

“Oh! Ma, look... what Babu says. He will take me...! ...He will, I will, I will go to the town, to the fair!! Round and round in the swing! I want to dance! Whooo... Mama... Please! Stop combing, ma!... ouch!... Can I go to tell Kamla, please tell Kamla please please please!...”

Sundara gave a final pat and a twist to her daughter's swinging plaits and smiled at the fluttering scarlet ribbons, like two virgin flowers of a just flowering gulmohar. She heard her pattering feet in the courtyard, running to that corner of the mud-and-brick wall she and Kamla had knocked down brick by brick jumping over it to each other's house.

The girls had grown up together.

Sundara frowned. Almost nine. And the neighbours would soon start whispering.

In the villages, nine was the respectable age at which families married off their daughters. Of course she wasn't straightaway sent to her husband's house. It meant that parents could stop worrying about their daughters once and for all.

Devi ran back. Disappointed. “Kamla's not there. Mama, can I wear my green frock to town?”

“Did Babu say he will take you?”

“Of course!”

Sundara was somewhat amazed. In these days of such tension. To think of taking a child for a jaunt. What had come over her husband?

“When are you going, Devi?”

He hadn't told her anything. He was so worried and tense lately. Her mind went to his worries. That strip of land which edged between their own and her sister-in-law's field.

He wouldn't accept it. He couldn't. That bitch sister of his had seduced his mother. Fooling a poor old widow. Saris and sweets and sweet-talk. “Mother, dear, see! See

SHORT STORY

Pappa's Girl

○ Sunanda Mongia

your dear *damaad*... so thoughtful. Like a real son. This nice sari he brought for you from Bombay. At mill rate. Mother dear, is your head aching? Oh! Let me oil your hair.” A plateful of *kheer*. The bitch! *Saali!* Fooled her with sweet talk... And took away my father's land. A son gets all, the village elders ignore the law. Didn't we give her a big dowry? A piece of land to grow her vegetables and the hut? A motorcycle? A big shiny Rajdoot. He thinks my father shat it out.

Pacing up and down, up and down. Moustache quivering and dense anger rolling down the incline of his stomach. Mornings and days and nights. Sundara remembered him fuming that very morning. “I won't let him. What's mine is mine.” Pacing up and down in the courtyard, shouting obscenities and threats across the wall.

He had suddenly swung around to where she was spreading clothes. Slapped her – her teeth had snapped shut on the inside of her



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cheek. “Motherfucker... you... couldn’t you at least cook two rotis for her... Look what you have done... Let that land slip away from my grip.”

“But,” she tried not to cry, “you insisted I wasn’t to...”

It was a mistake. When a man has troubles a woman should hold her tongue. She knew but she forgot. She touched the sore spot on the side of her head. It would be fine in a day or two. These always healed in a day or two.

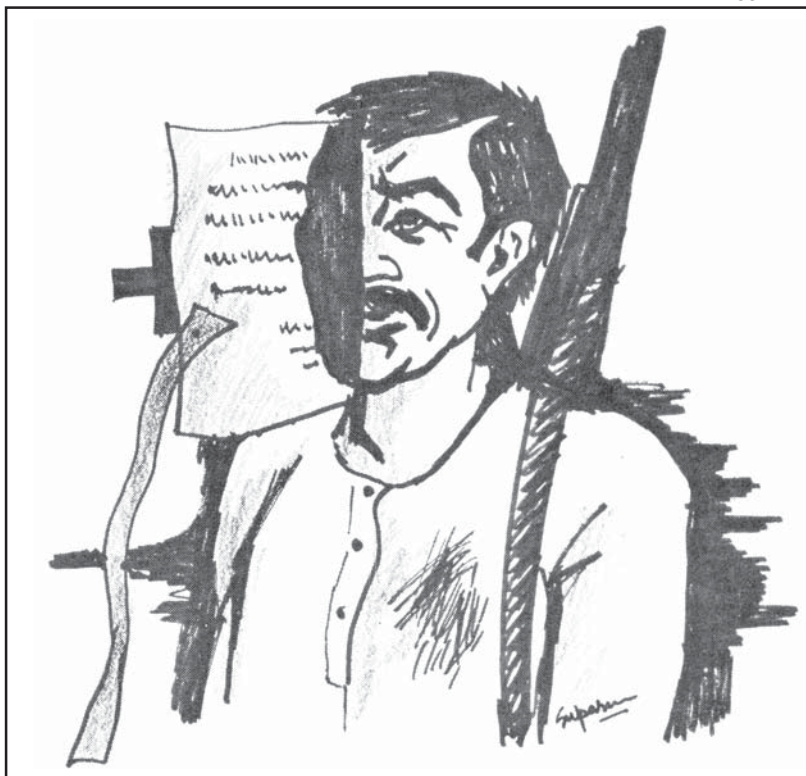
The trouble was no one was fighting back. They didn’t have to. It remained quiet across the wall. Except once in a while, the sound of the television. That enticed Devi across to Kamla. And that again was half the trouble.

Sundara could sympathise with him. How is a full-blooded man to vent his anger? If it wasn’t her, it could be the buffalo. Her children needed the milk.

She sat down on the gunny bag next to her *chulha* where she burnt the firewood for her family. Chopping vegetables here was her only time for some peace and quiet. She got to sit down then. She could rest her feet. Her peaceful part of the day.

And now he is taking the child to the fair. To the *sawan mela*. The fair to celebrate the monsoons. Why? Her mind returned to the question again and again. Like a crow pecking at the open heaps of garbage. Why?... Why?

Is it his way of saying sorry for the many beatings he has given her lately? Perhaps he is sorry for the scoldings, the many times he has shut Devi up in the dark dank storeroom. The storeroom... She too had a lurking fear of it since she got locked up there once. The bunch of keys used to be tied to the edge of her mother-in-law’s sari



and tucked in her waist before she went to live in a hut at the edge of the village... now Sundara would rather not enter it.

He said it would do her some good.

Well, it was true. She had to be married off and which family would tolerate a rebellious bride? And, then he would shout, every second day or so, “Don’t play with Kamla. Don’t go there. That bitch girl of my worst enemy... Sundara, I warn you. Control her. You bitch, motherfucker, littering girls in my house. I’ll strangle her one day. Save dowry. This black-starred sin of my house.”

Those had been harsh words.

He must be feeling sorry.

He wasn’t that bad a father. Had even sent the girl to school earlier when Kamla had started school. Perhaps his sister’s intervention had worked. Yesterday he lost his temper with Devi jumping over the wall. The child still thought she

would get the same mild scolding she got for stealing raw mangoes from the trees. His slap had flung her half way across the courtyard. Meera had pleaded over the wall. “*Bhaiya*, please! Don’t carry the fight to the children. The girls are like sisters.”

Sundara sat mulling over the situation. Ram Prakash, Meera’s husband, had been her husband Prem Chandra’s best friend. They had grown up together, except that Ram Prakash’s father had been much poorer. He was that friend who rode on his cycle and helped him with homework. The one who married Meera when the whole village had decided that she was unlucky. Like a real brother. Naturally, her husband felt betrayed. Just for a five feet strip of land. Indeed, why did he need a path to his field? When had he stopped him from sharing his path? Indeed, hadn’t he been given a field, what if it was a little small? Things

had become difficult since their father died. Didn't Meera witness the decline? What if he had worked hard? Did he expect to be fed?

She wanted to tell him desperately. "Forget it. Be generous. She is your sister and he has worked hard. Can't you forgive him his progress? If our fields are shrinking that's our *kismet*." She knew a man had his pride. Naturally, one does expect better behaviour from friends. What could she tell him? Besides, a mother should worry more for her son.

He had gone to town yesterday. Fixed up a lawyer who would take more than the worth of that strip. "It is the principle of the thing... Be ready to sell off your gold."

Sundara had hoped to save the gold for Devi's marriage. At least one girl would be married off. With no son to bring dowry which could be used in the marriage of the other two, she felt bad. Very guilty. The least she should have done was to give a man a son to depend upon in his old age.

She sighed. Her mind went back to the trip.

Is he taking her because he wants the child to enjoy herself? Maybe.

She suddenly felt relieved. She wouldn't worry about the land. Those are a man's worries.

Sundara got up with a sigh. She would have to do better than sitting there chopping potatoes into smaller and smaller pieces. There was food to be cooked, chores to be completed.

In the afternoon, Prem Chandra came home with two men. He called out for the strongest tea for them. She had seen them lately coming and going. They always come on shiny black Rajdoot motorcycles which he admired so much... "So loud, it makes you feel like a king in the village," he



had said after a ride round the village. It reminded him of his childhood with his grandfather when they rode into the village with an erect gun pointing skywards in hand and riding on the back of a noble horse. Why had he never bought his own motorcycle, she wondered, they grew enough wheat and *arhar* in the fields.

Later, they had gone together to the fields, bamboo staffs in hand and rifles slung on their shoulders. That didn't alarm her much, for she knew the men were inseparable from their guns. It was like carrying their *izzat* (status) slung on their backs. Just the same she felt relieved when he came back, much before his usual time in the evening.

She was surprised. His breath wasn't smelling. But then he always said, "Oh! I am in control." Which was true, she knew. He was always in control.

And, he was behaving differently. Tweaked the sari off her head, slapped her on the behind, "Ah! Devi's ma! Ah! What shall we have for dinner today?"

As if he didn't know. Just being playful. He had very early told her of his tastes.

Any village woman worth her two rotis knew that a man in such a mood was a rare marvel and had to be humoured.

"Where's Devi?" he asked

She replied, evasively. "Must be around ... somewhere." She was afraid in case she was with Kamla, listening to songs on the radio.

"So? Where's she? ... Ah!" He smiled. Genuinely? "Must be with Kamla. I do feel sorry. I was too harsh with the child."

It was a good opportunity and she asked from behind her sari *pallav* veiling her head and one of her eyes, "Are you taking her to town?"

He had laughed, exultantly. "I just might, you know. I might." There was a suppressed excitement about him. Sundara didn't remember seeing him in this mood for a long long time.

Early next morning when she was making tea she heard him stir, cough and belch loudly. It was the way his body worked, he said. He had to do it every morning.

“That was good food last night,” he yawned and stretched as she handed him his tea, “You—motherfucker!—made me overeat. Now I am feeling quite sick.”

She preferred it to the ominous silences. She knew her standing for the day.

“Get the child ready,” he told her brusquely as he went to the hand-pump for his bath, a chewed neemstick in hand. “We leave in half an hour.”

Devi was in a state of hyper excitement—like a hungry calf jumping to get at its mother’s teats. “Ma, can I just go to Kamla’s house... Ma! Ma! ... one minute please ...jus’ to say bye...please please...”

Sundara had first whispered and then loudly scolded “Quiet!” and finally slapped her.

The father looked up from his *puris*, indulgently. “Oh! Let her if she wants.” His teeth had gleamed at the child, “Don’t take too long. Remember? We are going to the *mela*.”

Devi stood hesitatingly, looking at both of them, then darted across to the wall, like an airy dragonfly, her red ribbons fluttering against the sky.

The lady doctor was alone in her clinic. Short, curly haired and dark-skinned. In her eyes there was a quiet sympathy which made village men trust her with their pregnant on-the-verge-of-death wives, daughters and sisters. She was on the edge

of the town, on the main road which led back to the three or four rural districts in the east for which it was the main nerve centre.

She saw them enter the gate and walk up the long grassy driveway of her sprawling house between the towering trees planted so long ago by her grandfather. A man and a girl with red fluttering ribbons tripping behind her under the trees bearing mangoes and memories. Then, a little higher up, the guavas both ripe and raw, custard apples, and one mulberry, which had a sturdy branch curved like a hammock from the days of her childhood.

Obviously they were from one of the surrounding villages. He was dressed in spotless white and across his shoulder was a red *gamchha*, a thin traditional cotton scarf which men carried in this part of the country. In his hand he carried a much used rifle, whose shining

butt was polished smooth by the grip of three generations of men of the family. She was used to seeing men walk around like this even in these years of the late '70s; they always did so in this part of the country, a compensation, she thought with a sudden quirk, for their inability to walk with their erections in hand. How else to display their masculinity? Freud? Eh? Society is quite old-fashioned in some matters. She grinned as the two entered her chamber.

The chattering girl clutching his hand seemed to be around eight years of age, though one doesn’t quite know about the under-fed village girls... Moon-faced with a nose-pin the size of a fading star, her skin was the colour of rain-soaked soil; her cheerful lilting voice had the smell of rain on parched earth; her scarlet ribbons like victorious banners challenging

the sky. A happy child; an excited child clutching a candy-stick and a packet of crayons in the other hand.

The doctor smiled at her and then thought, they will soon be marrying her off.

The man came and sat down opposite her. The child half-hidden behind him gazed round-eyed at the doctor’s short hair. ‘Has the mouse nibbled at her hair, too?’ She looked around inquisitively, then at a chart of a breast-feeding naked woman. She covered her mouth, exclaimed “hoooh” in wide-eyed shyness and asked the



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doctor, "Is it a ghost?" Pointing at a chart of a human skeleton, all but forgetting her timidity.

He scolded her, "Shut up! And go outside, on the bench. Out! And come in only when I call."

The doctor saw the distaste with which he brushed off her sticky clutch.

"Don't dirty my clothes. Go!"

The ribbons appeared limp and subdued as she quietly went to the folding chair outside.

"Where is the patient?" she asked, suddenly annoyed.

"Oh, doctor! There is no patient. Just this girl there. Don't you remember me? Your permanent customer. I brought my wife and my sister to you. This girl—my first-born. You don't remember? Born so effortlessly into your hands. Except that you gave me a girl—and so dark. Do you remember now?"

"Well maybe. But you know... What have you come here for?"

"This girl has been raped by my brother-in-law. I have come for the certificate."

The doctor was speechless. She looked at the man and then the girl. The scolding already forgotten, she sat sucking her candy and swinging her legs, her red ribbons fluttered across the sky.

The doctor was speechless.

He started off "Look, I have two daughters more. And she is so dark. Think of the dowry..."

She said "She is not raped."

The man laughed, harshly. "Is it written on her face that a girl is raped? I am telling you she is raped."

Coldly she replied "Rape shows on the mind, body... the face as well." She glanced at the fluttering ribbons. "She looks like a happy child. I won't even make a physical examination. Go away!"

"Don't tell me that!" he shouted. "I tell you, that motherfucker has raped



her! The police agrees—they will take my FIR. I need that certificate." He sat there glaring and panting.

"Look, you must understand. I can't give a false certificate. The courts... and the police. It won't be accepted."

Suddenly expansive, patient, he explained "Now listen, madamji, don't you worry about that. I've fixed up all that... I will get him into jail for 20 years. Madam, I don't want this for free. My poor trusting child. She went to his house again and again... All this I had kept for her marriage..." with a sentimental sniff and a sigh he took out from the pocket of his stitched cotton vest a small cloth bag with drawstrings.

He spilled its contents on her table "All this is yours... Just give me that certificate." He sat back, looking for all the world a man satisfied with his performance and very sure of a positive outcome.

It made her blow a fuse, that gesture of sitting back in expectant ease. Gun or no gun she didn't care. She was that angry.

"Get out! You insect from the drain! Dirty devil! Animal! Getttt out justttt now! Out, out! I say... out!!!"

Her words sank like fragile paper boats in a monsoon deluge as she sputtered into a blazing silence.

He looked at her ominously, smiled. Leaned forward. Asked quietly, coolly, "You mean you can give a certificate only when the girl is raped? You will?" He asked her.

"Get out" she shouted. "Thinking such evil thoughts about your own child... Your brother-in-law... a relative! Get out!"

"I will go," he replied from the door, "as soon as you give me the certificate. I will be right back." he called over his shoulder as he clutched the twiggy arm of the child.

"Don't dare come back" she shouted out from the window.

A patient peeped in curiously.

In her long career she had seen enough husbands and fathers of neglected dying women, raped wives, aborted women and girls dying of knitting needles and bamboo poles, new-born girls fed cactus juices and stuffed with raw salt, overweight husbands of emaciated wives... so many... but a father like this one... In a country where even a disliked daughter was still worshipped as a symbol of a goddess? Such evil thoughts!

Her telephone rang.

The patient walked in.

Another patient, pregnant a third time, with her eldest daughter clutching the edge of her *pallav*, also walked in. A child she had delivered long ago. The doctor smiled at her, teased her half-heartedly and almost forgot the other girl.

Later, the doctor stretched herself tiredly. Time for lunch. All she had to do was to latch the clinic from inside and walk over to her private rooms.

She lingered on, her thoughts like tangles in storm-tossed hair. She knew it was the girl and her father.

She thought she smelled a thunderstorm in the air.

She finally stirred, switched off her fan, closed a window... Then

across to the other window...

She saw him climb the steps of the portico.

He came in. His gun was in his left hand. On his right shoulder the girl. The girl's head lolled in rhythm to his steps. She was so small; he carried her quite effortlessly.

He came up and loudly dropped his gun on her glass top table. And dumped the girl on her examination table. The doctor gasped at the sight of the broken girl. An accident?

Arms folded, he leaned back against the examination table, observing the doctor with great deliberation.

She saw his clothes. The snow-white kurta was stained with mud and crushed grass. A streak of a reddish stain?

"Now you can make the examination," he said.

The girl stirred and groaned, 'Ma Ma... I am sorry... Mama Ma... I troubled Papu...pappa please I don't want colour pencil like Kamla blue red please please...mama..he is angry it hurt me the red ribbon tore my mouth tore me tore me...papu.. I wont ask promise don't don't don't don't... please.. Doctor aunty... please tell Babu... I am sorry sorry... Don't papu ...Don't want colour...

He walked past to the table picking up his gun, calling out from the door, "I am waiting outside. You wanted her raped. So now... Hurry up."

"What!" she shouted. "I wanted her raped...!"

He didn't turn.

The girl turned her head. The doctor heard herself gasp. The bright ribbons were lifeless, a long scratch from chin to eye. She was now quiet. It was there on the girl's violated face, the rape.

The doctor screamed. It could have been the sound of a slaughtered animal.

It brought him back. "Look doctor, stop your antics! You cannot escape responsibility! You said the girl's got to be raped!..."

She screamed.

"...Ah!.. before I forget... let me tell you. Your garden is nice. Quiet and shady!... But do hurry up now!... I must return."

She screamed.

The sky fell tinkling down on her head shattered by the piercing echoes.

Scattered on the ground like crystal cubes from broken glass. □

Acknowledgment: To Ranjana's mother, the doctor of the story, whose scream reverberates still in the voice of her daughter twenty-five years later as she recounts this incident.

Women Bhakt Poets



*"No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head.
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermilion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy."*

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