

GIRLS

THE day we left with Ma for Nani's house, Babu broke a *surahi*. I don't know whether he did it on purpose or by mistake. There was water everywhere in the room. Holding up her sari, Ma found her way into the next room and told Saru's mother, who was listening with her ear to the door, to mop up the water. Otherwise someone might slip and break a bone, and then there would be another problem.

In any case, Ma sees everything as a problem. If we are at home it's a problem, if we have to go to school it's a problem, if we are sick it's a problem, if we are fine and jumping around it's a problem. While mopping the floor, Saru's mother cocked her head on one side and asked Ma: "Well, this time you'll be away for at least three months, won't you?" Ma, as was the way with her those days, put her hands on her thighs to assess the weight and said: "Yes, they won't let me come away sooner. Go and play outside." This last was an order to me, because I had a habit of always popping up in a corner at the wrong moment.

As I was making off with a fragment of the broken *surahi* which I wanted to suck, I heard Ma saying, either to Saru's mother or to the cobweb hung roof: "If only it's a boy this time, I'll be freed from having to go through this problem again and again." And as usual Saru's mother must have nodded her head and said: "Why not? Why not?"

In the train I emerged victorious in the squabble for the window seat, and then stuck out my tongue at the others: "Ee...ee..." Seeing Ma's eye turning towards me, I hurriedly converted this into a chant of "E for Emli, Ee for Eekh" but Ma was not paying any attention to me. She had a whole lot of problems to deal with—

the scattered luggage, the wobbling *surahi* her exhaustion, the three of us. At one station we bought *samosas* filled with chillis. Just at that moment, a woman was making her child urinate through the adjoining window. It made me feel sick so I couldn't eat the *samosa*. I gave it to Ma. A piece of boiled potato was lying on the seat. I crushed it into the shape of an insect to frighten my small sister. She squealed, my mother smacked me and I began to cry. My big sister got irritated and said: "Oh what a nuisance!" My big sister loves me. Only she does. Everyone else is horrid.

Mama* came to fetch us from the station. I sat next to Mami. Mami was chewing *pan* and the diamonds in her earlobes bobbed up and down as she chewed. Every time the driver pressed the horn of the jeep, we three girls would scream in unison: "Po...o...o..." The driver laughed. When we reached the house, he lifted me and my small sister out of the jeep. He smelt of tea and *bidis*. He had big moustaches and his woollen uniform was ticklish. I was feeling sleepy. As the *surahi* was being taken out, it again got overturned and water flowed everywhere. I remembered Babu. And I stepped so hard on my small sister's sandal that she almost tripped up. "You root of all problems!" Ma hissed at me through her teeth so that no one should hear. She caught my hand as if to save me from falling, but actually she crushed it so hard that she hurt my shoulder. I was missing Babu. Whenever we come to Nani's house, this is what happens. Babu doesn't come with us and as soon as we reach here Ma too gets swallowed up in a crowd of Masis, Mamis, Nani and old maidservants. If we even try to go near her in the daytime, someone or

*maternal uncle



other reproaches us: "Let the poor thing rest here at least." Ma also puts on the expression of a "poor thing" as if she really is in danger of being devoured by us! I began to feel very irritated at the idea of going into Nani's house, so I deliberately hung back near the bushes. The mongrel dog came and smelt me. Just then someone inside called my name and said: "Now where has she disappeared again?" The dog and I went in together.

Nani was sitting with Mama's son in her lap. She shoed off the dog. She doesn't touch animals. The dog put its tail down and went out. It was used to being reprimanded. I was told: "Touch Nani's feet. Not like that. Properly. *Arre*, you are born a girl, you'll have to bend all your life, why not learn now?" Nani patted me on the back and said: "This girl hasn't got a bit taller. Who'd believe she's eight years old?"

I pinched Mama's son, but he, like an idiot, kept on following me around. He's fair and chubby, sweet-sweet. He's quite tall for his age. He's five but looks seven. "Will you tell me a story at night?" he asked me. "No", I said and pretended to be reading the newspaper.

“Oh, what a problem it is”, Ma was saying, and the neighbour woman was telling Nani: “Lalli’s mother, this time Lalli is definitely going to have a boy. Just see how yellow her face is. Remember how pink it used to be when she was expecting the girls?” “Who knows, may be this time too...” Ma said, and putting on a pathetic expression she began to clean her nails. “Is there anyone there to cook for your husband?” the neighbour’s Nani was asking. I missed Babu a lot. How clean Babu smells and how soft his lap is. Here Ma doesn’t let me stay long in her lap. She says: “Ugh, you’ve made all my bones ache, and of course, crushed my sari. Get up now, do. I’ve a whole heap of work to do, and on top of it, there’s this nuisance. Get up.” Nani folds her hands and says: “Oh goddess, preserve my honour. This time let her take back a son from her parents’ home.” And she wipes her eyes.

●

From the corners of my eyes I looked at my sisters. They were asleep. We were sleeping in a big room which had been divided into two parts by a wooden partition. Right above my bed hung a big wall clock, ticking away and hissing softly before it struck the hour. Just the way my small sister draws in her breath before she starts howling. The lights are all off. The room is lit by the moon. Tulsadai is rubbing oil into the soles of Ma’s feet, and saying: “If it’s a boy this time, I’ll take a sari with stainless steel *zari*” In the moonlight I can’t see Ma’s face. I can only see her stomach like a drum Ma’s sari has slipped down. Tulsa touches some painful spot and Ma moans softly. Like cows when they are coming home. “If it’s a boy this time, I’ll be freed of this”, she tells Tulsa too, and then says: “You go now. Your children must be waiting for you. He sure you put the oil vessel well under the bed, otherwise in the morning one of these kids will kick it over and...” Ah a bad thing. When Ma leaves a sentence unfinished, it floats in the room for a long while. Like the ticking of the clock. Grown-ups always complete their sentences if they’re talking of nice things,

but leave bad things half said. Why is that? Like “Oh...a woman’s fate...” Silence. “Oh—three girls...” Silence.

There’s a star shining very brightly outside. Could it be the polestar? Babu said to me: “If you study hard, you can also become anything you want, as Dhruva became a star.” “But I can’t become a boy, can I?” I said, obstinately. I don’t know why Babu scolded me, saying: “Don’t argue with elders.”

It’s impossible to understand grown-ups. My big sister says one should never rely on them. When they want to know something, they’ll question you and dig it out of you by hook or by crook, but they won’t tell you a thing.

Nobody ever tells us anything. Here, especially when we go to sleep at night, these grown-ups’ world opens up, like a magic casket. I want to stay awake and listen, but I don’t know why, I always fall asleep half-way through. Whose voice is that now? Who is crying in suppressed tones? Is it Chhoti Masi? “I am treated worse than a dog in that house”, she is telling Ma. Where is she treated worse than a dog? I want to ask. Where? Ma answers: “All of us suffer like that but one has to put up with it.” My eyes close.

“What does one have to put up with, Ma?” I ask, next morning. Everyone is having breakfast. I remind her—that putting up which Chhoti Masi has to do. I get one slap, then another. Mami saves me, saying: “Let be, she’s a child.” “She’s no child. She’s a witch.” Ma’s stomach wobbles in anger. “Eavesdropping on her elders. Heaven knows what will become of her.”

“Oh you...” Out in the garden, my big sister shakes at me the flowers she has gathered. “Haven’t I told you hundreds of times not to go asking questions like that? One day these people will beat you up so much that you’ll die, if you keep on asking questions like that., “ I answer, crying: “I will ask questions, I will, I will.” “Then go and die” big sister says, and sensibly continues weaving a garland for Nani’s Gopalji. “You’re my precious Lakshmi” Nani says to her, meaning me to hear.

In the afternoon I tell the little ones frightening stories about mons and ghosts who live in the walnut tree. “If you go there at midnight,” I say, “You’ll see them bathing in children’s blood. They speak through their nose. At first you can’t even understand what they say.” The kids follow me around all over the house. Like the mice following the pied piper.

In the afternoon, Bari Mami and Ma give us money to buy sweet and sour candy, and send us running off. The room is dark, green paper has been stuck over the windowpanes. The room is full of women—Mami, Ma, Masis, Nani. They are eating something or other all the time. Their cushiony arms, fat half naked legs, and wrinkled stomachs! Well then, why are we told not with our feet apart because our legs show?

“You all look like cows”, I declare, but perhaps nobody hears me. Chhoti Masi, who is lying on the floor with a pillow under her head, takes a sour candy from us and begins to suck it. “Jijaji is really the limit”, she says, and suddenly laughter explodes in the room. Who? Why? How? I look all round for an answer but nobody bothers us here. They are all busy talking their own language once again. I go out, slamming the door as hard as I can. Perhaps that will make Ma come out and say: “Oh what! nuisance”, but no, nobody comes out to scold me.

“Move aside.” Hari’s mother wags her head at me. She is talking a trayful of glasses of tea into the room. “Move aside, this is not you. It’s for the grown-ups. Move out.” Hari’s mother has a no like a frog and her eyebrows meet above her nose. When she laughs her cheeks hang loose like a dead bat. “Do move aside”, she again. “I won’t move”, I say, “First you say that girls are good.” “Yes yes, I say it, now move”, she says. “No”, I persist, “Say it properly.”!

“What’s happening, Hari’s mother?” says Masi irritably from the room, “Will you bring the tea next ‘ year or what?” Hari’s mother draws together her thick eyebrows. “This middle Lalli won’t let me—” She starts laughing and her froglike nose bobs—bob, bob. Ma takes my name

and says: "That girl must be harassing her. She was born only to plague my life." Someone tells her: "You shouldn't get angry in your condition."

I sit outside the house for a long time and watch the birds flying in the air. Why was I not born a bird? Does the mother bird also think that girl birds are not so good?

"Where has she gone?" Somebody inside is searching for me. I purposely hide behind the wall so that no one should find me. Ever. Anywhere. Anyhow. If only I could find that magic candy which makes you become invisible when you put it in your mouth, how wonderful it would be.

At night, when Nani finishes the story, she says: "Now go off to sleep, all of you." My small sister is already asleep. Hari's mother carries her away. I ask Nani whether I can sleep with her. Nani's body is so soft and warm, and her quilt smells of cloves and cardamoms. Nani keeps a torch under her pillow. If you take it with you to the bathroom, after the lights are put out, you don't knock your toes against anything. Nani says: "No, no, as it is, this boy doesn't leave me. Where is the space for two of you here? You go to your mother. Tomorrow I'll tell you another story, all right?" Nani's voice is sugary, the way grown-ups' voices always become when they want to coax you into doing something or other. In the other room, my big sister says, without turning towards me: "Well, did she let you sleep with her?" Her voice is trembling with anger. The clock ticks on. Ma is snoring. Let you sleep? Let you sleep? Tick, tick. Khrr, khrr.

"Girls, where are you?" Nani is calling out. She has the *roli* in her hand. In front of her is a big vessel of *halwa* and a heap of *puris*. It's the morning of Ashtami. There is a mat spread in front of Nani. "Come, let me put *tika* on you. She burns camphor for the arti.

"Come, let me do *arti* for you." My two sisters and Mama's beautiful daughters are sitting crosslegged in front of Nani. Nani puts *tika* on them and rings a bell. Like a railway guard. Then she blows the conch—pu, pu. I become an engine

and race round on the ledge of the courtyard. The room is full of scents—the scent of camphor, *halwa*, *ghee*, flowers. "Pay your fares and off to Calcutta, pu, pu."

"Come dear, put on the *tika*, you are my *kanyakumari*, aren't you?" "No", I say, "I'm an engine." Mama's son claps his hands. "She's an engine, she's an engine." Then my stomach suddenly grows tight with fear like a clenched fist Ma is waddling towards me. Her face is compressed with anger. "I'll make an engine of you, just now,



this minute."

"Are you mad, Lalli?" The neighbour's Nani catches hold of Ma's hand and signs to me with her eyes to do as I am told. "She's only a child. She's a *kanyakumari* and today is Ashtami, the goddess's day. Today you mustn't hit a *kanyakumari*. It's a sin." I jump clown from the ledge with a thud,

Nani, with tightly clenched lips, has started serving *halwa puri* to the girls.

"Why don't you go?" the irritable Masi says to me, "Why do you make your

mother cry when she is in this condition?"

"When you people don't love girls why do you pretend to worship them?" My voice breaks on a sob. This makes me so angry that I feel like swallowing the burning camphor to brand my treacherous throat. I want to ask again: "Why?" but I keep quiet for fear of starting to cry. I don't want to cry. Especially not in front of them.

Hari's mother puts her hand to her mouth in wonder. "Ma *ri ma*, just listen to her. A girl—and showing such temper." Nani is giving Rs 1.25 to each of the girls. "20 sour candies can be bought with Rs 1.25", Nani says, as if to the wall, and holds out a 25 paise coin wrapped in a rupee note towards me. The mark of the *roll* on the tip of Nani's thumb looks like a blood-stain. I move backward towards the wall.

"I don't want all this women's stuff—this *halwa puri*, *tika*, money. I won't become a goddess." I scream so loudly that the pigeons pecking at the grain in the courtyard take off in a flurry, as if a bullet has been fired some where. □

(translated from Hindi by Manushi)

Kitchen

I do not know
what is cooking in the vessel,
and what in her heart,
and what in their thoughts,
who sit, heads bent,
outside the house.

All I know is,
the vessel is warm,
today she's not sad,
and the people outside
are preparing
to go somewhere.

She hums to herself,
and, lifting the lid,
looks into the vessel,
then stokes the fire.
Outside, the people
say, in loud voices :
"We've had enough—
this cannot go on any longer."
/ do not know
what will happen next.

—Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena

(translated from Hindi by Manushi)