

SHORT STORY

# Shanti! Shanti!

○ Fatima M. Noronha

The screaming was the worst part. If one stood long enough at the window or on the stairs, one would overhear some family quarrel or the cries of bullied children at play in front of the garages. Radha had heard loud voices before. In her native Kumaon her mother halloed friends right across the ravine. The raucous shouts of the hill people were pleasant. Even in this painful Delhi, one could stand at one's window and shout across the row of garages to the service quarters of the parallel building, to ask one's country cousin for a handful of chillies or to chat.

The officers were generally in a hurry, zipping round the corner to brake sharply in front of their particular garage. It was a miracle every time, but somehow Radha never saw a child run over even though the two-year-olds also played right there. Shanti's Bam Bahadur sometimes sat a full hour leaning against a garage shutter, with his baby brother in his lap. If sorely tempted, he patted little Jang down to a sleeping position on the cement ramp and joined the other cramped cricketers. They too shouted out to one another. Shouting means you are free, thought Radha. Shouting, even screaming sometimes — but not like Shanti. Shanti's shouts went around and around in one's guts. Peace, Shanti, she was called: a bitter joke.

"Shanti! Shanti!" bellowed the fat woman. All the families upstairs and even two storeys down could hear her. "Shanti! Shanti!" she chanted in mock piety. Radha heard her chuckling all the way from the kitchen into the depths of the house. What a huge flat the fat woman had! And mostly to herself! The builders could well have spared a few extra bricks to make decent service quarters. Radha looked about the tiny room she managed to keep so tidy. It was her entire

home — hers, her husband's, her three school-going children's.

Three children. Three children. Go to the doctor, woman. Her glamorous memsahib used to be at her till Shanti came to work for the fat one in the next flat. Then all the mems and the maids as well had someone else to pester with kindly advice. Shanti had five kids and was suspected of another pregnancy even though little Jang Bahadur still drank her milk.

Living in the room next to Shanti's was no fun at all. The two families had to share the bath and toilet on the landing. Water came twice a day and whoever was lucky washed clothes, filled buckets and had a bath. The lavatory tap was always dry, come drought or water supply. Shanti's little ones always left the toilet dirty. Radha's

children held their noses and said "Chee!" Then Radha would fetch an old paint can full of precious water and flush the toilet so that her children could use it.

Radha took care of Shanti's toddlers when she could. But for her they would have fallen downstairs several times more or knocked the stove over. Not a word of thanks from Shanti, but one did these things out of humanity and not for thanks. And it was not deliberate rudeness on Shanti's part. She was not nice to anybody.

"Shanti! O Shanti ki \_\_\_\_!" And the fat woman gave her employee a mouthful as she entered. No sweat, thought Radha, a wall away. Shanti would store up the anger for future use. She had a husband, she had five kids. And the sixth would be born screaming.

"Why are you going to those people's house, Mummyji?" Sarita screwed up her little nose.

"Behanji called me, beti."

"Don't go there. They're smelly."

Radha went. Unwillingly. It was the very next room but a world apart really.

"I have to talk to somebody and there's no one else," Shanti began.

"I'm flattered," Radha would normally have said, but nothing in this squalid room was normal. Even the newspaper on the crate which served as the kitchen table had not been changed. Oil stains



and turmeric stains everywhere. No wonder Shanti's man hissed obscenities at her every evening.

"It's too much. Everybody's talking now," Shanti announced.

"What?" Radha pretended.

"My man, my man! Of course you know. My man and his pretty sister-in-law." Her man was as pretty as his sister-in-law, thought Radha. All these Nepali migrants had lovely complexions and love affairs. She pressed a finger to her lips.

"Shh! *behanji*, if you shout like that, naturally everybody will know. Can't you see your little ones are listening too?"

"Just yesterday..." The lights went out but Shanti kept on talking. The little ones whose delicate conscience Radha wished to protect jumped up and let out yelps of delight. She could not see them but they knew exactly where she was. They darted to and from her on every side, tugging at her sari. Little paws tapped her arms, her back. Tweezer fingers pinched her bare midriff. Her plait was pulled so sharply she almost cried. The devils laughed short laughs beneath their breath each time they touched Radha and ran away.

Their mother did not seem to notice them. She listed her woes and her husband's evil ways while she groped for the matches.

"That oily newspaper will catch fire, Shanti!" warned Radha, hitting out at a small attacker.

Shanti's slender hand placed the candle between them. Her pale skin and slanting eyes could have been beautiful once but not now, with this disgust in them.

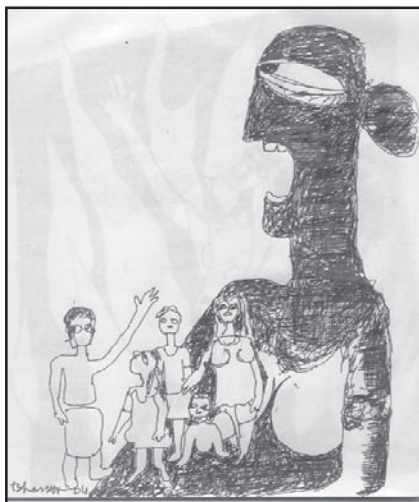
A shadow ran up and blew out the flame. The devils yelped. Shanti cursed. What a vocabulary she had! Radha knew her own children would be listening to all this. During a power cut, the fan stops whirring and the radio jockey for once keeps quiet, so one hears what the neighbours are saying even if they do not yell like Shanti.

"I have to go, *behanji*. My children are scared of the dark."

"I wanted to tell you..."

"Tomorrow, Shanti."

Radha was no weakling but she could not take this easily. Night after night she lay awake or dozed off only to dream terrors. Her throat filled with strangled screams which sometimes escaped. Her husband nudged her and muttered. He is a good man, thought Radha, he never beats me. Her son did not stir but little Sarita sighed deeply. From time to time, a groan betrayed the elder girl's troubled dreams. Meena was nearly fifteen. She must have gathered all the details.



It was almost like missing Shanti's yells which went from high pitch to higher pitch till her voice cracked and produced nothing but rasping growls.

Even Radha's memsahib, usually so deaf to the voices, to the people of the back stairs, even she, while Radha swabbed the floor around her leather sandals, had once lowered the newspaper and pointed a varnished index nail towards the rear of the building, "Who is that witch? Sahib wanted to know."

It was blood-curdling, Shanti's routine screaming session.

The colonel sahib was in the drawing room the morning after that terrible night. Even so, Radha spoke aloud to the memsahib in the kitchen.

The woman walked quickly to the drawing room and repeated the tale to her husband. It was a foregone conclusion, he said. He said he had realized the very first time he heard the screaming that there was a schizo around and why hadn't anyone taken her to a competent psychiatrist while there was time.

"I read somewhere there are only six hundred nut-doctors in the country," remarked the mem, tossing back her hennaed curls.

"So?" The colonel shrugged.

"Oof-oh! Who'll look after all those brats of hers? Radha says there are five of them."

"These servants are a menace. They should forfeit the quarters if they have more than two brats."

Radha's hands trembled as she swept and swabbed the floor. When she got to the dish-washing, the rattle was audible. She tried to keep her mind clear, but there was nothing she could do about her hands.

Radha was used to the midnight quarrels next door. She dozed off to the sound of Shanti scolding her erring husband. Awakening suddenly, she jumped to her feet and unlatched the door. The screams and flames were running to the staircase and down to the second floor. The screams muffled the knocking at each door of the domestic quarters, at the doors of the officers' kitchens.

No one came out.

Radha wanted to help but her feet took root in her own doorway. When they released her, she sped downstairs, her husband behind her and Shanti's husband behind him. They found Shanti's charred body on the first floor landing.

The fat memsahib's husband went out in his car and ten minutes later returned with an auto-rickshaw. The fat mem came to the door holding out a bedsheet which her man gave to Shanti's man. He and Radha wrapped Shanti's body and lifted it into the rickshaw. The driver complained that



he had not been told this was the job. He did not want any trouble with the police, he added. The officer went indoors and brought his wallet. He paid the driver what he asked and pressed some notes into the shirt pocket of the bereaved husband.

Of course Shanti was dead on the first floor landing. Radha saw. And she had to touch the corpse to wrap it and lift it. But at two in the morning the fat mem knocked at Radha's door and told her to say, if the police came, that Shanti's sari had accidentally caught fire and she was rushed to hospital.

It was almost dawn when the police came. They took a quick look at Shanti's quarters. A constable came to Radha's home and called her husband out. Standing between the bathroom and the toilet, the policeman took his statement. Then, seeing Shanti's Bam Bahadur at the other door, he asked, "What did your mother do?"

Bam Bahadur cowered and kept quiet. The other children, half-awake, huddled together among the discoloured rumpled sheets on the mat.

When the police had gone, Radha dragged herself to Shanti's room and tried to clean up some of the mess. She looked around for something the children could eat. There was no milk in any of the pans but there was a vegetable curry, not yet stinking, on the cold stove.

The stove. It looked all right, though dirty. Stove-burst is what she had heard her husband tell the constable and what probably went into the register.

She stared at Bam Bahadur. He stared back, then said tonelessly, "Papaji threw water from that bottle on Maji. And also his cigarette." There was no cigarette butt anywhere and the water bottle, smelling of kerosene, stood empty in the corner. Shanti's man seemed so mild, thought Radha. Still waters.

Word soon did the round of maids, cooks, butlers and batmen in the building, then the colony. Many rubber slippers and black boots ran upstairs to the third floor. Radha's husband decided to stay home, answer questions and get a little sleep. All morning and afternoon Radha was busy with the colonel's housework but later she told whoever asked her, "Shanti is in intensive care. She will recover. She couldn't be very badly off. She walked downstairs on her own feet. I saw her."

Ever after, she was glad she had not told the truth. Within six months, even her nightmares became rarer. Fortunately for everyone, the police never came again. The fat mem said if

the police kept appearing the Defence Colony would lose its prestige.

It was Radha's belief that Shanti's man gave a little gift to the policeman who met him at the hospital. The hospital authorities asked him to sign a paper and they took care of the cremation. He stayed away for a week. Radha and the downstairs women took turns minding Jang Bahadur and the bigger ones. Their father said "Thanks" most courteously when he came to hand over the quarters to the officer.

No maid, no quarters, it was well understood. The man rolled up the bedding and tied Shanti's sari around it. He stuffed the pots and pans into a bucket. Radha watched him carry a couple of cardboard boxes to the top of the stairs and shake out the cockroaches. Two hours later everything was piled onto a bicycle-cart. The old cart-man pedalled and Shanti's husband walked beside him, holding Jang over his shoulder. The four children ran behind, quite excited. At the corner of the block, they dodged the upstairs sahib's Opel Astra. □

*The author is a freelance writer based in Goa.*

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