



A Dark Morning

by Mridula Garg

IT was seven in the morning. Madhavi had barely awoken from sleep when an uproar broke out in the house below hers. Cries of "Catch him, catch him ! He has killed me ! Help ! He has killed me !" rent the air.

Madhavi rushed downstairs. All the men and women from the neighbouring houses had already collected there. The landlord's aged mother was beating her breast and wailing aloud : "Oh, he has killed me ! He has ruined me ! I am finished !"

Above, Her cries could be heard the

shouts of neighbours: "What's happened? What has happened ?" "May worms get him ! May leprosy seize him !" hissed the old lady, switching from cries to curses.

"Police ! Police !" The head of the household was in search of a solution.

"What has happened ? What is it that has happened ?" The neighbours continued to sing to their own tune.

"He has killed me ! Oh, oh, he has killed me!" The old lady began afresh on a new note.

Madhavi thought someone must surely have been murdered. But who ? The members of the family seemed to be in good health. They swarmed around, screaming and shouting with vigour. She applied herself to identifying each one. Perhaps someone was missing.

But by then the neighbours' continual cries of "What happened ?" had elicited an answer. It turned out that someone had snatched the old lady's heavy gold chain and fled, scaling the five foot high wall of the backyard. The poor old lady had been

watering the basil plant in the yard. No one else had witnessed the incident.

A mountain out of a molehill ! Madhavi returned home.

But for the crowd that had collected downstairs, what had happened was no less sensational and tragic than a murder. After all, life and death are in god's hands; one has to take what comes. But gold jewellery ! What consolation can suffice for the loss of one's hard earned money ? The crowd occupied itself in guessing at the identity of the thief and the head of the household responded by threatening to call the police and get each suspect beaten up.

Within an hour, a subinspector and a constable arrived to investigate the matter. Madhavi too was called downstairs.

"Give us the name and address of your servant", said the inspector.

"Why ? How is my servant connected with this theft ?" she retorted, surprised.

"We are taking everyone's name and address."

"Really ! Have you got mine down ?"

"What's the use of taking yours? Only those whom we suspect are to be listed."

"Wonderful. And what makes you suspect my servant ? He was at work inside my house at the time."

"If that is so, he will say so during interrogation. Why should it bother you?"

"No, thank you. You will not interrogate him", she replied angrily. "The police have made it a regular business to harass innocent people."

But at that moment her husband Rakesh came downstairs, and he immediately supplied the name and address of their servant. When Madhavi protested, he added that the servant had been serving him tea when the theft took place, and he was ready to vouch for this.

"That's right. That's the way to put it." The subinspector turned his back on Madhavi and addressed the old lady : "Can you describe him ?"

"Of course I can", she replied, excitedly. "He was tall and well built! One jump took him over the wall."

"What was he wearing ?"

"A white shirt and a black pant, what else ?"

"Half the population of Delhi would answer to that description", Madhavi remarked.

"Please be quiet", the inspector rebuked her, and then returned to the old lady. "Can you recognise him ?"

"Of course I can. Why not?" she replied, with undiminished enthusiasm.

The inspector smiled knowingly and presented her with an album containing photographs of habitual offenders. And the old lady managed to recognise not just one but three of the men.

"Were there three men ?" Madhavi spoke up again.

"You please be quiet", the inspector thundered, and then he said to the old lady : "Look carefully and tell us which one of the three it was."

"All three look alike." she said.

"No, no. All three are different. Take a good look."

"What do you expect me to do ?" snapped the old lady. "I can only see as well as my spectacles allow. I am not a youngster like you."

Madhavi felt as if she were watching a comic film. This was probably the first time in her life that the good woman had found herself centrestage and she was making the most of it. Madhavi burst out laughing.



Just then, the eldest son of the family entered, escorting the neighbours' servant. As soon as she set eyes on him, the old lady leapt to her feet : "He is the one ! He is the one !"

Abruptly, the comic film turned tragic.

It took Madhavi a while to control her laughter. Startled, she saw that the well built young boy was wearing a white shirt and black pant.

"He is the one ! He is the one !" The old lady kept pointing at him and screaming.

The boy was gaping at her, a strange, almost foolish, innocence on his face. In

contrast to his well grown body, his face seemed babyish, stamped with a somewhat stupid childishness. Weighing him up from head to foot, the inspector smiled like a cruel tomcat. The constable was twirling his baton in the air, to administer a theatrical threat.

The eldest son of the family pounced on the servant, pushed him to the ground and then stood over him, his foot on the servant's back as if he had just downed a ferocious beast of prey.

"How can you say he is the one! A moment ago, you identified someone else from the photographs !" cried Madhavi, agitated and fearful. "Inspector! Inspector! How does she know who it was? Her eyes were closed when she was watering the basil. Every day, I see from upstairs how she prays and waters the plant with her eyes closed. How can she identify someone in a split second ?" The inspector kept smiling knowingly.

"We will find out everything", said the constable, vigorously twirl his baton.

Madhavi's blood froze.

The policemen caught him and took him to the police station.

Manhavi ran upstairs, calling : "Rakesh, Rakesh. Let us go to the police station at once. They have caught the servant from the house next door. They will definitely beat him up. He is innocent."

"What can we do about it ?" said Rakesh, much surprised. "Why should they listen to us ? We are not the ones who reported the matter."

While he was still speaking, Madhavi was already running down the stairs to remonstrate with the landlord once more.

He could not help laughing at her agitation, and said : "How can they find the thief unless they conduct an enquiry?"

"Beating up innocent people is no enquiry", said Madhavi.

"Oh, come on, no one dies of it! And how do you know he is innocent ?"

"I don't know whether you are innocent, either. Is that any ground for the police to arrest you ?"

“What do you mean by that?” demanded the landlord, much annoyed.

“Look, your mother identified four different men as the thief. You know that as well as I do. How can her eyesight be relied upon?”

“When did I say it could be relied on?” he replied. At this, his wife, who was sitting by, added: “Mother cannot identify her own offspring from a foot away.” And both husband and wife burst into peals of laughter.

“It will do you no good to get an innocent man beaten up”, whimpered Madhavi, like a helpless beggar.

“Did we ask the police to beat him up?” So saying, the two of them got up and went indoors, as if completely uninvolved in the affair.

Madhavi too got up and went next door.

The mistress of the house was lying on the sofa, drinking her tea. As soon as she saw Madhavi, she said: “Did you hear all the hue and cry so early in the morning? Can you imagine, it’s only now that we have managed to get our bed tea!”

“Why did you allow them to take away your servant?” said Madhavi. “I flatly refused to let them take ours.”

“I did say we’d find it very difficult to manage without him”, was the answer. “But my husband said it is not right to interfere with police procedure.”

“And is it right to have an innocent man beaten up?”

“Oh, no one dies of it!” she said with indifference, taking long sips of tea.

Defeated by this second encounter with indifference, Madhavi made her way to the police station, alone.

The police officer was very polite. He gave her a patient hearing, smiled slightly, and said: “We too know that he is innocent. If he were not innocent, he would not have come so quietly with the police.”

Amazed, Madhavi asked: “Why did you arrest him then?”

“He may know something about the incident. One of his associates may be



involved in this incident or in some other similar incident. Questioning him may lead us somewhere. After all, we have to put an end to such incidents.”

“What does questioning him mean? When you agree that he is innocent, to beat him up....”

“Look, we are human beings too, not beasts”, he interrupted. “Why should we beat him when we know he is innocent?”

“May I meet him?” Madhavi asked.

“Oh yes, why not?” He motioned to one of the constables and a short while later, the boy was standing before her.

Madhavi looked closely at him. He was dazed with fear, silent, pallid, lost, but no signs of beating were visible on his person.

“These people did not beat you up, did they?” asked Madhavi. The boy shook his head, to convey a negative.

“Don’t worry. You will be released in a day or two. All of us know you did not commit the theft. Tell these people truthfully whatever they ask. You understand, don’t you? Don’t be afraid. I will come again tomorrow.”

Looking dazed, the boy kept gaping at her. The stupidity on his face had not diminished. Madhavi could not think of anything further to say.

The officer motioned the constable took the boy away. “Are you satisfied?” He smiled at Madhavi.

“I still think it was wrong to arrest him.”

“Please give us credit for some sense. Look at it this way. The thief must have got to know that a man has been arrested. He will be off his guard. He will try to sell the chain or will snatch another, and we will be able to catch him. Don’t you see?”

Madhavi got up in a flurry. The officer’s explanations began to seem reasonable to her.

Next morning, the news spread like wild fire that a boy had committed suicide in police custody. With perverse delight, people discovered that it was the same boy whom the police had arrested from their neighbourhood on the charge of theft. Word spread that all of the previous day, he had been deprived of food and water while the police repeatedly demanded where he had hidden the chain. As darkness fell, the beating started. By midnight, he had confessed and named a friend. Then he asked permission to go to the toilet. Once inside, he removed the drawstring of his underwear and hanged himself by it. When 20 minutes elapsed and he did not emerge, the door was forced open and his corpse was found hanging from the ventilator. As for the chain, it had not yet been found with the friend named.

“Didn’t we say so?” said the landlord, assertively. “If he were innocent, would he have committed suicide?”

The landlady burst into tears. “I kept trying to stop them, but no one would listen to me. Now all the servants of the neighbourhood will be our sworn foes. If one of them does my children some harm, what will become of me?”

Madhavi alone had nothing to say. She felt that everywhere she went, that lost looking boy followed her. With every breath she took, he sobbed softly and said: “Why did you leave the police station? How could you trust the syrupy words of the officer? Did no doubts cross your mind when you saw my dazed expression? Or did you prefer not to doubt? Did you choose to believe him because the path of disbelief was harder to take?”

(translated from Hindi by
Poonam Kaul)