

SHORT STORY
JYOTSNA MILAN

Hands pressed her shoulders and a voice near her ear spoke her name very softly, tenderly. The voice was familiar. She knew it was her sister-in-law but, startled by her abnormal closeness, she turned around to look. Her sister-in-law looked away. Neela kept waiting for her to speak, but instead she began tidying up the room. At last, Neela asked in a tired voice : “What is it, Bhabhi, what were you saying ?”

Pressing Neela’s hand between her hands, she said : “Neela, he has come to fetch you.”

“Why are you joking with me, Bhabhi ?”

“Truly. Go and see for yourself, if you don’t believe me.”

“But how can it be ?” She was as though addressing the question to herself.

“Why cannot it be ? He says he wants to talk to you.”

“To me ? What can he have to say to me ? Mother and father are there, you are there.”

“But Neela, it is you who have to decide whether or not you will go with him.”

“I don’t know.”

“How can that be? Think it over, coolly, and then go and talk to him.”

Neela had not been able to understand why everyone in the house had suddenly begun to look flustered, and had busied themselves in tidying up the place. She had heard whispers in the yard and in the adjoining room, but had thought “Oh well, something or other must have happened”, and had continued cooking the meal.

The truth was that she had as good as forgotten that she had ever had a husband. If the thought of him ever entered her empty mind like a buzzing fly, she would brush it away. Time had blocked that relationship away from her, and she had walked so far from it that she was now able to examine it as if it were an incident in someone else’s life. She had decided that even if that relationship ever had

existed, it existed no longer and never would again.

That is why the news of Arun’s coming shook the ground under her feet. She had altogether lost the sense of herself as the wife of someone. She felt as if she no longer had the ability to play the part of a wife.

When, over a period of seven years, a life has been continuously getting converted into a desert, can anyone come and all of a sudden save it from being a desert ? Then why had Arun come ? To mock her ? To flay her still further ?

She had returned a few years ago. It was difficult to tell the truth, yet she had tried to say something, explain something. After all, this was her mother’s house. She was her mother’s only daughter. Whatever the truth may have been, her mother had thought it best not to send her back to her in-laws. Her brother was put on his mettle : “There’s no need at all to send Neela back. She will stay here.” Her parents knew that it would not be so simple, but they were helpless. They could not find peace by throwing Neela out.

The neighbourhood was agog. When Neela came back, they carried on their habitual whisperings for days together. She listened quietly.

“I think they must have turned her out because she didn’t have a son.”

“But, Aunt, she could still have a son. She’s not old yet.”

“I think, Gopa, the poor thing is not so good looking so...”

“So what ? He’s no angel himself.” Eighteen year old Gopa was irritated.

“What of that ? Who cares how a man looks ?”

“I think, Aunt, her mother-in-law is a witch and the fellow blindly obeys his mother.”

“If that’s so, it’s as well that she’s come back.”

“Arre, so what if the mother-in-law is a witch ? If the girl had anything in her, couldn’t she have won over the man ?”

“Which girl would want to come back to her mother’s house like this ? I say the man must be a good for nothing. With men, you never can tell. They can’t be trusted for a moment.”

These speculations went on endlessly. Sometimes, Neela felt she would like to gag these people or stuff her own ears with cotton. Yet she listened to it all, her face as blank as if someone else was being discussed. Sometimes, she felt like revenging herself by going back to her in-laws. But no ! Was it so easy to go back ? To that hell ! Let these neighbours babble as much as they pleased. Sometime, they would tire of the subject and would fall silent. So she thought.

She had left that home, that road, never to return. No one had tried to hold her back. When she did not return,

Reprieve

not once had anyone asked why she had not returned. No one had come to fetch her.

For the first few days, few months, she had retained a faint hope that someone might call her back. But that had not happened. Her parents and brothers too had had the same idea. For a long time, they kept reassuring themselves and the neighbours, saying: "She's come for a few days. The son-in-law is studying. He'll take her back in a year's time. She can go after Sanjay gets married, in a couple of months. It's difficult for her to keep coming :and going."

"While she's free, she may as well study. What's the harm ?" But gradually, they stopped reassuring themselves or the neighbours.

Repeatedly, she asked herself why she continued to live when no one needed her. Then two small hands

would be outstretched towards her. A lispng voice would drench her withered frame. How could she end her life ? And then she asked herself whether others might need her even if her husband did not ?

Wiping her hands with her sari, she entered the room, and immediately, was overcome with perplexity. She had a keen desire to return to the kitchen. Not a word could she speak. She could neither advance into the room nor retreat from it. She stood there, speechless. Was this really Arun and not someone else, she asked herself. Sona came running into the room. She looked from one to the other, then, hiding behind Neela, she asked : "Ma, who is this ?"

"Tell me, Ma, who is this?" Sona caught hold of her sari and questioned her persistently.

"Come to me and I'll tell you."

"Come, dear, ..-Neela, why are you standing there like that ? Sit down. I'm Arun. Don't you recognise me?"

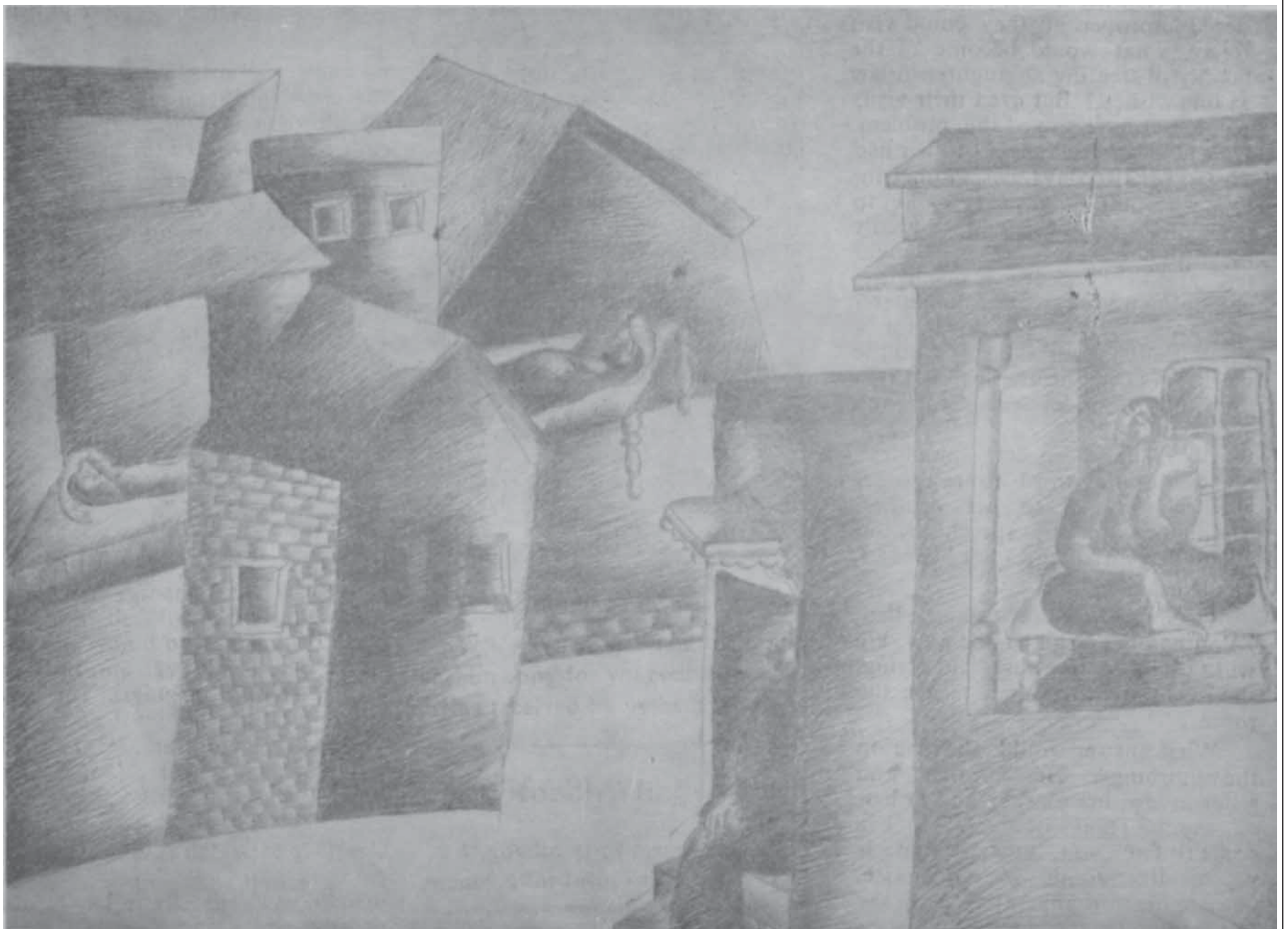
"Neela, won't you speak to me? I've come to fetch you."

Where were you all these years ? Why do you need me today? There were many questions she wanted to ask but she gazed out of the window, her eyes vacant, and stroked Sona's head.

Sona started off again. "Ma, who is this?" She did not know what to say, how to say it. All she had to say to Sona was a simple, two word sentence—your father. But her tongue seemed stuck. As if she did not know how to speak.

"Shall I tell you ?" Arun caught hold of the unwilling Sona, took her on his lap and kissed her. "Call me Babu. Do you know who is called Babu ?"

Sona began to kick, squirm and cry.



Arun put her down. She ran to her mother and clung to her. "Ma is this Babu? Tell me, Ma...Ma...!"

"Yes, dear." Compressed and suppressed, the words escaped her lips. She closed her eyes tightly as if by her merely closing her eyes, Arun would disappear.

Arun had just said to her mother: "She never told me how my mother treated her. How was I to know? If my mother didn't give her food, or accused her falsely, why didn't she ever tell me?"

She felt like laughing out loud at this. She wanted to ask whether Arun would really have listened to her. Had he no idea of his mother's cruelties and taunts? When his mother complained, he used to beat Neela without even questioning her. What gave him the right to hit her? But she had so many faults, after all. She was ordinary looking, she was not the mother of a son, she was the daughter of poor parents. Who was to be punished for all these crimes?

A girl's parents and brothers cannot visit her home. That is considered improper. If they could visit freely, what would become of the facility of treating a daughter-in-law as one wishes? But even their visits would not have solved the problem. Once, when her younger brother had visited for two days, her mother-in-law, who normally never spoke to her without an abuse, had suddenly taken to addressing her as "daughter" and kept repeating: "Why are you doing all the work, daughter? You must be tired. Sit down for a while. Shobha will come and do the work." And her brother had felt that this mother-in-law was really a goddess.

Neela had been left speechless. She had not a word to say to her mother-in-law or to her brother. Today, too, she was speechless, unable to say anything to her husband. "Neela."

Once again, she was startled. "You had better go to bed now. We will talk in the morning." So saying, she made way for him to leave the room.

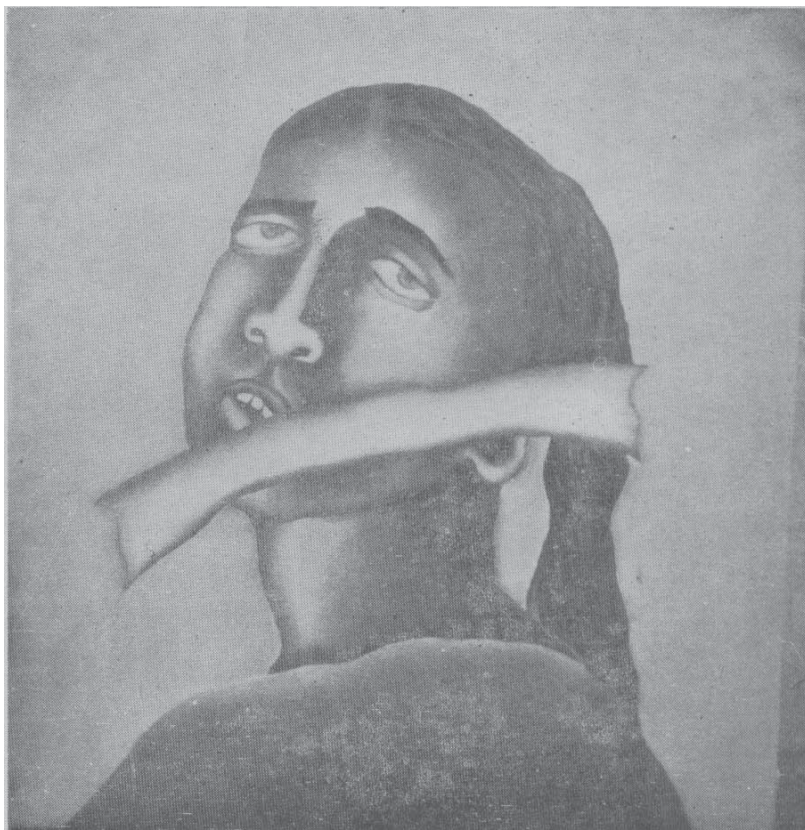
What answer would she give in the morning? Her brother and sister-in-law, her mother and father, all say: "Think it over. He has come to fetch you, talk to him. If you feel like going, go. Otherwise, you are here, in any case." Yes, she had to take the decision. What they all want to say is—Go, do go. Your husband has come to fetch you. The poor fellow has laid aside his dignity that is worth a lakh of rupees. But no one said it in so many words. Neela knew that everyone would be relieved if she went, they were all waiting for her to go. To stay on here was difficult and to go difficult.

On returning to her mother's house, she had thought that at last she had come home. This was the house in which she had been born and brought up. Here her family members would sense her sorrow and would seek to soothe her, so she would bear her troubles, even if they remained as heavy. These were her own people. Her life would definitely be of some value to them. In this belief, she had returned to her mother's house, to her people,

thinking that blood would call to blood. She had thought that here she would feel as if she existed, as if her existence was meaningful.

At first, it seemed that she had thought right. But gradually, she began to feel very out of place. Especially after her brother got married. She constantly felt that it was improper for her to live here yet to prove its propriety she kept denying her self in every possible way. She never expressed any desires—to eat, to go out, to do anything. She tried to understand what others, her parents, her brother and sister-in-law, wanted, and then, she tried to act accordingly. All the household tasks—cooking, fetching water, washing clothes, had fallen to her share as effortlessly as if they were her natural duty. Everyone in the house felt satisfied at the favour that was being done to her. Food to eat, clothes to wear, a bed to sleep on, a house to live in—what more could one ask for?

If one thought about it, they were not altogether wrong. How many are



fortunate enough to have even this much?

But she did not wish to acknowledge that she was merely being tolerated, even among her own people, that her situation here was not so different. She had told her parents, her brother and sister-in-law something about the situation at her in-laws' place, but she could not say a word to anyone about the situation here. Again and again, she tried to deny the truth. No, no, at least her parents were not just tolerating her, they were really keeping her with them. Her brother did love her, after all, and how much could her sister-in-law be expected to do? People kept gossiping so sister-in-law was forced to tell them a few details. Otherwise, there was nothing the matter. She felt she had gotten into a very bad habit of brooding too much and rebuked herself. Cutting through the rebuke, however, several incidents swam before her eyes. Words sounded within her like a tape being played.

Sister-in-law goes to market and brings beautiful clothes and toys for Anju and Anshu, but for Sona, only a couple of cheap frocks.

Toys are toys, after all. They are meant for everyone, but Anju and Anshu keep them well out of Sona's reach. They see to it that she does not even get to touch the toys.

Neela has often heard her sister-in-law whispering: "Hide the toys or Sona will break them." But if Sona ever makes the mistake of clamouring for the toys, she begins to make a pretence of scolding Anju and Anshu. "Why don't you give them to her? The toys are for everyone. Sona is not going to eat them up, is she?" Yet Neela has heard her sister-in-law tell them: "Don't give her the toys just because I scold you. My scoldings don't mean anything."

At first, her sister-in-law had felt somewhat embarrassed. When she bought clothes for herself, at festivals, she would buy some for Neela too. But one day Neela had over-heard her

saying to Sanjay: "You always say I should get clothes for Neela as well, but how is it possible that I should always buy for her whatever I buy for myself? Else I shouldn't buy anything at all."

Well, she was not wrong. Neela began to think that it was only natural. After all, she was dependent on them. They did so much for her, was it not enough? Surely she should not take offence. As for her own desires, what right had she to think of them? When there was no place in her husband's house for her wishes, how could there be place here? She would quarrel with herself and reproach herself.

She would push these scenes and sounds as far away as she could but they sprang up again within her and tormented her. She would toss and turn restlessly.

Today, her husband had suddenly materialised from a vacuum and had come to fetch her. All of them wished her to go with him. They were waiting for her to say "Yes." Yet to her they said: "Neela, we don't mind at all if you stay here, but now the poor fellow has come to fetch you, and he says that he did not know about all that happened earlier. You should have told him. Anyway, it is for you to think it over. After all, you are the one who has to go and stay with him."

Neela is still struck speechless by the fact that they think he is the one to be pitied, he is the one who has compromised his dignity, and he now claims not to have known what was going on. While she is the one who

must take the decision, she is the one who is absolutely free to decide. In the darkness, she felt as if she was laughing. She could not decide whether she was crying or laughing.

*Kukfoo-koo-kukroo-koo**

She got up with a start. Had day dawned? She looked out of the window. Darkness was being dispelled. She had to make a decision. Her reprieve ended with morning. All the eager faces would appear, would gather to hear her decision.

What was there to choose? If she had to lose herself, perhaps it would be easier to bear the sorrow of that loss amongst strangers in an alien place than amongst her own people. Neela consoled herself with this thought, and covered her face with her own *anchal*.

When her sister-in-law entered the room, she found Neela packing her trunk. Hastily, she went to mother's room: "Bai."

"What is it?"

"Neela is packing her box."

"Is she going?"

"Who knows? I didn't ask but so it seems."

Mother folded her hands towards the sky that was visible through the window, and wiped her eyes.

Everyone in the house saw that Neela was packing her things. Her father sighed and murmured: "May god bless you." Nobody asked her anything, nor did she say a word. She just silently went on packing her things.

(translated from Hindi by Manushi)