

TABISH KHAIR

NAMASTE TRUMP

CHOTTU IS WORRIED. “What is it, Babu?” he asks me, after placing the post-breakfast cup of chai on my desk, to my left, as I always insist. “This gas that is going to kill everyone they say?”

I look up from my laptop and gaze at him in incomprehension. He stands next to my desk, empty tray in hand, looking as goofy as ever, wearing those baggy trousers that he prefers. Chottu is small—hence, I suppose, his name—and it is impossible to determine his age. His face is round and unwrinkled, and he is about the height of a twelve-year-old boy. But he is not twelve years old. In fact, he probably came to us when he was twelve or thirteen, and that is—how much?—seven-eight years ago. There is something wrong with his head—he has trouble doing even simple sums; he goes about singing the same two or three film lyrics to himself in a monotone—and it has somehow stunted his body too.

“What gas?” I ask him.

He smiles his goofy, gap-toothed smile. He had two of his teeth knocked out when he stepped across the road without looking both ways, some years ago. My wife had sent him out on an errand. It was sheer luck he did not lose anything else. Just those two teeth, and a broken leg, which mended but left him with a slight limp. I remember running downstairs at the commotion. He was there, spread-eagled on the curb, mouth bloody, and he gave me this same goofy smile when I ran up to him. He always smiles. Even when he is being scolded.

“This gas that they say the Chinese gave the Pakistanis to spread in India. It makes you cough and die.”

Then it dawns on me.

“You mean the virus?” I say.

He nods vigorously. If my wife had been around, she would have said something sarcastic about Chottu to me—in English—and asked him to stop thinking and get back to work—in Hindi. She has grown to dislike him over the years. He is too big to keep in a flat with young girls, she says, alluding to our two teenage daughters. I think her dislike has more to do with Chottu’s missing teeth and limp—both of them indirectly caused by her. But my wife is not there, having left for her

weekly yoga session, so I turn around my laptop and show Chottu what I am working on. It is a poster for the Namaste Trump event. My ad company is one of the three commissioned to make posters for it, an order that has come to me through my MLA friend. It is not a huge order, but it will lead to bigger ones. That is why I am looking after the project personally.

"Look at this," I say to Chottu, showing him the poster. "Who is this?"

"Ahhh," exclaims Chottu, his moon-face lighting up. "That is Modiji." Modiji is printed on one side of the poster, palms folded in a namaste.

CHOTTU IS A GREAT admirer of our prime minister. Everyone in my family is, all my neighbors are, and Chottu has only us as his political mentors. He has lived with us for so long. When he first came to us, most of his salary used to be sent back to his family in some village in Bihar, but two years ago he asked us to give him the full salary. "What about your family in the village?" my wife had enquired. We knew he was the second oldest of about a dozen siblings. "It is my earnings," he had replied, almost sullenly, eyes fixed to the floor around his feet. "I have told them I cannot send them money anymore." "What will you do with the money?" my wife had asked him. "After all, you get food and shelter with us." He had blushed. Chottu is surprisingly fair, fairer than anyone in my family, apart from my wife. "Why," I had joked, "why, I think Chottu is saving up to get married!" Chottu had looked surprised, and then, in a voice full of admiration and bewilderment, he had gasped: "How did you know, Babu?" My wife and I had burst out laughing. But we had accepted his request: his wages had been handed over to him, and no one had come to protest from his village.

"Yes, that is Modiji," I reply. "But who is the other person?"

"He is a Firangi, Babu."

"You don't know who he is?"

"All Firangis look alike, Babu, like our own Pappuji," he says with a cheeky smile, repeating something he has heard me say.

"Not this Firangi," I tell him. "This Firangi is a great leader, a great man."

"As great as Modiji?"

"Almost," I reply, laughing. "His name is Trump, and he is the Modiji of America."

"Ahh, I have heard his name. The dhobi was saying Modiji is good friends with this man."

"He is," I agree. "And you know why I am making this poster on my computer?"

Chottu shakes his head.

"Because Trump is going to visit us."

Chottu looks alarmed. "Visit us?" he squeaks. "Visit us here?" And he looks around, as if to register all the things that need to be cleaned or tidied up in the flat.

"Not visit us in this flat, you dolt," I laugh. "Visit Modiji and our India. He is coming here in a few days. And do you think he would come here if there was a gas killing all of us? Would he?"

Chottu shakes his head.

"So, off with you. Do the breakfast dishes and stop wasting time on gossip by servants from other flats."

Chottu grins, gives me that exaggerated salaam-salute he reserves for such orders, and scampers away on his uneven legs.

THE EARLY WEEKS of the pandemic are not a problem for me. I often work from home, and my ad company is fully digitalized. I suspect the only reason we still prefer having an office is to get away from our children and spouses! Even back home, it is not an issue: my children switch to Zoom classes, and my wife reschedules a few arrangements. Chottu has always lived with us, sleeping on a roll-up mattress in a corner of the sitting room. This is convenient. While some of our neighbors have to do without servants, since theirs live in shanties elsewhere and have to be laid off for safety's sake, we go on as usual. Chottu brings me my morning tea; he prepares the breakfast and meals; he does the daily shopping, the dusting and cleaning. This is fine to begin with, but, as the pandemic unfolds, it also becomes a problem. It leaves us vulnerable.

This becomes clear to us on the day the entire nation comes out on balconies to clap hands and bang plates, as requested by Modiji, in order to thank our caregivers. Some go down into the parks and driveways, but my family and I are careful: we stay on our balcony, having hung some purifying Ayurvedic sachets from the railings. We bang the metal plates we have, and my wife fetches the conch shell from the puja room and blows on it. Downstairs—we are on the second floor—there are people with more elaborate instruments. Drums, bells, whistles, sheets of metal. There have been messages on WhatsApp about how some high-pitched metallic sounds ward off the virus, and many

people are doing their utmost to create a noise. In my family, we are not convinced by such messages, but we are also not the kind to scoff at any effort to save the nation. We are not libertards. We look on, making our own bit of noise. Suddenly, who do I see in the crowd below? Who but Chottu! He is dragging an empty metal container while a couple of other servants from the flats in the complex—not all house servants have been dismissed yet—are banging on it with rods. They must have got the container from the nearby dump. They have obviously washed it clean for the occasion. They have even decorated it with party ribbons. I point Chottu out to my wife. He has been instructed not to mingle with others needlessly. My wife tries to call him up, but the noise downstairs is far too loud, and just then some kids start bursting crackers.

The noise is still lingering outside, and Chottu has not returned when we close the balcony door and re-enter the sitting room. The children drift off to their rooms to continue swapping the photos and messages that they have been posting to friends on their iPhones. I look at my wife. There is no way I can avoid this issue anymore.

“What did I tell you?” she says.

My wife has been upset for a few days about Chottu. She has complained that he mixes too much with people in the complex, goes down to gossip as he had before the pandemic, and does not even take proper care in the kitchen: she always has to remind him to wash his hands whenever he returns from a chore, and to wash the fruits with soap, not just with water.

“What did I tell you?” she says to me. “He is a risk. Nothing will happen to him, I am sure; these people have excellent immunity. But we . . .”

Just then Chottu returns to the flat and heads for the guest wash-room. “Chottu,” I shout at him. But he gives me his dumb grin and says: “Coming, Babu. Just washing my hands first.”

I get up and walk after him to the washroom. I am angry. “Haven’t I told you not to take any risk, you dolt?” I say to him from the door, as he nonchalantly washes his hands.

“But I am not taking any risks, Babu,” he replies, pointing to two sachets hanging from a thread around his neck. “I put on two of the sachets that Guruji gave us when I go out. Not one, Babu, two.” He beams at me with the cleverness of his strategy.

THAT NIGHT, in bed, my wife and I hold a whispered consultation. My wife’s dislike of Chottu has grown during the pandemic, and she

has been suggesting getting rid of him. I am the one who is resisting it, partly from inertia and partly because Chottu always takes special care of my needs. I just have to look around for my slippers, and he will run to fetch them. If I so much as say that it would be nice to have a cup of tea, he brews one, no matter how busy he is with other chores. I simply have to mention a dish I have not eaten for a long time, and, unobtrusively, that dish is served for dinner the next night or the night after that. To be honest, Chottu takes better care of my needs than my wife—or, for that matter, even my mother, while that good old soul was alive—ever could.

“Are you sure?” I ask my wife when she says, once again, that we should send Chottu “home.”

“Send him away. We do not owe him anything,” she replies.

“It is just that . . .”

“He is not a boy,” she observes. “He is a grown-up man. If he was not retarded, he would be shaving by now.”

That, of course, is true. But I still hesitate, wanting to have at least a good reason to send Chottu away.

THEN MODIJI comes on television, announces a lockdown, and tells everyone to go home. National curfew, he says. It catches us by surprise. The Namaste Trump event of just a month ago had been such a success that we were expecting the country to ride over the pandemic without a full lockdown. We were taking all precautions, of course: washing hands, avoiding crowds, purifying the air in the flat with the Ayurvedic sachets—turmeric, neem leaves, dried lemon, secret herbs from the Himalayas—that my wife’s guru gave us to us to hang from doors and windows. Those are the ones Chottu wears around his neck.

We are all in the sitting room, watching Modiji’s address on TV. Chottu is there too, sitting in a far corner, as we have started insisting on him keeping his distance. He is not cooking for us either, just doing the washing and cleaning up now.

“You will have to go home, Chottu,” I tell him, after Modiji goes off the screen. Maybe I begin by just intending to pull his leg; I don’t know. But, somehow, as the conversation proceeds, my joke becomes reality.

“Go home, Babu? Whose home?” Chottu is confused.

“You heard what Modiji said,” I add. “Everyone is to go home.”

“But I don’t have a home, Babu,” he replies. “I live here.”

“No, Chottu,” I explain to him, with greater resolve now. “That will

be against the law. This is not your home. You need to go back to your village.”

My wife looks at me, and I can see she is backing me up. My children, who are probably not even paying attention, focused as they always are on their iPhones, drift off to their rooms.

“But that is so many hours away by bus,” Chottu replies.

“We will give you extra money,” I answer him. “But you cannot stay here. You do not want to disobey Modiji, do you?”

“You do not want Modiji to get angry at us?” my wife adds.

Chottu shakes his head and slaps himself on the forehead in his customary gesture of contrition. He always does that when he feels that he has made a stupid mistake.

IT IS AROUND a month after Chottu has left us with his clothes in an old VIP suitcase—my wife and the girls, whose schools are closed, are managing the kitchen quite well without him—that one of my neighbors stops me on the stairs. I am going out for a walk in our park, and he is coming back from a rare shopping trip. Our masks are parked on our chins, ready to be pulled up if required.

“Mishraji,” he says to me, pushing his mask further down to allow his chin more freedom to wag. “I have been meaning to ask you. Your chokkra, he isn’t with you any longer, is he?”

“You mean Chottu?”

“Yes, that’s the boy.”

“No,” I reply. “He returned home to his village a long time back.”

“Strange,” he says. “I am certain I saw him living in one of the canisters in the dump behind us. You know, my uncle has a flat in the other row, and you can look over the dump from the back windows. There are a group of vagrants living there, sleeping rough, and I thought I saw Chottu with them. I could recognize him, his baggy pants and limp.”

“No, it could not have been him,” I insist. “He went home weeks ago. We paid him an extra month’s salary too.”

“That’s good, because my uncle and his family are worried of possible contamination. Their windows overlook the dump. They have complained to the police a couple of times now. But you know how slow the police are . . .”

“Incredibly slow,” I agree.

“That is why we need Modiji. A leader who can get things done. A strong leader.”

THE PHONE CALL from the police chowki comes exactly five days after that conversation. It comes on our landline. My youngest daughter picks it up and brings the cordless phone to me. It is some sub-inspector, she mutters, plonking it down on the sofa next to me.

The sub-inspector launches into a veritable diatribe as soon as I identify myself. He has a rough, booming voice. I imagine someone large and heavily moustachioed at the other end. All I gather from what he says is that he has arrested my “servant” in a public space, and I was going to be charged with criminal negligence for not keeping him indoors. He goes on a rant about irresponsibility and anti-nationals. What servant? I demand. He does not have the name or does not wish to give it to me. He orders me to come down to the police station right now—come and see me within an hour, or we will challan you, he growls into the phone, and disconnects.

I was not born yesterday; I know what his game is. I call my friend, the MLA who had obtained the Namaste Trump contract for us, and the representative asks me to give the details to his private secretary. Don’t worry, Mishra Sa’ab, the private secretary tells me. I will take care of the matter.

THE SUB-INSPECTOR calls back within an hour. His tone is very different. He is brimming with details, explanations, and courtesies. He explains that the police had raided the dump behind our colony, on receipt of numerous complaints from residents of the colony.

It is our duty to follow up on complaints, Sirji, he says to me. We are stretched. You have no idea how difficult it is to enforce the curfew. If only everyone was like you, Sirji, educated and disciplined. But, oof, these people, what to say! Too few policemen, too much work. But when we get a complaint from respectable people like you, Sirji, we always act. Immediately. I went there personally, with three constables. There were four-five vagrants there. They ran away on seeing the jeep. We chased and caught one of them. He was limping and couldn’t run much. We were just, what do you say, Sirji, teaching him a lesson, our usual treatment for such law-breakers, when he shouted out your name. He said he worked in your flat, and his name was Chottu.

I explain to the sub-inspector that Chottu had worked in my flat but had gone back home on the day of the curfew. I had no idea he had come back. He never came to us.

Oh no, Sirji, he has not come back. He has been living in the con-

tainers all these weeks, him and a few others.

I wouldn't know about that, Inspector, I say firmly. I did not see Chottu or hear from him after he left.

What do we do with him now, Sirji?

I think about it. I do not want them to give Chottu what they call a treatment once again. I know all about that, and I am not a mean-hearted man.

Can't you get him admitted to one of these migrant labor camps that are being set up?

Yes, Sirji. Of course, Sirji. I will take care of it, Sirji. Sorry to bother you, Sirji. Please give my regards to the MLA Sa'ab, Sirji. You have jotted down my mobile number, haven't you, Sirji? SI Om Prakash, that's my good name, Sirji. Anytime you want anything, just call, Sirji. Om Prakash, SI, at your service, Sirji. Anytime.

I am certain I will not hear of Chottu again, at least not before the pandemic is over. I am wrong.

THERE IS NO doubt that the pandemic worsens over the next few days. Some people I know catch the virus, but recover. Then one of my employees—a man in his late fifties with a heart condition—dies of it.

The terror of the virus finally settles on my family and the neighborhood. Streets stay silent all through the night. There are no vendors in sight during daytime. The anti-Modi social media go on and on about migrant laborers trekking for hundreds of kilometers to get home and dying on the way, sometimes in traffic accidents. But what traffic accidents, I post on Twitter, where is the traffic? It is all lies. How can people die in traffic accidents when there is a curfew? And yet, the virus is real. We know it. No sensible person dares go out needlessly.

One afternoon, the phone rings again. It is the landline, and I hesitate to pick it up; anyone who is someone calls me on one of my two iPhones. But maybe it is the ennui of the afternoon, the lethargy of the lockdown; I finally reach for it.

The female voice identifies itself as someone or the other from the Janata COVID Centre. I know what it is. It has been set up a couple of kilometers away from here and mostly caters to COVID patients who cannot afford anything better.

"Come and collect your dead body," says the voice on the phone.

"What dead body?" I sputter into the receiver. "I don't know any dead body."

"Patient 81-C, Bed 54, name of Chottu. Your address and this number on record at registration. Police to be notified if body unclaimed."

I bang down the receiver and rummage in my diary for SI Om Prakash's number. Bloody fool, I mutter under my breath. I catch him on the fifth try and I shout at him. What did you think you were doing? How dare you enter my address as Chottu's address? What impudence! How dare you?

SI Om Prakash is contrite. He spends a long time explaining, because I do not really let him do so for the first few minutes. But then, after I calm down, he explains that the rules demand a "last known address" before admitting anyone to a migrant labor center, and he had entered my address, little dreaming that Chottu would catch the disease and die of it. The address must have traveled with Chottu when he was moved from the migrant center to the COVID center.

Simple oversight, Sirji. Don't worry, Sirji. I will collect the body, personally, Sirji, and I will have it cremated properly. It is my job, Sirji. Don't call anyone, Sirji; it is as good as taken care of by yours truly.

And the man is as good as his word. He calls that very evening to tell me that Chottu has been cremated. All according to the Shastras, Sirji, properly done.

I feel sad, no doubt, remembering Chottu's goofy smile, but I also feel relieved. I am not his keeper, after all. I consider telling my wife that Chottu is dead and has been duly cremated, but then do not do so. What is the point? She is frightened enough about the virus. Why mention another death from COVID?

IT IS A MISTY morning the next day. The mist is unseasonal. I get up earlier than I usually do. My wife is still lying in bed, snoring a bit, and the children, late risers given half a chance, are in their rooms. I go out to the balcony, but can make out only the silhouettes of other buildings and trees, gauzed with mist. No one is out. Even crows are not cawing. An eerie silence envelops the neighborhood.

I re-enter the sitting room and am about to switch on the TV when there is a knock on the front door. I am not certain it is a knock. It is such a hesitant sound. But I listen, and it recurs: more like someone scratching rather than knocking.

Who could be knocking this early in the morning?

I go up to the door and peer through the peephole. The corridor outside is still lit up with the mercury tubes that burn in the building

all night. I see a boy with his back to me. The light from the mercury tubes is falling like a thin white shroud on him. His back looks vaguely familiar. Then the boy turns. I gasp. I know the face. It is different now, thinner, stained with what looks like charcoal on one side. But I know the face. It is Chottu. And, as if to remove all doubt, the face then smiles at the peephole: it is Chottu's goofy smile, daft and childlike. For some reason, he is dripping wet.

I RECOIL INTO the sitting room. What is Chottu doing out there? Has it all been a mistake? Had someone assumed Chottu's identity? Was someone playing a trick on me?

The scratch-knock is repeated. But I have no intention of letting Chottu into the flat: that man-boy could be carrying a hundred diseases! Why is he so wet? There is only one thing to do. I call SI Om Prakash. This time I get him on the first try. He sounds half asleep but tries to hide the irritation in his voice.

"What did you mean by saying that you cremated Chottu last night?" I demand.

"I did, Sirji. I supervised it from a distance."

I describe Chottu to him. Yes, he says, that was the boy. A man, I retort, he is a man, he just looks like a boy. "Yessirji," says the sub-inspector, "Yessirji, that was him."

"Then what is he doing outside my flat right now?" I demand of the sub-inspector.

"Your flat, Sirji?"

"Right outside my door!"

"It cannot be, Sirji. We cremated him." Then he hesitates. "The boy had been dead for hours, Sirji. He was stiff like cardboard. For some reason he did not burn. You know how short of wood the cremation grounds are these days. But we cremated him with what we could procure, and I even bought the ghee myself. We cremated him as a Hindu, because it was your order, Sirji. Except that his body did not burn, and so, as other people were doing too, we floated it in the river. There is nothing wrong with that, Sirji. Our Shastras say that once the body has been touched by fire, it can be given to water, if required. The soul will still be released for rebirth . . ."

"You fool!" I shout at him. "You half-burnt a live person and then threw him into the river!"

"No, Sirji, it cannot be," the inspector is adamant. "If there is any-

thing I can recognize it is a dead body. That boy had been dead for hours. He was like, like plyboard."

"Then why is he standing there outside my flat, dripping wet?"

"Dripping wet, Sirji? It is not possible, Sirji. Give me ten minutes; I am coming to your place. Do not open the door until I get there. This is a conspiracy, Sirji. Let me catch the bastards who are creating this drama."

MY WIFE HAD come out into the sitting room, rubbing her eyes, while I was shouting into my phone. The children, of course, were still sleeping. Even an earthquake cannot wake them up.

"What are you so upset about?" my wife asks me.

So shaken am I that I reply without thinking: "Chottu is back."

"Chottu?" exclaims my wife and moves toward the door, as if to open it, but I stop her. I tell her not to open the door: "He looks ill. Who knows where all he has been?"

She hesitates and then tiptoes up to the peephole and looks out. She gasps. And tiptoes back to me.

"There is something wrong with him," she whispers. "His clothes are burnt. And why is he dripping wet? It has not rained for days. It almost looks like there is water pouring out of him."

"It is Chottu, isn't it?" I ask her.

"Oh yes," she replies. "It is Chottu. No doubt about it. The same smile. Teeth missing. It is Chottu, for sure. What do we do with him?"

"Don't worry," I reassure her. "I will have him taken away to some care home. You go back to bed. It is too early."

"I can stay with you."

"What for? Just go back to bed, I will join you in ten minutes. I have asked an inspector to come and take him away."

"Give Chottu some money too," says my wife as she returns to the bedroom.

SI OM PRAKASH calls from outside my door. "I am here, Sirji. You can open up," he says.

I open the door. The sub-inspector is standing there with a constable. It strikes me that this is the first time I am meeting him, and SI Om Prakash, unlike his voice, is a small man, thin, pot-bellied, with a clerical moustache. The constable behind him looks more like a police officer. Then I notice that the floor is wet, as if it was recently flooded.

"Where is the boy who has been bothering you, Sirji?"

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I look around. Though the landing is wet, there is no one there.

"He was here just five minutes ago," I say.

Then I look up, and there, right where the staircase turns onto the landing above us, there he is, a bunch of ragged clothes, half-burnt, with water dripping from them: He is lying crumpled on the stairs, his back to us.

"There he is," I shout, pointing.

SI Om Prakash follows my finger.

"Where, Sirji?" he inquires.

"There, there, on the stairs," I shout, my fingers quivering. "There, as big as a blazing fire."

The pile of rags on the stairs shakes and stands up slowly, its back still to us.

"There is nothing there, Sirji," the SI is saying.

But I can see the half-burnt rags that are giving off steam or smoke and have water seeping out of them, I can see the body clad in those rags turn . . .

"Nothing on the stairs," the big constable echoes his boss.

. . . **AND I CAN** see it is Chottu, face blackened and singed, most of his hair burned off, but the smile recognizable as ever, because when he sees me he gives me that familiar goofy, gap-toothed smile, as water burbles out of his mouth and runs in rivulets down his chin and over his chest onto the stairs.