

SoliTaire

by Jamal H. Iqbal

She had halos for hats, his muse did. The top of her hands slightly matted, patent leather, with stars at the point her slim fingers joined the rest of her body, roped in lace. Down like soft transparent fur drooped gently to one side as she brought up her fanned cards just before she'd say, "*Gin*". At the back, just over her shoulders were elephants — trunks curled, ivory teeth gleaming, rot all around — feasting on what appeared to be chunks of a feather boa round her neck.

"All right my dear, time for bed" Soli heard Matron Maneckshaw call out. "Now be a good man and brush your teeth ji" she said, sounding more and more like his mother as days passed by. Giving the fading portrait one final look of appraisal, Sohrabjee 'Soli' Modi, started to inch his way towards Room 23, Jasmine Wing, *Sir Jamshetji Bhabha Parsi Temperarium for the Golden Yeared*. Or simply 'Bhabha Old Age Home' (as the *coolies* that portered an inmate's luggage on what was a one-way trip until that one final bundle of white was loaded into the municipal hearse) referred to it as.

He carefully put down his deck of vintage French playing cards; in front of the same portrait he'd been sneaking his monthly ration of Godiva on for a few years now. The chocolate treats sent by his niece Yasmeen, along with 450 rupees from his monthly ex-civil servant's pension, sent by kind Mr. A P J Abdul Kalam, Hon. President of India.

The lady in the oval frame waved and kissed him good night before singing him three verses from *Que Sera Sera*, as the elephants magically formed the brass, strings and horns section. She "reminds me of mother too", he mumbled as Matron's tiny tear drop slid down the corner of her own cataracted eyes, keeping pace with the drop of drool sliding down her patient's gaunt jawlines.

As Matron Maneckshaw wiped the saliva off his dentures, she couldn't help but wonder what 93 year-old Sohrabjee looked for in

the torn, dusty lithograph of *Marilyn in Persia* one of the orderlies had stuck to the wall of the corridor outside Jasmine Wing decades ago. “17 years in this very armchair, five hours before morning prayers to one hour after sunset kasti”, she reminded herself, “and still you wait for that fickle kiss, maro gentle Soli ji.”

That night, as the *ghee* lamp illuminated Zarathustra's shrine in the Fire Temple nearby, Sohrabjee ‘Soli’ Modi lay still, watching her freckled face through myopic eyes. Shadows danced long into the night, as she held him on to her bosom, drawing him into the light.

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- * * * *Kasti* — Persian Zoroastrian prayer thread
- * * * *Ji/Jee* — A form of address in Gujarati akin to *Sir*
- * * * *Maro* — Gujarati term of endearment meaning *Mine*
- * * * *Coolie* — Porters that hauled luggage, ironically, not considered the least bit racist in parts of India still!
- * * * *Gin* — Gin Rummy, a card game

