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Smoke

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Abstract

'I think Shanta is more suitable,' Ashok Mama said, putting another bidi in his mouth and fumbling with a matchbox. If that was his uncle's opinion, Vishnu thought, Shanta it would have to be. He was not in a position to oppose Mama's wishes. Besides, he could think of no objections to Shanta.

21. Cited in E.B. Dykes: *The Negro in English Romantic Thought* (Washington, 1942), p.33.
22. *A List of the Names of the Adventurers of the Royal African Company of England*, May 1720; J. Burke & J.B. Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Extinct and Dormant Baronetcies* (London, 1941), p.395.
23. 'A Dialogue on Taste', in *The Investigator* (London, 1762), p.47.

NISSIM EZEKIEL

Smoke

'I think Shanta is more suitable,' Ashok *Mama* said, putting another *bidi* in his mouth and fumbling with a matchbox.

If that was his uncle's opinion, Vishnu thought, Shanta it would have to be. He was not in a position to oppose *Mama's* wishes. Besides, he could think of no objections to Shanta.

'What does Dhondu say,' he asked, but already he had lost interest in the subject. Better to go down at once and speak to Shanta's parents about it.

'Let *Mama* say why Shanta is more suitable than Sakhoo,' Dhondu replied. He, too, put another *bidi* in his mouth. Of the company assembled in the field, he was the youngest. The burden of the morning's work had fallen largely on him. All that wood carried from the village! Vishnu should really have asked someone else to do the job.

'Shanta's parents will agree at once,' *Mama* said, but did not look at Dhondu. What business had he to ask such a question? As Vishnu's uncle, he had the right to suggest a girl, hadn't he? If Vishnu's parents had been alive, they would have chosen a girl for him.

'Do you think Sakhoo's parents will not agree at once, then?' Dhondu asked.

'It is time for Shanta to be married,' *Mama* went on, as though Dhondu had not spoken. 'She is already fourteen years old.'

'What do the others say?' Vishnu asked. He was anxious not to displease anybody.

'Sakhoo is also fourteen years old,' Dhondu said, looking away while he puffed at his *bidī*. Its thin acrid smell was sharp in his nostrils.

'Vishnu wants to know what the others have to say,' *Mama* put in, the tone of irritation appearing for the first time. He stared at Dhondu, who was obviously avoiding his eyes. That low-caste son of a... Did he think he could settle this business? Dhondu was not even related to Vishnu, just a common acquaintance. He shouldn't be present at the discussion in the first place. Vishnu was a fool to detain him. Once again *Mama* repeated Vishnu's question.

'What have the others to say?'

The others had nothing to say. They realised that they were 'others'. They knew that Vishnu would marry Shanta. *Mama* had said it. There was no obstacle in the path. Shanta was fourteen years old. They did not really know, no one knew anyone's age in the village, but it was probably fourteen. Vishnu needed another wife. He would get a good dowry from Shanta's parents. That would make him independent of *Mama*, who had helped him so much in the past. In selecting his new bride, Vishnu would have to accept *Mama*'s verdict. It was all as clear as a full moon. Why discuss the matter any further?

They remained squatting on the warm grass, patiently, and smoked their *bidīs*. The heat was oppressive, and there was little coolness in the shade of the tree under which they had gathered. It would be cooler under their thatched roofs, with fresh water sprinkled on the cowdung floors. They were anxious to get away, looking heavily first at Vishnu, then at *Mama*. They, too, did not relish Dhondu's question.

They were villagers, five of them, with their gnarled bodies more than half exposed, and with hard, wrinkled faces. They were like trees or old walls, brown and tough and uneven. There was little difference in appearance between the younger men, Vishnu and Dhondu, who were approaching thirty, and the other three who were in their fifties. They sat there leaning towards the earth, and the heat of the April afternoon drew a copious perspiration from them. It flowed down their backs and remained unwiped on their faces, making them gleam in the fiery light.

'Shall we talk it over now with Shanta's parents?' Vishnu asked, and he made a move to stand up. The others followed. *Mama* said, 'Yes, let's go,' and noticed that Dhondu remained squatting on the ground. He had filled a fist with mud, and was loosening it slowly on his bare feet.

'Wait,' Dhondu said. 'I have something to say.'

They all turned to him, ignorant of the motive that had led him to cross-question *Mama*. Nobody else would have dared to do such a thing.

'What is it?' Vishnu asked.

‘I want to suggest,’ Dhondu said looking at Vishnu steadily, ‘that you marry Sakhoo and not Shanta.’

They were too astonished to say anything. Vishnu looked away. *Mama* seemed to be restraining himself.

‘I’ll tell you why,’ Dhondu went on. ‘It’s because I want to marry Shanta myself.’

Immediately, they sensed trouble. *Mama* sensed it, and was not as angry as he wanted to be. Vishnu sensed it, and looked away toward a corner of the field from where some smoke moved in their direction. The two other silent witnesses of the drama sensed it, and they wondered if they ought to say something. If necessary, they would stand by *Mama*. Vishnu must respect his wishes.

They walked slowly towards the village with a small cloud of smoke following them disconsolately. It came from the corner of the field where the body of Vishnu’s first wife was being reduced to ashes.

In the Next Issue

The next issue includes interviews with Anita Desai and Salman Rushdie, articles on women in African literature, Bruce Clunies Ross on Australian suburbs and the Paradise Tram.