

Little Hands of Silk

[Excerpt; first appeared in The Baltimore Review]

“See them wriggle? And raise their heads?” asks Pandu, a silver chain shimmering in sweat around his neck, its oval glass pendant flickering and going dim on his bare chest. Though not as tall as my father, Pandu towers over me.

I cannot see clearly in the poorly lit factory shed but nod. In a large wicker basket, scattered among mulberry leaves, the silkworms look like tiny white trains dipping in and out of green tunnels. There are so many and they chomp so hard that it sounds like a flurry of raindrops.

“Get closer,” he says, pushing my head forward with his bulky hand. The worms smell terrible, like the errant cricket ball that I often fish out from the gutter. Two boys, also bare-chested, hunkered over their own baskets, titter in a dim corner. “Now, Giri, search for ones that aren’t moving. There’s one right there.” I nod again.

“Those are the dead ones. You search for them and pull them out before the bastards kill the others,” continues Pandu. I wonder how the dead worms could do that to live ones but decide not to ask him. I don’t want him or the two boys to think I am stupid. “Get going now,” he says, and walks over to the boys whose faces suddenly scrunch up in focus.

He stares into their baskets, then yells. Dragging the smaller of the two boys by the ear, Pandu pulls him to the ground, then whips out his belt and whacks the boy repeatedly on his back and legs. The boy doesn't resist. Grabbing a handful of worms from the basket, Pandu flings them in the boy's face. His friend continues to work on his basket. "The next dead worm you miss, I'll shove down your throat," he says, making a grabbing gesture with his hand, tongue sticking out.

Pandu then slings the belt over his shoulder as if it were a large snake, and storms out, his head almost touching the top of the doorway. The two boys look at each other and then at me, the smaller one rubbing his left ear. I look down into my basket, my head reeling. My own father is short-tempered but has never raised his hand to me, which Mother says is rare. There are a couple of worms in the right corner that don't move. I pick them up, and inspect them before setting them aside, their curled bodies feeling like soft dough. The idea of feeding the worms generously to reap more silk from them is fascinating. My basket is the smallest one, I realize, perhaps meant for trainees like me.

"You can get sick from touching them, you know," says the bigger boy, wide-eyed. "Dhina almost died."

"He had high fever for three days," chimes in the smaller boy, still stroking his ear.

“Does Pandu know?” I ask.

The bigger boy grimaces. “Of course he does. He doesn’t care. He just needs the job done. A real demon, that Pandu. He only smiles at the big boss. Everyone else around here is vermin to him.”

I figure by “big boss,” he means the factory owner. Through the doorway I see Pandu at a distance, bending down and chatting with a woman in a lemon green sari. He is smiling, but she doesn’t look like his big boss. Later, I hear someone refer to her as Jothi.

Pandu didn’t look as big two days ago when he stood next to Father, going over the financial details of my employment. I wonder who would win if Father and he got into a fight. I’ve heard stories from Mother, of Father in his younger days, overwhelming grown men double his size in wrestling rings.

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