

Pratima and her married girlfriend, Manju, were in the habit of driving to downtown Nairobi about once a week, usually taking Pratima's compact Mercedes—running around in flowing silk or chiffon saris, visiting hairdressers, shopping at the meat and vegetable markets on Market Street, stopping by the flower shop and bakery at the Westlands Shopping Centre. They normally parked at the metered stalls near stores called 'Dharamshi Lakhamsi & Co.' and 'Shahtex.' Street kids would direct her to an empty parking spot in the area, earning a few shillings in tips. There was a lame youth, probably 14 or 15 years, who hobbled around on crutches collecting silver coins from drivers; his job was to oversee the feeding of the city council parking meters. He knew roughly how long a driver was to be gone and fed the meter a shilling or two at a time at half-hour intervals until the driver returned.

The way Pratima had things organized, there were usually a few extra shillings left in the hands of her overseer by the time she returned to her car. That lame boy (Mrefu, "the tall one") controlled the territory near the Dharamshi Lakhamsi & Co. store. He was reliable, and she felt glad whenever she saw him limp up to her car and greet her with a smile. She felt worried whenever he failed to turn up. Never had he failed to account for the money he was entrusted with, although of course he usually got to keep any leftover change. He was also her protection against the theft of her windshield wipers and hubcaps.

But that day Pratima had parked the car at the big Juma Mosque parking grounds, away from the familiar territory controlled by Mrefu.

Nairobi

○ Rasik Shah



When Manju and she returned from the African Heritage shop on Kenyatta Avenue, three well-dressed men were standing near her light-blue Merc, apparently having a discussion. As Pratima approached, the one in the middle opened his leather brief case and pulled out a machine gun. Then the other two also drew guns, pointing them at Manju, who was standing near the passenger door. "Fungua mlango!" shouted the one with the machine gun.

It took only a second for Pratima to realize this was a carjacking. Conventional wisdom in such cases dictated that one ought not resist but simply do as one was told. She pulled out the car keys from her handbag and handed them to the man with the machine gun. He snatched them from her, but then pointed the muzzle of his gun toward the back door of the car and shouted, "Ingia dani."

Pratima took a look at the gun and then at the man's face. It was a young, handsome face, with well-chiseled features. She noted the excitement there, his nostrils expanding and contracting in a quick pulsating motion.

"Take the car," she said in Swahili.

"Ingia dani!" the man commanded.

This was serious business.

"Haya," Pratima murmured and got into the back seat as the man held the door open and then shut it on her. Meanwhile, the other two men shoved Manju inside on the other side of the car. Then one of them pushed in beside her. The second entered from the other side, sandwiching Pratima and Manju. The one with the machine gun was already in the driver's seat, turning the ignition key.

There were people watching all this from about 25 yards away. But no one was shouting for help or even

moving. Pratima was struck by their passivity. Surely they could see something was wrong!

The driver reversed and, in a deft manouever, jerked the car onto Muindi Mbingu Street. Seated right behind him, Pratima observed the neat hairline at the back of his head. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Manju adjust her *sari* and then realized her own *sari* had fallen off her shoulder, leaving her chest to heave visibly. She put the *sari* back on her shoulder and wrapped it across her chest.

They were sped through the big Ngara roundabout near the Globe Cinema, and soon the car was on Forthall Road, doing 80 km. an hour. All the while the three men conversed in Kikuyu. They passed a traffic cop just after the Pangani shops, but he was busy dealing with a matatu vehicle he had stopped. They never stop you when you need them, Pratima said to herself as she sank further into her seat. Meanwhile the hijackers were discussing them, Pratima could tell; she had observed the driver eye her through the rearview mirror. He had caught her watching him and smiled faintly.

Suddenly Pratima realized that the reason she could not take her eyes off him was because he reminded her of her son, Nitin. He looked about the same age, and his features were somewhat similar: a squarish face with a sharp nose, side whiskers well below the ear. She glanced towards Manju and saw that the two men in the back seat were watching them as well. The one next to her was pressing hard against her.

Manju was of the generation that had grown up in the prosperous 1970s and 1980s, young women of

a new generation that had enjoyed a lot of freedom. But Pratima herself had remained remarkably conservative. She was happy with her husband, Jaswant, who owned and operated a furniture-making business. Jaswant drank with the boys on Friday nights and played golf on weekends but had hardly any other self indulgence or bad habit.

The car was approaching the Muthaiga roundabout. Pratima hoped it would follow the Thika fork, and her heart sank as it turned left toward Kiambu and Karura Forest. There were lots of lonely spots and side roads in Karura Forest. She thought, this could be

friends and business associates. It was a good life. They had not been tempted by the idea of living in the West, though Pratima's brother, Dharam, had migrated to the U.K. and was always waxing lyrical about his life there. Pratima had visited his new home in the industrial Midlands city of Birmingham. She had neither liked the way the immigration officer questioned her when she flew in, nor the condescending way people treated her.

There was no question that Kenya had been going down. If only the politicians would control their greed. The telephones didn't work, the water supply was



the last half hour of her life. She thought of her family. Nitin had just turned 19 years and completed his A levels, ready to go to university in the U.K. Sheffield College of Engineering had reserved a place for him for the coming September. Reeta, her daughter, was doing her O-levels and was on the verge of adulthood; what an attractive young woman she would become.

Her family had committed itself to the new Kenya. They were all citizens and liked the country. They even socialized with new African

irregular, and power cuts were frequent. Everything could be fixed with a little magendo, greasing of the palm. And the horror of the new crime wave! Daring robberies occurred all the time, the police themselves were often involved in the crime and were utterly useless in providing protection. Finally, last week she and Jaswant both decided that once the kids had been sent off to university, they would take stock and reconsider emigrating.

The car was speeding down a valley, approaching Karura Forest.

The men had begun a lively discussion among themselves. One of them was pointing to a dirt road just beyond the bridge at the bottom of the incline. The car slowed down. It was going to turn. Pratima started to tremble and began saying the *jappa* (prayer) to herself.

“Pull yourself together,” she told herself.

She would rather be killed than violated. She would not be able to face the shame of it. She would kill herself first. Somewhat calmer as she came to this decision, she turned to take a look at the others in the car. Manju was trembling and had her eyes closed. Of the two, Pratima knew she herself had better reserves of control and strength. On the other hand, Pratima knew an intriguing secret about Manju: She had been having a clandestine affair with her African boss. Perhaps Manju could possibly draw on that knowledge, be able to deal with the lust of these men, talk them out of it? She did not know. The important thing was to keep one’s wits.

The car pulled up on a grassy knoll by some evergreen trees. The driver and the other two men stepped out and held a discussion. The spot was lonely and there was no sign of anyone within miles. Then the driver approached Pratima’s door and yanked it open.

“Toka inje!” he shouted.

Pratima did not like the look on his face. He did not look handsome any more.

“You, come with me this way,” he said in English.

Pratima was surprised at his perfect elocution. One of the other men had already gone behind the



trees and then come back. The driver said something to him in Kikuyu, and the man headed for the car. Holding Pratima by her hand, the driver led her towards the trees.

She realized this was her last chance. She was thinking of Nitin, his muscular, youthful body. This man was probably a year or two older than Nitin. Would Nitin ever stoop to do something as heinous as this man was about to do? No, no, she told herself, and suddenly found her voice.

“You are like my son, his age, his height, even his appearance. If you do anything to me it is like doing it to your own mother,” she said. The words in Swahili poured out in a torrent.

“Quiet!” he shouted and pulled her further into the bush. The others could not see them now. One of the other men had taken Manju to the other side of the knoll. Pratima caught a glimpse of the third man going back to the car. He was trying to pull the long seat cushion from the back seat.

“You are my son,” she said firmly, looking into his eyes. “Tell

me what is your name ?,” she said, maintaining eye contact. He blinked. There was hesitation.

“Chris.”

“You are my son forever. If you do something now, I will die and think my son is also dead,” she said without knowing what she meant by the words. “Chris, where is your mother?”

He had stopped walking. The man with the seat cushion emerged from behind a tall acacia tree and approached them. He got to within five yards, then dumped the cushion on the grass and turned back towards the car.

“You will have to kill me before I lie on that cushion,” she said, then added, “In any case, you have to tell me if your mother is alive. She is not alive, is she? I am your mother now,” she said, her voice trembling. “I can love you like a son. I have a husband at home. You are my son,” she said. She held his hand tightly. “Hug me as you would hug your mother.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. He saw them and wavered.

“Hug me now, please.”

He did not move. She put her arms around his shoulders and drew him to her. He pulled away with a jerk and shouted out to the man who had brought the cushion.

“Kiguru, take that cushion back to the car.”

He looked angry. He turned to her and said, “Let us go back to the car.” Then he shouted a further order to Kiguru, pointing in the direction where the third man had taken Manju.

By now they had reached the car.

“Give me your purse, and take those bangles and earrings off,” he said. Pratima handed him the three pairs of gold bangles from her hands and then unscrewed her pearl earrings.

Manju appeared in the company of the other two men. Her sari was hanging from off her shoulders and dragging behind her. She was in tears. Pratima heard the man called Chris issue commands in Kikuyu to the others. Then he said to Pratima, “Just hand over your bag and your jewelry. Tell your friend to do the same. Nothing will be done to you.”

Manju went to the car and produced her handbag and gave it to him. Then she took off her bangles and earrings and handed them to him as well. The three men all got into the car and the man called Chris revved up the engine. As he turned and then started took off in the direction of the

main road, he turned and waved toward the two women.

“How far did they go with you?” Pratima asked.

“He had me on the ground, but the other man turned up while he was still fumbling, and then they packed up, just like that. What did you say to that driver fellow? I think he issued the orders.”

The car was gone. They had no money. There could be wild animals in the bush, or more robbers. They started walking back down the dirt road. After a few minutes they saw an old man with a walking stick coming towards them. When he got close, Pratima walked up to him.

“Jambo, mzee, saidia sisi,” she said. “Ntaka rudhi uku Nairobi.”

The old man nodded sympathetically. He said a few words in Kikuyu and pointed in the direction

they were already headed. That seemed to be the way to the main road to Nairobi.

The two women walked another hundred yards, then stopped for a rest on a stone culvert. Soon a bunch of children appeared from the direction where they had left the old man. One of them spoke Swahili and said they were sent by the mzee to help them. The children escorted the women to the main road, told them to turn left and wait there for a lift.

In less than ten minutes a car came along, going in the direction of Nairobi. The children waved at it to stop. It was a van driven by an Asian man. His family was in the back. The women squeezed into the long back seat where room was made for them. As the driver put the van back into gear, they began to tell their story. Behind them, the children waved goodbye. □



Jeevika'04

A Livelihood Documentary Competition

Jeevika is a search for documentaries that focus on legal and regulatory restrictions, bureaucratic process of approvals and licenses with attendant extortion and harassment as well as social and cultural norms and religious practices that prevent or constrain people from earning an honest living in the vocation of their choice.

Jeevika is open to all, young filmmakers are particularly encouraged to participate.

The Last Date for Submission of Entries: December 20, 2004

Prize Ceremony & Screenings: January 27-29, 2005, India Habitat Centre, Delhi

PRIZES

First Prize: Rs. 45,000 Second Prize: Rs. 30,000 Third Prize: Rs. 20,000; Best Student Film: Rs 10,000

A winner will be provided financial support (upto Rs. 3 lac) for the next film on a related issue.

CCS will purchase multiple copies of winning entries for dissemination to educational institutions and NGOs.

For the entry form and resource material on livelihood issues, please visit www.ccsindia.org/jeevika.htm

Any language with English subtitles; Any format; Any length

Jeevika is supported by Sir Ratan Tata Trust and John Templeton Foundation.

For further information: contact Manali Shah (Coordinator, Programs) **Centre for Civil Society**

K-36 Hauz Khas Enclave, New Delhi 110016; 011-2653 7456/ 2651 2347; www.ccsindia.org; jeevika@ccsindia.org