laughs as she did the first time Daya saw her dancing in the courtyard.

When the pain in Daya's hands becomes unbearable, she lets go of the wall. The fall is not so far. As she lies in the alleyway, she feels cold for the first time in months.

On the way home, the drunks are sleeping with their books of poetry upon their chests, the only possession that will not be stolen from them. Their money purses are empty. Even their shoes are gone. Chaiwalas are pushing carts down the street, their sandals slapping the cobbles.

When Daya reaches her home, she looks to her father. He lays there, a used, broken man wheezing in his sleep. He has not drunk his water.

Daya fills a basin and washes her hands. There are shards of glass in her palms. When the glass has been removed, she cleans the wounds and bandages them with rags.

In a corner of the room, she puts her arms around her knees. After a while, the ache in her back asserts itself. She thinks that this is a good sign. Sleep pulls for

her, and she imagines what it will be like to be in the streets with her broom tomorrow, with her hands cut as they are.

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Jawarlalal awakes and discovers how great is his thirst. He casts about for the cup and nearly knocks it over. At first, the water tastes fiery. For a moment, his breathing eases. For a moment, he need not concentrate on the small act of drawing breath. Jawarlalal swings his legs off the bed.

It is still dark outside, dark as when he first went to sleep. He seldom sees the day anymore. In the day, dust stirs, and he finds it the most difficult to breathe.

Soon, the temple and the mosque will turn up their loudspeakers for prayer. The noise is one which is easily borne. His eyes adjust to the darkness. In the corner of the room, far from her bed, is his daughter. Her arms are huddled about herself. Silent, barely perceptible sounds of breathing and sleep come from her. It is the only sound she makes, for Daya has never spoken a word. She is thin, dark with the sun, and has yet to see the things that Jawarlalal does in his sleep. But he will show them to her one day, and he will take her to those places. It might be tomorrow, the day after that. It might be more time than he can bear, or she can. But it will be, for she is his daughter, and she is pure. The sun and stars are not so grand as she is. It will be, he tells himself, as he falls asleep again. As sure as the ocean and the smell of it that is with him all the time, it will be.

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Author Biography

Trent Lewin is a Canadian writer with roots in India. He has been longlisted and shortlisted a number of times in the CBC Short Story Prize and the Commonwealth Writers Prize. He has been published in *Rigorous Literary Magazine* and is a winner of Grain's Short Grain contest. His focus is on blending genres in fiction. In his day job, Trent works in the field of climate change. An immigrant to Canada and a BIPOC writer, he is also interested in themes of belonging, and what it means to truly be from a place when you are from no place.