

Things She Could Never Have

“Fresh sugar cane juice is the best,” Kiran pronounced happily, as she returned the empty glass to the sugarcane-walla.

I wiped my chin.

“Do you want another glass?” I asked.

“No. I am saving space for the pani puri and gol gappas.”

I ordered another glass for myself and watched the man feed the cane stalks into the juicer and saw them slip down to be crushed over the drum, juice spilling down into my glass.

“I will not share with you, so if you want another, you better order it for yourself.”

I knew her well. She ate scanty portions and then generously helped herself to mine. Kiran was always on a diet.

“One’s enough for me,” she said, as the vendor squeezed a lemon over my glass and handed it back. I downed it before she could change her mind.

We walked down Zamzama Avenue where the traffic streamed past us, honking furiously. Electric wires looped from pole to pole and bright advertisements hung off the low-rise buildings

on either side of the street. We stepped on and off the narrow pavement, meandering between the parked cars, stopping to gaze at the windows of the shoe stores, coffee shops, bakeries, and boutiques.

“Hey, look at this,” Kiran said, stopping outside a shop window. A stream of water was falling down the inner side of the glass wall. “I read somewhere that this shop even has water flowing under its glass floor. Do you want to go in?”

She wanted to visit the boutique, walk on its glass floor, touch the fine clothes, and for these simple pleasures she was willing to risk the humiliation of being turned out. Kiran liked the finer things in life. She leafed through fashion and décor magazines, cutting and pasting photos of things she could never have onto the walls of her room.

“Why don’t you have a look? I’ll wait here for you.” I turned away, but she gripped my arm.

“I won’t go without you.” It seemed we would either go in together or not at all.

We are both transgender, but my appearance leaves mouths agape. I am five-foot nine—unremarkable for a man, striking for a woman. Where Kiran’s body has curves, mine has edges. Even with the help of makeup and push-up bras, I look like a teenage boy playing dress-up in his mother’s clothes. Kiran is pretty, with features so delicate you could miss the shadow on her cheeks. Her voice is low and husky. Sexy. I wish I sounded like that, but each time I open my mouth, it is my father’s voice that emerges.

On her own, she stood a chance of pulling off the ruse of a well-to-do woman out shopping, but with me beside her, a minute was all she would be allowed.

“Let’s go in.”

There were fish swimming under the glass floor. I could tell that Kiran was controlling herself, suppressing the squeals she

was prone to utter. Coral reefs must look like this through the bottom of a tourist boat. Kiran wasn't the only one who leafed through the glossy magazines.

"May I help you with something?"

The sales girl was breathtaking, with long dark hair and heavily kohled eyes.

"We are just looking. Thank you."

"Please let me know if you need anything."

I heard Kiran exhale softly.

"Thank you," I said to the girl and walked over to a stand of clothes and flicked the price tag on a shalwar-kurta suit. Who wore these clothes? Where did they wear them? I turned to Kiran but her expression silenced me. *She* would wear these clothes, if she could afford them. A single shalwar-kurta from this boutique cost more than what we earned in a year.

She held up a white chiffon kurta with silver zari-work around the halter neck.

"You can try it on, if you like. Let me show you to the change room."

I looked at the sales assistant's retreating back as she led Kiran away.

"I'll be right outside if you need me," the girl said, pausing to look at herself in a full-length mirror and fixing her hair. She turned at my approach.

"Everything here is so expensive." The words slipped from my mouth.

"I know," she said, leaning into the mirror to re-apply a coat of crimson lipstick. "But you have to spend, na." Her eyes glanced over my clothes. "Don't want to look cheap, do you?" She bent her head towards her armpit and gave a little sniff. "Some people smell so terrible. I have to send the clothes they try on for dry cleaning."