

GULGUL, GUJIYAS, AND GLUE

A Memoir of
Shubhra Sharma

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*For her family,
who never said this is mine and that is yours —
and for everyone who still remembers the smell of
Fevicol.*

CHAPTER ONE

Before Shubhra Sharma was Shubhra Sharma — before the master's degree, the art classes, the paintings gifted at weddings, the ghungroos kept carefully through decades — she was Gulgul.

The name came from her elder sister, who visited the hospital after the birth and looked at the new baby and announced that she was very gol gol, and that her name should match. It stuck for life. Even now, when Shubhra signs a painting, she sometimes signs it Gulgul. The nickname is both origin and signature: the child she was, and the artist she became.

She grew up in Laxmibai Colony in Gwalior, a neighbourhood named for Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, the queen who died fighting the British not far from where these streets were later built. There was a temple near the house, and every morning at 4:30, before the sun was up, the bhajans began. Many of them were by Hari Om Sharan, whose voice was a fixture of devotional music across north India in those years. The songs drifted through the colony in the dark, mixing with birdsong from the trees that lined the streets.

That was how her days began. Not with an alarm. With music.

The colony was the kind of place that barely exists anymore. Families did not make appointments to visit each other. Children ran between houses as freely as they ran between rooms of their own homes. And the neighbours knew the children. Not just their names but their preferences, their moods, what they liked to eat.

“You must have heard of sanjha chulha,” she says. “Everyone knew which child liked to eat what.” Sanjha chulha, literally the shared hearth, was the old north Indian practice of neighbours cooking together, or at least cooking with full knowledge of each other's kitchens: from whose child refused to eat without a particular pickle to what was simmering next door and whether it needed salt. It was less a formal arrangement than a texture

of daily life, the assumption that a cooking fire and the food around it were community property as much as family property. In the colonies and mohallas of mid-century India, it was simply how things worked. Shubhra invokes it not as nostalgia but as a standard against which she still measures neighbourliness.



Shubhra as a child, with her sister.

Shubhra grew up with an elder sister, a younger brother, and a cousin whose mother had died young. The cousin was raised alongside them as a matter of course, without ceremony or discussion, the way such things happened in families of that generation. Nothing in the house was marked as belonging to any one person. If there was a large room, everyone used it. If there was a box of colours, it was everyone's box of colours.

We never said this is mine and that is yours.

The house itself had a personality. You entered up a flight of ten or fifteen stairs, always taken two at a time, never one, into a small drawing room where her father kept his mathematics books. He was a professor at an engineering college, a man of equations and theorems, and the drawing room smelled permanently of paper and old pages. Beyond it, through a series of rooms each separated by a raised dehri (a threshold step), was a prayer room that smelled of incense and the smoke of evening aarti. Past that, the kitchen, which smelled of whatever her mother happened to be making that day, always fresh, because there was no refrigerator and no reason to cook anything in advance. Outside, on a small open terrace, a tulsi plant stood in its pot.

Every room, a different fragrance. She can still map the house by smell.

The toilet was located at some distance from the main rooms, across open terraces. Getting there at night meant crossing the dark. This was not a problem. Fear of the dark was not something the family practiced.

It was a strange house. But it was very nice.

Gwalior in those years dealt in extremes. In May and June, the temperature climbed to 45 or 47 degrees. In winter, it dropped to 2 or 4, the whole city wrapped in fog. When the

monsoon came in July and August, the rains arrived fully and all at once. It was not a city that did anything by half.

Television arrived later, and mobile phones were unimaginable. The children of Laxmibai Colony made their own world. There were outdoor games in the colony's open ground: cycling, football, a game called Pose Pose in which the children were simultaneously scriptwriters and actors, inventing stories and performing them. When there was a construction site nearby, the sand it left behind became raw material for elaborate competitions. Who could build the most detailed house, the most intricate castle? Entire afternoons disappeared this way.

In the evenings, her father listened to the news on the radio. If there was a cricket match, he listened to that too. The sound of the radio was the sound of evening settling over the house.

Kathak came into her life early. She learned the classical dance form as a child, the bells of the ghungroos becoming as familiar as any other household sound. Later, in college, she began performing on stage. The two passions, movement and colour, ran alongside each other for years, parallel rivers. She still has her ghungroos, though the anklets have changed over the decades, from the strap kind to the string kind to the knot kind, each generation of them worn through.

When she eventually needed a knee replacement, she asked the surgeon one specific question before agreeing to the operation: would she be able to dance afterward?

He said yes. She went ahead.

***“If you ask me what my life dream is,
I want to do stage performances.”***

Across the street from the house, an aunty spent her afternoons making craft objects. She cut cardboard, applied coloured paper, assembled decorative things with a precision and patience that Shubhra watched, transfixed, from the opposite side of the lane.

One afternoon, the aunty introduced her to something new. It had come from Delhi, she explained. People in Delhi used it to make things. They applied lace with it. It was called Fevicol.

Shubhra had known gum. She had known tape. She had never encountered anything like this.

***I still remember the smell of Fevicol.
Even today.***

Any Indian child of that generation will know exactly what she means, and will also remember the other thing you did with Fevicol, which was spread it thickly on your palm, wait for it to dry, and then peel it off in one slow, satisfying sheet to examine the ghost of your own fingerprints. That was not craft. That was just the irresistible logic of a new material in the hands of a child.

But for Shubhra it was also something more. Whatever that aunty was doing with her cardboard and her coloured paper, she wanted to do that too. Word spread through the colony the way new things spread among children: immediately. Soon they were all at it, pressing coloured paper onto cardboard, passing the bottle around, trying variations. What else could this become?

She was already collecting, the way certain children do, drawn to colour and texture before they have words for the impulse. At school, when students stood in the morning assembly, she noticed the sweaters. Hand-knitted wool sweaters came in every colour, red, blue, green, pink, and if you

sat behind someone wearing one and rubbed the fabric gently, small tufts of wool came loose in your fingers.

Pink, she will tell you, is her weakness. It always has been.

She collected the tufts and pressed them flat between the pages of her books, where they slowly flattened and brightened and stayed. She collected feathers the same way. Neither wool nor feathers had any particular purpose. They were beautiful, and that was enough. Later she would use them, drawing over them, sticking them down, turning them into greeting cards. But first they were just kept, for the pleasure of keeping something coloured and soft.

Later still, for a biology assignment, she boiled noodles, coated them in linseed oil, and used them to represent the digestive system on a full-size project sheet. The noodles preserved. The project was memorable. What mattered to her was never simply completing the assignment. It was finding the approach that no one else would think of.

Art supplies were not always easy to come by. Pencils were used down to the stub. Erasers were rationed by the simple discipline of trying to draw well enough not to need them. Nothing was wasted because replacing things was not straightforward.

One memory from sixth standard has stayed with her for decades. She had a drawing examination and no colours. She sat and cried.

When her father came home from college that evening, he brought her a pencil with six colours.

***I have millions of things but I can't
forget that pencil with six colours.***

Her mother, meanwhile, was conducting her own daily acts of creation in the kitchen.

The landlord was South Indian and kept a large traditional grinding stone (the kind used for lentils), and Shubhra's mother borrowed it to make dahi vadas. They were soft in a way that all subsequent dahi vadas have failed to match. She made makki ki roti and bajre ki roti, aloo tikki, dosa at home long before dosa was a Gwalior street food. She made curry rice. She did not buy things she could make.

Eating out was rare enough to be an event. Occasionally, her father would take the children far (it had to be far, there was nowhere nearby) for falooda kulfi. When dosa appeared in a restaurant in Gwalior, he took them to try it. The rarity was part of what made it matter.

Holi was the festival she remembers most vividly. Nobody made food separately on Holi, that was the rule. Her mother made gujiyas, the deep-fried pastries stuffed with khoya and dry fruit that appeared in every kitchen in the colony at that time of year, and kanji, a sharp, fermented drink in a big pot that stood like a promise of what the day would be. But what she remembers most is the music. A dholwala would come to the colony, but often he was almost unnecessary, because her mother played the dholak, and played it well, and the two of them, mother and daughter, would be at it for hours, the drum going, the colours flying, the whole colony gathered around.

She still makes kanji every Holi. She makes it in a big pot, the way her mother did.

When the time came to choose a direction for her life, the answer was both obvious and a surprise. Everyone around her came from science, from engineering. Fine arts wasn't a thing. But her parents asked the question directly, which was itself unusual: what do you want to do?

She told them: "Fine Arts."

They supported it. She went on to complete both graduation and a master's degree at Jivaji University, painting through Gwalior's brutal summers with the fan switched off. The fan

dried the watercolours too fast, the sheets would fly, and she did not want the disturbance. She sat in 47-degree heat and painted. She didn't notice.

One teacher, Basant Mishra, she remembers with particular reverence. His watercolours were exceptionally fresh. Two or three strokes and a figure appeared, complete, as if it had always been there waiting to be uncovered. She watched his hands and understood something about economy and confidence that no syllabus teaches directly.

She never sold a painting. Not once, not ever. She gave them away instead. To friends, to family, at weddings, as gifts prepared a month in advance because oil painting takes time and a painting was something worth taking time over. She taught art classes for free, because teaching was something to share, not a transaction.



One of Shubhra's paintings.

Her favourite of all the works she made was a tribal woman, given to her sister-in-law. The figure was painted the way modern cameras now create bokeh, the jungle behind blurred, the woman in front sharply lit, emerging from soft green into clear focus. Even now, when she looks at a photograph of it, she cannot quite believe she made it.

“How did I put such a stroke?” she says. “How did I highlight it so much?”

The painting is gone, given away. But the question stays with her. The same startled pleasure of a person who can still be surprised by what their own hands were capable of.



The tribal woman — Shubhra's favourite of all her paintings.

In her new house, built in recent years, Shubhra finally made something she had wanted for a long time: an activity corner of her own. A small dedicated space where her colours and pens and papers can stay exactly where she leaves them. Where nobody asks her to tidy up. Where a half-finished piece of work will still be there, exactly as she left it, when she comes back.

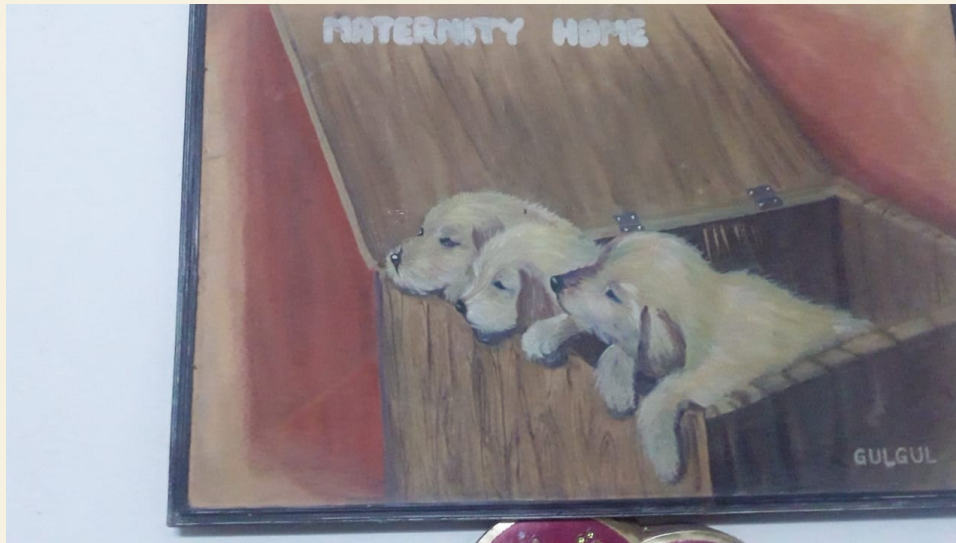
She spent a childhood in shared rooms, shared spaces, a shared box of colours. The activity corner is the room she always imagined. Bright, a little disordered, entirely hers.



Shubhra with her sister, today.

The child who cried in sixth standard because she had no colours for her drawing examination — the child whose father came home that evening with a six-colour pencil, and who felt a happiness so large it has outlasted everything that came after — still lives in that corner. Still reaches for the brightest colour first. Still refuses dull shades. Still finds, in a brush loaded with paint or a piece of cardboard waiting to be cut, the same pull she felt the first time she smelled Fevicol.

Some things, once they take hold, do not let go.



Signed, as always — Gulgul.

Gulgul is still in there, signing her name.