

“**I**S it absolutely necessary that I must ring the bell three times before you open the door? What’s keeping you so busy anyway? A man comes home tired from the office and then has to wait at the door for five minutes.....”

SHORT STORY

# Are You Listening?

Sudha Arora

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“You call this a home? Clothes piled up here, toys strewn around there. Can’t you keep things neat and tidy in the house?”

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“Ugh! It’s impossible to sit on this bed - the sheet stinks. At least you could put these mattresses out in the sun. No wonder the place smells. You are drying nappies all over the house and you have got so used to the stink that you can hardly feel it.”

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“Tell me, what is it that you are doing all day? The children seem to tie you up twenty hours a day. My mother brought up seven kids but our house used to be absolutely spic and span. And you, with just two kids, have turned the home into a bloody railway platform.”

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“Oh no, not again! You know very well that I have a sore throat but you still have to bring me a cold sherbet. Can’t you use your brain once in a while? Go, make me a cup of tea...and listen, don’t face me with a cold drink the moment I step into the house. I can’t afford to fall sick. Do you have any idea of my workload in the office? But you don’t give a damn. You seem to think the world moves in slow motion just like yourself.”

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“Don’t you ever get bored sitting at home all day long? You should go out and get some fresh air. Get yourself some decent clothes and if you can’t manage long hair then cut it



short. Maybe then you will look somewhat desirable. Why don’t you go out and meet some sensible women in the neighbourhood? It will open up your mind and do you some good.”

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“Have you given Babuji his food? How many times do I have to tell you that he must eat early to avoid indigestion.....what? You’ve already given it to him? Then why don’t you

open your mouth and tell me so? How the hell am I supposed to know?”

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“Before I forget, tell me where you have kept that book which I gave you last week? I have turned the table upside down; and it’s not there on that shelf either. You can’t keep anything in its place, can you? It was a big mistake to tell you to read that book. Now it is lost for good. That’s the

trouble with you women - the moment you get married and produce kids, it's good-bye to books. After that, all you do is dry nappies and work out your grocery list. And to hell with reading!"

"You call this a meal? Day in and day out you churn out the same old stuff - dal, roti and potatoes - as if there are no vegetables other than potatoes grown in India. Even if you can't do anything else, at least cook a decent meal. Why don't you go and stay with your mother for some time and pick up some good recipes from her? She is such a wonderful cook. How come you haven't learned anything from her? You could make some Chinese and Continental dishes. But no, you don't seem to be interested in cooking. Everyday the same routine stuff without any variation....Bah!"

"You better find that book. I have to return it, and don't tell me you forgot. Nowadays you don't remember a single thing."

"Now that both children are asleep, why don't you come here, sit with me. You never seem to have time for me."

"Tell me something. Do you know why I picked you out of so many proposals? I'll tell you why. It was because you were so interested in *ghazals* and your house was aesthetically decorated, lovely landscapes on the wall....But now, look at yourself! Sometimes I wonder if you are the same girl I married. I bring you so many interesting books, but you have no time even to look at them. Shall I tell you something? One reason why we men get involved with other women is because of

stupid wives like you. And then you sit at home and cry your lungs out but never even think of improving yourselves."

"Do you know something? Your clothes stink of baby food and oil and masala. How long does it take to bathe and freshen up before going to bed?"

"There you are, fallen asleep. I might as well have talked to the walls. You get so tired doing household work that you are no good for anything else."



"You'll never change. Even after 15 years of marriage you have not learned that when a man comes home tired, you should open the door at the first ring. Why do you have to sit right in that corner bedroom so that it takes ages for you to reach the front door? Why don't you sit here on the sofa around the time I'm due from office?"

"You call this a home? No ash-tray on the table, no towel in the bathroom, the whole house full of books wherever you turn - on the table, on the shelf, on the bed, on the carpet, in the kitchen, bathroom."

"Now, why do I see so many newspapers around? Do you have to read all the evening papers published in the city? After all, the same news is there in all the papers. If I stop you from reading all this crap, you'll probably start reading what's wrapped around the medicine bottles. It has become an obsession with you now. You hardly bother to see what's happening at home or with the children."

"You know very well, I don't have tea at this time. It's time for dinner. It's so bloody hot and you have to come with a hot cup of tea. Use your brain, please. Can't you make some lime juice and keep it in the fridge?"

"What is this? You call this food? I'm sick and tired of baked and boiled vegetables. I feel like a patient in a five-star hospital! You don't have to be so nutrition conscious. I'm longing for simple dal-roti. At least I'll feel I'm eating food at home. You women have started aping Western ideas and forgotten even how to use our Indian spices. That's ridiculous."

"Oh no! You haven't got my shoes repaired? And when are you going to pay this electricity bill? You don't have time for all this; you must go gallivanting around. As though teaching in school is not enough, you've taken up this stupid social work. Why the hell do you go to that wretched social work office, full of hypocritical women? What do you get out of it? Nothing! Not even a penny! In fact, you are paying even the transport fare also from your own pocket."

"So, this is your darling son's report card? Now don't expect me to teach both of them the new maths. After I come back from the office, I've got no stamina left for anything. Listen, you are the MA, the gold

medalist, can't you look after your children's studies? If you don't know the new maths, then arrange for a tutor. Now that you've started earning, spend something on your children, instead of wasting your money in social work. All day long, the children sit watching rubbish on MTV."

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"Will you put that book down! It's

a quarter to twelve now. If you are not sleepy, then go to another room and read until morning, but please switch off the light. And listen, if you provoke me like this, I am going to throw these books which are scattered like cockroaches throughout the house right out of the window."

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"Now wait a minute. Have you

been listening to me or was I talking to the walls? What's so remarkable and interesting in this massive book, without which your life will be meaningless? No matter how much you read, it's not going to add to your intelligence. You'll never change. You'll remain the same....." □

**Translation From Hindi:  
Lavin Kumar**

## *In that city*

*I can still remember waking in that city; the soft grey light  
Of its mornings, the sound of old women  
Pulling their small rolling carts to the open market. They sold  
Vegetables there, and brightly colored fruits, still dirty  
From that country's rich soil. There was a table of fishes too;  
I was fascinated by the shining silver carcasses and white bellies  
Reflecting the sun's stolen glory. And there were small animals:  
Red, screaming---made perfect by their deaths. At the very end  
One could buy flowers also; golden, white, purple things  
Dripping water and tied together with a thin worn string. I  
Liked to buy a handful of them---one thousand drachmas worth--and to walk  
Out into the middle of the city, my hair a yellow stained crown,  
Pressing them against my best dress. One day I got lost among  
The low white houses, terraces and broken pink streets. Afraid,  
I dropped my gentle bouquet down to my feet. A single blue flower  
Tumbled ahead of me, leading me back to my street where men were  
Closing up their businesses now, and women sweeping their washed  
Porches. A group of young schoolgirls in uniform dresses passed  
By me; their faces were open, beautiful with a studied somberness--  
And then breaking into giggles. I watched them walk up and down  
Picking up fallen petals---and then folding them like secrets  
Into their little pockets. One found a discarded orange; her dark  
Hands felt the round of it, the heaviness and pungent smell.  
She stood up straight, a few wisps of her honey hair shining  
In the day's falling light. She knew that her life had changed.  
After that there was only night with her many stars. A book opened  
And finished, some letters written and coffee drunk at an outdoor  
Café among emptied fruit rinds, blood and the faint smell of religious fishes.*

**Ann Claremont Le Zotte**