



SHORT STORY
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ALL FOR A HUSBAND

solitude. The whole bogey lay empty, like a graveyard filled with row upon row of graves. My heart began to sink. I was fed up of scanning the newspaper. I picked up another. The same news items. Oh god, if I were in a graveyard, at least the corpses might emerge from their graves. Oh god, if only someone would come. Oh god, oh god... I began to pray. All of a sudden, the train stopped, and it was as though an army of locusts had invaded the train. There were more infants and bundles than there were people. The children, as though they had come from famine stricken villages, fell to nourishing themselves the moment they entered the train. The suckling infants set about it in a business like manner while the others moved around, whining and whimpering. As for the bundles, they were tied in such a fashion as to take up the maximum possible space, and refused to stay put anywhere. As you caught hold of one, another fell on your head. I continued to sit on a separate berth at such an angle that if a bundle were to fall on me, my spine would be spared. I value my spine above all the other parts of my body. They say that if your spine breaks, you become a mere lump of flesh.

"Where are you going?" enquired my fellow traveller in an anxious tone, even though she was as yet barely free of the bundles. I hurriedly informed her, and then drew her attention to a heavy bundle which seemed to contain utensils, and was threatening to descend on us at the slightest provocation. The touch of a hand sent the utensils clattering in a manner calculated to strike dread into the boldest heart.

"Where are you coming from?" I told her, with a little less alacrity.

"Are you going to your *maika*?"*

When one is not married, one's *maika* is the whole world, and yet is nowhere at all. The question of *maika* and *sasural** does not arise. Yet her question threw me off balance, and for a moment I wondered in which province there was a danger of my being married.

"Are you going to your husband?"

"No." I began to wish for a change of subject. Why be pitied for nothing at all?

"Oh, then you must be going to your in-laws, isn't it?" What philosophical answers these questions require!

"No—I'm going to Bombay. I—I'm not married", I said, with some trepidation, even though at college I had won first prize for speaking against marriage at a debate, and even now—in any case, now—well, anyway, that's what I said to her. She gave such a start that the infant was deprived of milk, and instantly began to shriek like a goat being slaughtered. To divert her attention, I tried directing it towards the child, but she just shoved the milk into the child's nose, while she gazed at me with a compassion and kind condescension cannot be reduced into words. In fact, she looked so affectionate that I was afraid she might gather me into her arms and burst into tears. To cheer her up, I bought some roasted gram, but she remained sunk in sorrow. She told me one or two methods of catching a good husband, which, surprisingly, later turned out to be particularly worthless.

My prayers "were indeed being answered with a vengeance. Or perhaps the heavenly scribe erred and recorded my submission twice over, for here came

**maika* : natal home of a married woman.

sasural: in-laws' home of a married woman.

AND all this happened over the merest trifle. Misfortunes cannot be foreseen. What an unlucky hour it was when I set foot in that train, and stirred up a nest of hornets round my ears! This is how it happened. Last November, I was travelling from Jodhpur to Bombay. Everybody advised me: "Look, don't go. You'll regret it." But when an ant's wings sprout, it flies straight to its destruction.

A long journey and an extra jerky train. Sleep seemed far away, sand flew in through the window. To top it all,

another troop of beings. With them came also sticks of sugarcane which had been measured and cut so large as not to fit into any corner of the compartment. They also had rolls of bedding and trunks which refused to stay either on the berths or under them. These ladies created chaos as soon as they arrived. They mercilessly dragged around the trunks and bedding, while the obstinate bundles aforesaid, which had been awaiting this opportunity, promptly fell on the women and children, who then fell on one another.

“Where are you going ?” She too seemed deeply concerned.

I told her.

“Where are you coming from ?” she next asked., though she was not yet settled, and her burka was strangling her. I told her.

“Are you going to your *maika* or your *sasural* ?” If only I knew ! There was no time to think, so I said : “*Sasural*” in a low tone so as not to be overheard by my other fellow traveller.

“What does your husband do ?” Well, I thought, he must be doing something. Why should he roam around, doing nothing ? If only he had told me what he does ! Well, in any case, he couldn’t be unemployed. Just then, she suggested : “In the railways, perhaps..?”

“Yes, he is”, I hastened to assure her. A railway man will be fine, I thought. One can get free tickets and explore every part of India. I like their uniform too. Those caps and whistles, green and red flags how fortunate that I met this nice woman, otherwise I would never have dreamt of a guard or a clerk or...

“What job does he do in the railways ?”

“Well, naturally, he’d do a good job, what else ?” I hadn’t quite realised that it is easy enough to be the wife of a guard but the details might prove a bit too much for me.

“Yes, but what does he do ? There are a thousand and one jobs in the railways.”

“Oh—whistle—coolie—” I was taken aback, and my eye fell on a coolie weighed down by a large bundle, a

bedroll, half a dozen mud pots and two pitchers.

“Coolie—your husband is a coolie?” She too fell prey to a fit of astonishment. I was anxious that we hold this heart to heart conversation in low tones, lest my first friend overhear us. Her infant was still happily drinking milk. But once I have made a statement, I always stick to it. In any case, there was little enough to stick *to* on the present occasion.

“Ye-es, even if he is a coolie, what difference does it make to you ?” I said, feeling quite offended.

“Your h-husband, a coolie ?”

“So what ?” I felt like retorting, “What makes you so jealous ? You’re welcome to marry a coolie too.. Marry ten coolies if you like, who’s stopping you-especially if you think coolies are so cheap !” But I restrained myself and pulled a long face.

“However did you get married to a coolie ?” she asked, and began to wonder how coolies get married. I wanted to invent something, but when I thought of it, the story of a coolie’s marriage seemed very drab, so I said : “Once there was a coolie “

She listened with attention. “He lived . “ I wanted her to say “Hm” or nod her head. “Then it so happened that one day—” God, if I only knew. I couldn’t even recall any story, at that moment. “He was carrying some luggage...” I wanted her to ask “Whose ?” and she did.

“A very beautiful girl’s. Then that girl—that girl fell in love with him .”

“Who was the girl ?”

Oh my, I never thought of that. Anyway, it hardly matters. There must have been some girl or other. Some beautiful girl.

“And why did she fall in love with a coolie ?”

“She fell in love with him because— because—well, how should I know, there must have been some reason. Perhaps he smiled at her...” Just then, a particularly dreadful looking railway employee looked at me and smiled, causing me fervently to hope that I would not actually have to fall in love. After all, I was to appear for an interview.

One hears that falling in love reduces one to a terrible condition. And who wants to go around falling in love in unknown territory ? Also, I had to stay in Jasimbhai’s house, and if there is anything he dreads next to cholera, it is love. Fortunately, the issue was soon forgotten.

“Sister, what are you talking; about? Which girl ? Who fell in love ? I’m asking you how you got married...”

“She is not married, poor thing.” My earlier acquaintance had at last overheard us. That is why I kept saying, talk softly, softly—but now I have lost even that coolie.

“At that time I wasn’t married...” I hoped to convince her.

“What ? you mean you got married sitting in the train ?” God, if only that were possible ! If only rich, well placed husbands were on sale instead of hot tea, I would definitely buy one for the journey even if later—later I’d see. And I decided that I would definitely search for a plausible kind of husband. What does one lose ? It would work fine. At least, one would not have to cook up fresh lies for each passenger. As soon as someone asks, in a flash you produce your husband !

“My dear, where can you get good boys these days?” she said, despairing of my future, “They demand a car, or a horse carriage. That’s the only way to get an earning boy.”

I too grew sorrowful. Why can’t these boys earn, after all. How many good boys there used to be in earlier times. Like so many carrots and radishes. But now there is not one to bless yourself with. This war has only made things worse. Earlier, at least there were boys enough—earning ones or good for nothing ones. Now every man jack of them is rushing off to the war.

“Why don’t you get married then?”

“As you please”, I answered, like an innocent girl whose parents first arrange her marriage and then ask for her opinion, just to show how liberal they are.

“When will you marry, if you don’t marry now ?”

“Now—you mean, right now ? I

think it would perhaps be better if we wait till we reach the junction “

“What ?”

“Since you have decided, why delay the auspicious moment ?”

“Auspicious? What are you talking about, girl ?” She got really upset.

I am asking why you don’t get married”, put in the other.

“Why don’t you get married then?”

I was getting exasperated so I chose to ignore the presence of her child who was still blissfully sucking away.

“Oo— it seems there’s something wrong with your head.” She shifted the angle at which she was holding the child, so as to make it clear that he was not merely sleeping in her arms.

“Oh, you mean you are married”, I remarked nonchalantly, “When did you get yourself married ?”

“My parents got me married. Why would I have got myself married ?”

“So you are against marriage ? You are right, absolutely right. My parents also went and got married—savages that they were.” She quietened down after this, and took some sweet pancakes out of her basket to console herself.

Oh god, when you answer a prayer, is this the way you go about it ? Your poor creatures have not a moment’s peace. This poor handmaiden of yours was lonely. When she desired company, did you have to start sending such quantities of passengers, and even greater quantities of luggage ? Not that I have any right to interfere with your arrangements, but all that I have to say, oh merciful provider, is that you might take into account the tolerance level of your creatures when you are heaping burdens upon them.

I began to feel quite concerned lest my prayer for a husband also be granted after this fashion, and husbands descend upon me, one after another. That would be the end of me. It will be a wonder if I am able to sew buttons on the shirt of one, and serve him cups of tea. How can I possibly endure so many of them, indolent as I am ? They say that if you have second thoughts about a letter after you have posted it, you can get it back from the post office by paying a small

bribe. If only there was such a system with regard to prayers too ! But I had already sent up the prayer, and it was now being answered to my cost. My new fellow traveller appeared to be sophisticated, and more soft spoken than was strictly necessary. She seemed to be suffering from some delicate, poetical sickness and also to be in the habit of speaking softly. All in all, I was



quite pleased with her.

“Are you going to Hyderabad ?” she asked. I was afraid to say no lest she take offence. However, I very politely told her I was going to Bombay.

“You must have come from Ahmedabad ?” She seemed adept at filling old bottles with new medicine and cajoling one into drinking it. But she looked so downcast that I could not bring myself to hurt her. So I told her.

“You study there ?”

“No. I’m going for an interview.”

“My uncle’s brother-in-law’s aunt lives in Bombay. You must meet her.” I promised faithfully, wondering how I would find the time to go searching for her uncle’s brother-in-law’s aunts.

“Do your parents live there ?”

“No — my” Before I could complete the sentence, she interposed : “Oh, I see, your husband lives there.” Here we were again — what a long detour to come back to the same old terminus — a husband. A man. Indian men may go around cutting off noses, handing out divorces, they may be difficult to secure as husbands, and when they are secured, may turn out to be good for

nothing whoremongers and gamblers. Yet here are the women all dying for them. Every woman obsessed either with her own or with someone else’s husband. The unmarried ones singing songs about a husband, and the married ones crazy about the beloved. The beloved, of course, continues to suck their blood. Such is the situation when the beloved is cruel. If he were to show a little kindness, heaven knows what would happen. I began to think that even the cruelties of husbands may have their advantages.

“Where do you live, in Bombay? How many children do you have ?” Here was I, sunk in thought, there was she, proceeding from the husband to the number of children.

“Eight”, I remarked, counting the dogs on the platform, “How come there are always more dogs than passengers on platforms ?”

“Eight ?”

“Yes. Why, what’s so surprising about that ? If you don’t believe me, get off the train and count them for yourself.”

“No, how can I break my journey ? Of course, if I ever pay a visit to my uncle’s brother-in-law’s aunt—but—sister, one could never tell by looking at your face...”

“Ah, what can one tell by looking at a face ?” I replied, in a philosophical tone. When I feel disgusted with the world, and everything begins to appear dead and dull, I start waxing philosophical.

“How many years have you been married ?” she asked, after a pause.

“Four years, three months and...”

“And eight children? Look, sister, I thought OK, maybe it is possible you have eight, but...” She seemed on the verge of tears. I felt sorry for her. But I decided that no matter what happened, I would not be brow beaten any further, otherwise, after the children, she would go on to impose grand children too on me. And those other ladies who were so well acquainted with my life history had not yet fallen asleep. We would get involved in another unnecessary exchange of views. Those eight children were already weighing heavy on my

spirit.

“Yes, yes, I am telling you there are eight.”

“Good god, are they all alive ? But sister, how were they born ?”

“How do you expect ? The same way all children are born, of course.”

“I mean, in four years...”

“Oh, I see. That’s what you want to know. Well, sometimes two were born together, sometimes three and...”

“What ? What ?” She gaped at me, and I felt quite offended that she should be so surprised. After all, it was my personal affair, was it not ? What difference did it make to her whether someone gave birth to one child or to ten ? Of course, what I had been dreading all along was bound to happen. My earlier acquaintances began to show an interest.

“Have you heard this, sister ? She has had them sometimes two at a time, and sometimes three— children, I mean...” One of them heard only the word “children”, panicked, and hastily began to count her own.

“What’s the matter ?” enquired the

other. When the matter was fully explained, all three of them took offence.

“Just now she said she was not married and now she’s started producing two or three children at a time”, one of them rebuked me.

“What makes you think I am not married ? Heaven preserve me ! You must be the unmarried one.” The situation began to deteriorate rapidly. A ticket checker passed by. At least, I have no idea what he was. Every railway employee looks like a ticket checker to me. I leant across to ask him the time. After telling me, he smiled, and off he went, still smiling.

“You said you were travelling alone? And now who is this ?”

“He is my daughter’s son.” Before they could establish some more romantic relationship, I took the decision for myself.

“Daughter’s son ?” they shrieked in unison.

My god, why have these people determined to take such violent objection to every simple family relationship of mine ?

“What does the girl say? That’s your daughter’s son ?”

“So what is it to you ?”

“Sister, surely he had grey hair”, put in another.

“Must have greyed because of a bad cold”, I muttered, and then leant as far out of the window as I could. I was not desirous of committing suicide, and was unpractised in harsh world and a distant heaven.

That which is decreed to happen must inevitably happen. When my luggage was being weighed and charged, the clerk asked : “Your name ? Your husband’s name ?”

“*Chugd (rascal)*” I muttered through clenched teeth.

“Chokhe ? What an outlandish name.” He nudged the other clerk.

Needless to say, when he drew up a receipt that converted me into Mrs Chokhe, I gave him one across the face with my bag which contained a heavy book. And all this just for a husband.

(translated from Urdu by Manushi)

Blatantly Discriminatory

...The constitution of India, article 14, guarantees that the state shall not deny to any person equality before law or the equal protection of laws within the territory of India. Article 15 states that the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth. Yet many laws continue to be discriminatory. Recently, Mary Roy of Kerala has filed a suit challenging the discrimination between men and women in the matter of intestate succession among Syrian Christians.

In Kerala, intestate succession is governed by three statutes—Travancore Christian Succession Act, 1916, Cochin Christian Succession Act, and Indian Succession Act, 1925. In some districts, the first is applicable, in others, the second, and in still others, the third. Under the second and the third, male and female heirs share equally in the property of a man who dies intestate, that is,

without making a will. On the other hand, under the Travancore Christian Succession Act, a widow or mother of a deceased man has only a life interest in the property allotted to her. Also, the property of a man is divided only amongst his sons, the daughters are paid a fixed amount known as *stridhana*, but have no share in the property. A woman governed by the Travancore Christian Succession Act is, therefore, at a disadvantage on two grounds—of sex and of place of birth. If she had been born in a district where this Act did not apply, she would have shared equally with the male heirs.

Another example of a discriminatory law is the Indian Divorce Act, 1869, which applies to Christians in India. Under section 10 of this Act, a husband can ask for divorce on the ground that his wife has committed adultery. A single act of adultery would be sufficient ground for

divorce. However, a wife cannot ask for divorce if her husband commits adultery. She has to prove that he has been guilty of adultery with incest, or of adultery with bigamy, or of adultery with cruelty, or of adultery with desertion without reasonable excuse for two years. This means that it is much more difficult for a wife to prove her case and obtain a divorce than it is for a husband. Also, a husband can, either in a petition for judicial separation or for dissolution of marriage, claim damages from any person on the ground that the person has committed adultery with his wife. The wife cannot claim such damages from a person who has committed adultery with her husband.

There is an urgent need for the legislature to change such discriminatory laws, so as to make the constitutional guarantee of equality a reality...

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