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Beyond the rainbow

Chris Saji

When Samira was asked what a rainbow looked like, the inquisitive six-year-old pointed to the vast array of garments fluttering on the communal clothesline. Multicolored saris, shawls and cloths formed veins that ran through the arteries of the Goan slum. A splash of colour in a dark body of perversion. A small murky river ran through the heart of the ghetto. Samira, clutching her doll, would sit on the edge of the bank and observe the little paper boats she had made run alongside the ripple of the stream. Women would perch over the edge, washing reams of fabric to add layers to the shanty rainbow, while their toddlers, naked and care free, slapped gleefully at the floating soapsuds.

If one followed the trail of fabrics, they would soon find themselves in the loving embrace of Sister Nancy. Everyone knew her as Nani, the missionary from Australia — the land of Ricky Ponting and birds that laughed like men. The nun ran a little school for girls she called ‘underprivileged’; there, she taught them English as well as arts and crafts. What enticed Samira and her doll to go every day was not the rice and lentils they offered for lunch, or even the funny song about a ‘swagman’ that Nani sang; rather, it was the opportunity to use those beautiful sparkle pens set aside for the well-behaved. Red, orange, blue ... all the colours of the rainbow, but stored neatly on a shelf.

Each day, Samira would sit under the only windowsill in the dilapidated classroom and scour over a fascinating book that Nani

called the ‘great big dictionary’. The sun’s soft rays would guide the young girl’s small hands over hundreds of words, till she found a word that took her fancy. Using a piece of chalk, Samira would then practise the expression on a slate until she had perfected the intricate turns and curves of the English alphabet.

Once she was confident of her calligraphy, Samira would grab her doll and run up to Nani. Without needing to say a word, the aged nun would cast her benevolent gaze over them and ask, ‘Samira, what colour shall it be today for you and your doll?’ The young girl would then stand on her tiptoes, and using her small index finger and silent whispers of ‘yes’ and ‘no’, guide Nani to the coloured pen of her choice. Once the painter had obtained her brush, she would clasp her doll, her canvas of hope, and carefully inscribe the word ... a new addition to the ever-growing list of rainbow-coloured tattoos inked into the limbs of the pale, ragged doll.

When the sun dipped its head beneath the horizon and the moon had awoken from its slumber, Samira hugged Nani goodbye and stepped out into the bustle of the night. A thousand moons littered the floor, one lying in each puddle. It had rained and the cool monsoon winds had brought with it many men, who, like the insects of the night, went to rooms scantily lit. These rooms were known as rainbow rooms as their doors were painted in a myriad of colours, the darker hues of night.

Once, Samira had asked Uncle Varun why they were called rainbow rooms. ‘Sweet, little girl, there is gold to be found within! One day Uncle will show you the riches that lie behind the doors ... a few more years and you will be ripe for picking,’ replied the aging pimp as his eyes traced the soft curves of his young niece.

As Samira and her doll walked into the night, eyes peered out from the darkness, some tired and weary, others innocent and youthful, but all yearning for something different, something more than the gold at the end of this rainbow.

In front of Samira, a small girl, not much older than ten or eleven, wrestled in the greedy clasp of an elderly man. Neither the make-up nor the bright lipstick failed to mask the soulless eyes of the child. The stains of dark eyeliner tracked the tears of her innocence. As she was pushed into a rainbow room, the lecherous old man ripped a little doll from her grasp and hurled it into the darkness of the night.

As Samira continued along the canopy of coloured fabrics, they reached her home — a bright blue tarp held up by four rusted, corrugated metal sheets. Inside, Samira's mother Fatima eagerly awaited her daughter.

'Amma,' Samira called out as she ran in and hugged her mother. 'Samira! How was your day? Did Nani feed you well? What English words did you learn today?' questioned Fatima as she caressed her only daughter under the moonlight.

Fatima, hair braided and face painted for the men whose desires she would succumb to, asked Samira to read to her the words that she had learnt at school. Samira's mother didn't understand what was being read, but her eyes welled up as she looked on proudly at her daughter ... her smart, beautiful daughter.

Fatima would then sit on the ground, knees pressed onto her chest, waiting for Varun to take her to the rainbow room. She would silently watch Samira have her dinner of day-old rice porridge, dreaming of the day when her daughter, educated and smart, could afford to escape from the hell they endured every day.

When it was time, she would plant a small kiss on her daughter's forehead and promise her that this was the last time she would leave her by herself — a promise that Samira's mother would unwittingly keep.

As the young girl sat waiting for her mother to come back through the rainbow door, an ominous breath of wind blew out the oil lamp. A rough hand ripped the doll from Samira's arms and threw it into the darkness of the night.

As the early morning rain settled on the small Goan slum, a rainbow had come to rest at the site of a young girl's lifeless body. A mother sat crying skywards. Men and women whispered their outrage in hushed tones. No one noticed a small doll, lying in the gutter, sewer water streaking away the words carefully inscribed on its torso: princess, happy, pretty, innocent, girl, rainbow.



Chris Saji wrote this in 2015 when he was in Year 12 at Rostrevor College in South Australia.