

Anju Sosan George

THE DEATH OF SYMPATHY

Everyone told me it was a good alliance. The boy had a Government job and unlike the alliances from business classes with their unpredictable fortunes, I would never have to worry of shortage of funds to run the family. It was not that my opinion in this regard mattered much. Still, being the daughter of parents who believed they were progressive thinkers, I was at least part of the discussions and debates regarding the choice of my future husband.

It was the broker Thampichettan who brought this proposal. He came every Friday with a black bag under his armpit, carrying dozens of photographs of young men and women of marriageable age. He would sit under the fan, sipping the cold lime juice my mother hastily prepared, and take out the photographs one by one. Each photo was presented with a flourish and my mother would ponder aloud at the pros and cons of the prospects of the young man whose colour photo emerged from the bag.

Thampichettan would have liked to marry me off to the business man from Kollam who had a cloth store in the neighbouring village, and was a little dismayed at both our lack of interest and his loss of the profitable cut from the broker's commission that he could have earned. But father circled on Sandeep Valyaparambil, a 28-year old high school teacher at the Government Higher Secondary School at Nattukadavu. That day when Thampichettan walked away with 500 rupees for his efforts, my destiny was written.

The first thing I noticed about Nattukadavu, Sandeep's village, was its birds. The mynah's playing hide and seek, the parakeets screeching and flying between the reeds, the grey-sprinkled pigeons tactfully shifting glances from one end to another. I saw this not because I was a naturalist or anything, it was just that I was suddenly feeling lonely having to walk up the hill in my cream-gold wedding sari as the road to his house was not accessible by the ambassador car that we came in. We walked in a single file manoeuvring our way past the rough stones that made the path. My parents and a handful of others in their wedding finery were finding it equally difficult too. All uneasiness dissipated when they saw the palatial Valyaparambil family house, standing tall and proud and aged in a small clearing on top of the hill.

To me, it was love at first sight. With its big pillars, a timeless grace seemed to surround the building. Pigeons cooed from the heart of its darkness. Sandeep lifted his hand and touched mine. "Here, this way." He led me to the room where a small group of elders had gathered. We sat together on the sofa. Someone brought a cup of milk and I took it shyly, looking around and soaking in everything around me as politely as I could. My life had changed from what it was and from what I knew it was to an unknown world. Soon everything and everyone around me would be unfamiliar. I knew this was inevitable, having heard amma and ammachi saying the same many a times.

"The girl is educated." I thought I detected sniggering from behind the door. Two elderly women stood watching me with disdain and I could not understand what I had done to offend them so. I stood demurely near Sandeep as he introduced one member of the family after another. I smiled in acknowledgement and tried to remember one face after the other with all its associated titles.

"You don't need to remember all these names today," Sandeep murmured slowly in my ear. I blushed.

"Yes yes ... you'll hardly remember them all today. Besides, what's the hurry?" I felt an arm looping around mine and turned to face my new sister-in-law, Sandeep's younger sister Suja.

I smiled, feeling suddenly comfortable sandwiched between the brother and sister. Their easy banter and affable laughter immediately put me at ease.

"Stop giving Chechi your advices like you give me Ju." Sandeep pretended irritation.

"Chechi? "-I had already planned to call her Deepu ... I can ... can't I?" She looked at me imploringly.

"Please? I heard your mother calling you that and it sounds lovely. Deepu- Deepu- Deepu-" She chanted. Both Sandeep and I exchanged amused looks and somehow, I felt drawn into the comfortable conspiracy of this wedded relationship. I was beginning to like this. I liked this energetic sister-in-law of mine in whom I found a potential ally and I was drawn into liking Sandeep and his towering exuberance.

"Sandeep!" came the voice of his father and Sandeep left with him to attend to someone. I stood staring at the vacant space Sandeep left behind and smiled at Suja.

"Come Deepu, you must be dead tired. Let me show you your room. Is the room ready?" She turned to look at a tired-looking girl who stood at the corner of the room.

The girl bent a little as one would address one's superior and nodded quietly. Suja took my hand and ushered me into a room with a double bed,

and said, “change your sari. I’ll wait downstairs. Nalli will be outside if you need anything.”

“Here, girl! Wait here for mistress to give orders.” She walked out briskly.

I looked around the large room. It had a bookshelf at the corner and a table with a lamp near the window. The bed had two large posters on which hung a mosquito curtain. An empty wardrobe on one side reminded me that I ought to unpack my trolley bags and arrange it neatly within. I suddenly missed the familiarity of my old room. I missed the mess I used to make. I missed home.

“Found your bags?” Sandeep asked walking in.

“Yes,” I said.

“Come, sit down.” He patted the bed near him.

I sat down near him, making sure there was an arm’s length between us. A strange sensation was slowly building up inside me and I tried to pretend to be busy removing the hundreds of hair-pins the beautician had pinned on my curly hair to make it less unruly. My fingers tugged the steel hairpins that refused to budge. It was a tangle and I would need someone’s help to remove them, if I didn’t want to rip out my hair. I cursed the *Fair and Lovely* beautician with all my heart and to hide my uneasiness at his proximity, masked it all with a demure smile.

“Let me help you.” He smiled and touched my hand. His presence had an intoxicating effect on me, and my heart slowly began to sing. He slowly removed the hair clips one after the other, dexterously tugging at the dovetailed pins, till after ten minutes, my hair lay in a weak cluster around the nape of my neck.

I turned around, my hair in a mess, sweat pouring from my forehead, the cream-gold sari crushed and crumpled and looked at Sandeep.

“All mine,” he said with a smile.

Have you wondered how inhumane humans could be? How we can watch someone writhing in pain without flinching? How we long to assume control over someone’s life and enjoy every second of it? Many a time human behaviour defies rational explanation.

I saw Nalli ... Her grey salwar, aged colourless due to repeated use, sunk into her. She had hardly any flesh on her body and so the dress clung to her tiredly. They stood around her, hurling words, which seemed to hit harder than boulders. She stood under its weight.

I had seen Nalli yesterday, carrying my trolley bags up the steep stairs. I had tried a polite conversation, my attempt to befriend someone in this unknown territory, but she had shrunk away with trepidation.

“That’s just Nalli-” Suja explained seeing the doubt on my face. “She’s been around for a long time.”

“She lives here?”

“Oh yes. Orphan. Has been here ever since I remember.”

I climbed down the stairs to join the women downstairs. My mother-in-law seemed furious, angrily walking up and down the corridor, screaming “How many times you fool? How many times? You think we earn money to wash it off on scum like you?”

I clinched involuntarily at the violence of her words and wondered if it was right to stand there at all. My! I was glad I was not in that girl’s position. And I would think twice before angering my mother-in-law in future. She seemed a humongous woman, her anger expanding around her like paper in water.

Nalli was breaking into sobs by now. She held her arms folded in supplication, and shrunk even more into herself. If I were in that girl’s position, I would have wanted the earth to swallow me up completely. Shame clung over her.

“What did she do?” I asked Suja, who was busy talking to someone I remembered from yesterday.

“Oh ... she let the boiled milk run over and mom caught it spilling. Mom’s crazy when it comes to food being wasted you see.” “I nodded understandingly, eager to emphasize on whose side my sympathies lay.

“This is usual ... Nalli needs her dose everyday... else she’s just a big oaf.” Suja cried over her shoulders and walked away.

Nalli was on her knees now and my mother-in-law had a large cooking spatula in her hand which she hovered dangerously close around Nalli’s head. Swoosh, it came down on her head. She smarted at the pain and bent down to the floor, whimpering “sorry madam- sorry madam- please madam ... I will be careful next time”.

“There is no next time you stupid pig.” She kicked Nalli violently. Blood sprouted from her chin. I didn’t realise I was shuddering too.

Sandeep busied himself with his books for school and signalled me over. Our physical intimacy over the night had made us comfortable with each other. He had entered me, slowly, lovingly, and it was unlike anything I had read with my college friends about sexual intercourse the first time.

“Don’t worry about this ... Nalli deserves her dose once in a while to get herself moving ... mom’s just doing it the hard way ... that’s all. Else she doesn’t know what to do with herself.” His hand lingered a trifle while longer on the back of my neck. I smiled at him and shrugged away

any uneasiness I would otherwise have registered regarding the morning incident.

When amma came over and gave me an ear-to-ear smile, and asked “Mol, did you have coffee?” I had completely forgiven any misgivings I had about my new family.

Nalli had stood up by now. Her chin had a slight cut and she ran her fingers over it and brushed it away. Her face looked puffy from crying. She was clutching the front of her dress and slowly backed away into the kitchen and then ran out of the door.

“Nalli ... Nalli ... Idiot! Where are you?” Suja called out from her bedroom window.

It was nearly ten, and the house was strangely quiet as the men had all gone to work. Father-in-law and Sandeep both took their lunch with them to work, so they were expected only by 5 o’o clock in the evening. I was bored and lonely and stood on the steps undecided of what I should do next. Suddenly Nalli ran in and nearly tumbled into me. She started apologizing profusely. “Sorry madam ... sorry madam ...” She seemed terrified.

“It’s okay Nalli. My fault actually,” I said.

“Sorry madam,” she said. She folded her hands as if in prayer, touched my feet, raised it to her forehead and ran quietly into Suja’s room. All without even once looking at me in the eye.

My curiosity got the better of me. I was intrigued by this girl. More so by the family’s treatment of her. She seemed to be a bounded slave than a servant. I knew by now that she lived in the house itself and she was older than me and Suja.

When I knocked at Suja’s bedroom door, I saw Nalli making the bed. Suja was lying down on the sofa in the large room, her feet tapping at the rhythm pouring out of her earphones. She did not see me coming in, and I didn’t want to disturb, so I quietly closed the door and went to the balcony where mother-in-law was sorting out the gifts we received for the wedding.

By the time I got back to our room, the bed was already made. My clothes were taken for washing, my trolley bag was unpacked and the cupboard was neatly arranged. I was irritated more than thankful. If this was Nalli’s work, I should tell her that I did not appreciate this. My mother would not be happy if she heard someone else did these chores that she had reminded were the first things a married girl should do. I did not want a servant to do these things for me.

I decided to go the kitchen and ask her.

The large house on the hill seemed even larger with the sun pouring in through the wide walls. I walked out from the considerably large dining room, to a considerably smaller kitchen area. There were two kitchens and a work area. The first kitchen had a gas stove and a mixer and grinder and other modern utensils, all sparkly and seemingly not much used. The second kitchen had a mud stove with the conventional wood fire place and seemed frequently used. There was a huge pot of water boiling away in mirth and a couple of coconut shells awaiting grating.

Nalli stood outside near the wash area. There was a large pile of clothes near her and I saw my cream-and-gold sari in it too. This reminded me of my purpose and I walked barefooted to where she stood with her back towards the house.

“Nalli.”

“Madam,” she impulsively responded and turned. She clenched the front of her dress, her body stooped down in respect. The water from her hands was making her dress wet. Her eyes were cast down as usual.

I felt a wave of sympathy rushing through me. Deep down, there was another emotion which I couldn't name. It grew stronger the longer I stood with her. What was it? Was it her meekness that made me suddenly superior? Or is this how you feel when you know you have been given absolute power over someone? I was drawn into a conundrum.

“Nalli, did you take my clothes for wash?” I said drawing in as much sternness as I could.

“Yes madam,” she replied faintly, her thin body bending down even more.

“You should have asked me. I am not used to anyone taking my things without asking.”

“Madam ... forgive me madam ... my mistake madam.” She had stooped down so low that she was nearly crouched on the floor, near where I stood. I could have kicked her. Easily.

“Nalli. What are you doing? Get up please.” I grew uneasy now, my prime worry being if someone would come in and think I was abusing the girl. She didn't seem to hear it, but kept crooning--“sorry madam ... sorry madam ...”

“Nalli.”- I spoke sternly. “Get up!”

She didn't.

“Nalli ... I said get up.” She still didn't.

“Sorry madam ... sorry madam ...” She was chanting it like a nun in prayer.

“Its okay Nalli ... Just ask me before you take anything from my cupboard, that's all.” “Please get up.” I said frantically.

I felt thoroughly irritated by now. Angry at the pretence the girl was putting up. Angry she was drawing me into the mess of her life. Angry someone would see us.

I bent forward and grabbed both her shoulders.

“Nalli.” “Stop”

She seemed to be in a trance. Her eyes were blank. “Nalli”... “My grip on her had become stronger. I was filled with contempt at the body before me.

Before thinking further, I raised my hand and slapped her on her face. Hard. She fell back. I staggered back too. I had never hit anyone in my life.

“Entha mole ... Nalli got the better of you too?” Mother-in-law was standing near the door, smiling.

“I ... I ... I shouldn’t have amma ... it just happened.”

“I know ... you don’t have to say anything.”

“If she had just looked at me ... perhaps said something ... I wouldn’t have ... I wouldn’t have slapped her.”

“Yes ... yes ... I know ...” She drew me into the shade of the big house and we went inside.

When I turned back, Nalli had slowly got up and was back washing the clothes.