



Short Story

Shelter

by

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It was quite crowded. At least twenty-five people were gathered there. All of them thronged together in front of a shop, waiting with bated breath for the door to open.

Moments later they started talking in hushed voices. But the loud cries of a woman drowned all other sounds. She wailed, "You dirty fellow, bring my child out. Dear God, what shall I do? What shall I tell her mother?" beating her breast all the while.

"Somebody, please break that door open. Isn't there a single man in this crowd? God, what will I do?" she begged with folded hands while bawling. No one came forward. None dared force the door open; instead they preferred to watch.

The outcry and the hushed talk would have continued for a long time. But all came to a standstill when a police jeep came to a screeching halt.

A young police officer jumped out to find out what was going on. "What's the matter?" he shouted. His harsh voice frightened them and soon there was only silence. The woman also stopped wailing for a moment.

But the moment the officer asked her, "Tell me what's the matter? Can't

you say something instead of moaning as if somebody is dead?", she started her full-throated cries once again.

"Look, won't you talk, or do you want me to...." and he waved his baton.

"Sir, oh sir, my daughter....no, my sister's daughter. She's inside that shop. God, oh God..." she screamed again.

The officer caught hold of her shoulder and tried to talk in a low, kind voice, rather unsuccessfully. "Stop crying, lady and tell me everything. How did she get inside? Did she lock herself in?"

"No sir... no. That shopkeeper took her in. I don't know what he is doing to her. Sir, my little girl..." she covered her mouth with her sari and let out a muffled cry.

"When did he take her in? Can't anyone explain properly?" He became impatient and roared.

"Please sir, will you bring her out first? You are only asking questions. If he does something to her, what will I tell Janaki? God, why did I bring her with me here?..."

"If you don't tell me everything,

I'm going to beat all of you to a pulp... You selfish woman, you are not worried about her, but thinking only about what you would tell your sister..." the police officer banged his boot on the ground.

"Sir, please sir, I don't know anything. Her friend Malathi told me she is inside...no, she was taken inside. Sir, please open the door, or else..." she started beating her breast again.

"And you people are standing here enjoying the drama. None of you fools have the courage to break the door open. Very good." The officer talked in a mocking tone, the crowd stood in shame.

But before the officer could smash the door, it opened. A man appeared behind a small girl of ten. The little girl wore a skirt and a blouse. Her shoulder-length hair was dishevelled. Her fair, petite face was full of red marks and a few cuts. Her big, guileless eyes bulged out of the diminutive face. Her thin, skinny hands dangled as if her



shoulders could not carry them. She just stood there like a statue. She heard no voice, she saw no-body. There was only a vacant blankness in front of her.

The man behind her also appeared nervous. His hands trembled. He was a small man in dhoti and shirt. There was nothing awesome or horrifying about his countenance; only

panic writ large on his face. The big crowd in front of his shop made him all the more panicky. His quivering fingers ran over the little girl's scattered hair in order to cover his nervousness.

The police officer pushed himself forward and caught the man by his collar. He shouted, "You devil, how can you do this to such a small girl?" Even the crowd was shocked to see a small girl; they were anticipating the appearance of a sexy nymphet.

The officer clenched his fist and struck the man in the stomach. He doubled up in pain, but did not utter a sound. The officer struck him again on his legs with his baton. The man's face twitched but he didn't rub the spot where he was hit.

"You shameless creature—such a small girl! I can't believe..." the officer dragged the man and pushed him down.

The girl stood there all the time, motionless, not paying any attention to the outcry. The officer tried to catch her hand. She just recoiled in terror, and closed her eyes hard. All the muscles in her small hand were taut and tense. As if to pacify her, he held her close and said:

"Hey, woman, would you have remained outside if it had been your daughter? All of you waited outside when this little one was being molested inside...."

"Don't talk like that, sir. What would I have done alone?" the woman sobbed uncontrollably.

"Tell me, would you wait outside

had it been your daughter? Such a small girl!" Turning to the small man he shouted, "You devil, I'll handle you properly in the station. What's your name, little one?" he sat on his haunches and asked her. The girl was too frightened to even open her mouth. She looked vacantly ahead. Nothing existed for her. She did not see the crowd, her aunt or even the officer who was

questioning her in a kindly manner.

"She's Malini," the woman said while crying.

"Where are her parents?"

"I think they're about 25 miles away, sir. We've got to catch two buses."

"Anyway, you too come to the station. The doctors will examine her. Inform her parents, as early as possible."

"Sir, please don't take her anywhere, sir, no police station—not there... Please have mercy on us..." the officer felt she knew only how to howl. She was constantly shouting like a mad woman.

"Don't shout, lady. You think we do such dirty things in the police station? Nobody will do such mean, heartless things there... Understood?"

He ordered the woman and the man to get inside the jeep. The girl too stepped into it, but without seeming to be aware of what she was doing. She was cut off

from the whole world.

The crowd dispersed after a while.

By evening, her parents arrived. The pale and frail mother was dressed in a crumpled sari. Her eyes were puffed up from crying. She was too shaken to even take a seat. Tears rolled down her cheeks; her lips quivered at times, but she did not even make a muffled cry.

She only made a move when the constable brought out the girl. Next moment, the officer saw her running to the girl; she hugged her tight and started crying. But the girl stood there unmoved like a statue.

"Dear, what happened? Tell me, tell your mother," the pale woman

in her pale voice asked her in a barely audible voice. Again, there was no response from the girl; she stared vacantly. Her mother looked into her eyes and was appalled to see the haunted look on her daughter's face.

"Nothing has been done to her... Who would do such a cruel thing to a small girl? She's just scared, that's all. Please tell me,



dear..." her mother stuttered.

"I know, it is unbearable for you... But it is my duty to tell you. A doctor has examined her and our doubts are cleared. She has been..." Somehow, the officer managed to convey it to her shocked parents.

"Please don't say that, sir. See, she is only ten, a small girl. Dear God, how will I bear this? How can God be so cruel to a tiny girl? Sir, she has two sisters elder to her... He didn't do anything to you, did he, dear child? Please talk, my child, please say some-thing. Your silence is killing me..." her mother shook the girl and cried.

The girl stood there like a lifeless, soulless frozen doll.

"Sir, why is she not talking?... We've two more girls... What will we do?" for the first time, her cries were slightly louder.

"So, you are worrying about the other girls. Are you a mother? Stop that and try to console this one. Only love can make her talk again. It has been a tremendous shock to her. She needs a lot of love and affection to come out of this. Anyway, we'll register a case against that man." The officer felt sorry for the girl.

Her father had remained quiet and aloof when all this was going on. He did not even bother to go near the girl, try to comfort her. The officer was astounded to note that he did not even glance at the girl.

Now he spoke, "Please don't register any case, sir. This is an issue concerning our prestige. Even now the news has spread, what with the case and the proceedings. You ask us not to think about the other girls and our prestige because you can never understand our plight. You can never step into our shoes, you are one of the big people. I've got to marry the other girls off in an-other one or two years. From where will I get a boy, if everybody knows about this incident?" he went on in a low, whining tone. The officer noticed that his two

hands were trembling.

"As you please..." the officer looked at the girl once again. His heart felt for her but what could an outsider like him do? He felt helpless.

Her mother hugged the girl tightly and went on asking her questions. There was no response.

"Dear, you need not worry. No-body will do anything to you. I'm with you, your mother is with you." She caressed the girl's bruised face and dishevelled hair. When her hand brushed over the red marks on the girl's face, the mother thought she was going to faint. But the girl stood there as if no pain, nothing, could affect her anymore.

Three days later, after many hushed conversations, they started their jour-ney in a hired taxi — that too after three days. The three sat behind, with the girl in the middle, between her parents. The mother tried to hold the girl close but the girl freed



to interlock her fingers with the girl's thin, fragile fingers, but the girl re-fused to open her fingers. She looked ahead, ignoring her mother's touch or was she not aware of it? Nobody could read her mind.

Her father was looking out of the car window throughout the journey, his hands clutching an almost empty purse. He was thinking about the expensive taxi journey. He asked the taxi to halt in front of a huge gate.

The gate was opened by a watch-man. The long driveway ended near a big two-storey building. The whole compound was full of trees and potted plants in full bloom.

A nun in white habit was standing near the door waiting for them. Only her fair, round and kind face was visible out-side the white dress. Her downward glancing, eyes fell '.;. on the girl and a ten-

der feeling appeared in them.

"Sister, my child..." her father tried to say something in a quivering voice, but was unable to do so. For the first time, tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Don't worry about anything. She is ours, our treasure," the nun said in a kind voice.

"Sister, please forgive us... what could we do? We've two more girls. Nobody understands the pain we are going through..." the man talked halt-ingly, trying to suppress the sobs.

"Please don't say anything. Don't worry also. Everything is God's will... Come, child..." she held the girl close.

All the muscles in the girl's body tightened at the touch. They became so stiff that the sister feared they would break. She recoiled at the physi-cal proximity of another person. Slowly, very tenderly, the sister started stroking the girl's face and hair to ease the tension she was under; to try to alleviate some of the pain.

Her mother came near her to give a parting kiss on her cheeks, but the girl suddenly turned and buried her face in the sister's robe.