



STORY

Rema's Choice

○ Lata Thankappan

REMA took a breath and decided to go for it. *Better do it coolly if you want to get anywhere*, she told herself. *By now you ought to know how to handle him*. She was prepared for all possibilities. Rema considered them all before blurting out,

"Father, I want to do social work!"

Her father paused briefly before retorting, "Take my word, you won't be good at it."

"Why?" Rema asked, trying not to sound defensive.

"I know you. You'll get emotionally involved."

"What's wrong with that?" Rema wasn't prepared for this—"I mean, the quality of one's work improves when done with emotion."

"Really Rema, consider your character. You'll want to end all the world's misery with one big sweep of a hand. But you can't do that because you are not God.

Sooner or later you'll reach a point where you will feel utterly helpless. If you are wise, at that point you will quit. If you decide to stay... you'll end up a psychological wreck." He spoke in a melodramatic manner. Nevertheless, Rema was not moved.

"Thanks for warning me," she said with feeling. "But I believe that problem can be controlled. The moment I feel I'm getting emotional, the moment the feelings of helplessness descend over me, I'll take a break and relax a while before going back to it."

"So it's very simple according to you! Perhaps you want to tell me why you want to join social work in the first place... apart from your guilt complex of course."

"Guilt complex?"

"Yeah, you know, daughter of a rich, busy businessman." Her father looked a little bit guilty himself as he uttered the word "busy".

"Well..." She shifted uncomfortably. "I won't comment on that but I do want to make my existence worthwhile."

"Being a good wife and mother is worthwhile too," her father said with a wise look on his face.

"I don't think I'll be a good wife and mother," Rema said, irritated briefly by the stereo-

typical statement. "Besides, where are the good husbands who deserve good wives?"

"You can't say that! You are rich and beautiful. I'm sure you have hundreds of suitors to choose from."

"Rich and beautiful!" Rema exclaimed, "That's exactly the problem. I'd like to think that there's more to me than my money and beauty. I can't tell which of these men are genuinely interested in me, and not just in my physical or material assets."

"At my age I do consider them to be true assets. Why! I can get married even now thanks to my money!" He spoke with a smile, a faint shyness lining it.

Rema stared at him. That secretary of his, of course, she thought ruefully. With her winning smile and wide-eyed admiration she could charm Vishwamitra. Her mother had died two decades ago. He deserved some happiness too, she reasoned. Yet the old familiar feeling of being unwanted crept over her. *I've got to get out of here fast*, she thought.

Looking at Rema, her father thought it best to leave the topic of marriage for the time being. He had given her the freedom to find a husband herself. With all good fatherly intentions, he had

introduced her to eminently wealthy, suitable men but he had not pushed her.

Instead he said, "Don't you think I'm in a better position to help in what you want to do? If it's teaching children that interests you, I can give any amount of donation to build schools. There's only one medicine for poverty and that's money."

"Money is not everything. It is important, of course. But by simply building a school, you don't ensure children of the poor get access to them as well."

Privately she considered it a vicious job, plucking the children from the excitement and freedom of life on the street and imprisoning them within four walls to listen to boring teachers. Many times, watching from a distance sitting inside a car, she had wondered how these skinny and dirty beggar kids could laugh so freely and play the naughtiest pranks she had ever witnessed. Didn't they realize the misery their early adult life would bring? They did not seem to consider themselves unfortunate. Maybe they had seen their loved ones suffering so many times, that they counted each living minute of their life too precious to be lost in sorrow, she mused. Had their hardships hardened them and made them mature early in life?

She was determined she could learn a lot from them. Yes, she would come out of this experience as a better human being.

Meanwhile, her father continued:

"The poor in the villages are the proudest people and they uphold Indian values. Indian hospitality, courage, family loyalty and all that goes with it. Compromises that people make

for money is what's destroying our culture and our self-respect."

Rema gazed at him with a sudden intensity. As she tried responding, her father readied himself with different angles of reasoning with her. "Social work isn't as glamorous as it appears."

"I don't know why people expect any glamour in it." She looked genuinely puzzled. "For me, I want to follow this path because I believe that we can learn a lot from the poor."

Her father sat back again, and replied in a condescending manner. "You get your ideas from books, I assume. Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky or whatever his name was... I don't know what your sources are."

Things seemed to be cooling down. Rema calmly said, "As a matter of fact, I don't like to read such books. Too many descriptions of suffering make

people immune, or make them frustrated because they can't do anything about it." Rema looked thoughtful. "Anyway I don't need books to remind myself of the suffering. Just look around, and you'll see enough of it. Injustice grips me, yes, because I can't tolerate it. I can relate to it, for after all, I've had my share of injustices too. But, I believe in looking at things with an open mind. Logical minds with good hearts, that's what the world needs."

Her father gave up. She only became more determined with arguments. Privately, he thought she would make a good lawyer, arguing the way she did. Anyway, if it's social work, then so be it. Perhaps she would become a great politician. That would be just the right thing for his business, he thought with a smile... □

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