

There was this Premvati, one peculiar girl, really singular.

No wonder, she got cut up into seven pieces. And that's why I still remember her, though she is years away in my past.

She was, you know, just about fourteen years. She was the pig-headed daughter of our maid, Kamla. I will have to call her pigheaded—the more her mother tried the less she could install slavery in her soul. The mother would demand, "Come with me—help me wash the dishes!" And tartly she would call out,

"No, not I!" The mother would say, "Go, then, cook food at home." "I won't. Go, do it yourself," she would declare. And there she would sit, limbs flung apart like a boy, sucking pieces of sugarcane she had cajoled me to pay for. A girl, so hopeless, I could only watch with fascinated interest as one might watch a bird frolicking on the top of the cage.

A soul, as I said, not born to be enslaved.

She would, of course once in a while, help her mother—quite often and quick as a fish in cool water. She did everything with verve and grace, as effortlessly as a fish flicking its tail in the water. But she was more interested in playing and frolicking. A fleeting life Premvati led, like the muddy monsoon waters of the river, just outside our little town. A short quick intense here today and gone tomorrow life they had, both the river and Premvati.

Oh! But I liked her, that rude girl—the ruder she got the more I liked her: you know how the bird inside the cage likes the one outside. The more she sat on the walls around the town swinging her legs and teasing the little kids, the more I laughed with her. Her mother would come complaining of

SHORT STORY

Premvati

○ Sunanda Mongia

her escapades, and Premvati would be right behind her giggling and I would grin with her.

She taught me some uncomfortable lessons also, you know—that not all cages need to have their doors closed.

One day she came to me. She had an uneven flick of hair cut across her forehead. "Didiji, don't I look good?"—I, having lived in a hostel in Nainital, was to her the neighbourhood authority on style. Her biggest and final authority was, of course, the movies.

"Who gave you this haircut?" That tinge of disapproval in my voice reached her mother. "Look, Didiji, what she has done! Cut her hair with a mango-cutting toka! I refused to give her the scissors."

"How did you manage to cut your hair with a toka?" I couldn't take it.

"Oh! I spread my hair on Mother's wooden chopping board and hit the toka hard on it. Didi, like you cut mangoes with it..."

I couldn't help laughing at her nerve.

And all Premvati did was giggle and caress her hair in front of my dressing table.

●
One day her mother got really mad at her. She hadn't filled the buckets from the tap that morning.

"There was too long a line. I didn't want to wait."

"Now how shall I cook...you won't cook! Won't help me. Don't care about water! About cleaning, about clothes, about..."

It could have been a long, long list. Premvati full-stopped it by sticking out her tongue.

—It was a hard swinging slap she got from her mother.

It was late in the evening by the time a frantic Kamla came to us. "Premvati! Premvati! I don't know where's she gone. What times these are! Can't a mother beat her girl? She's run away! Her brothers will kill me!"

Premvati had six brothers, doting most of the time, but they didn't like it that she was going out of the house like her mother. Even the youngest one, eleven years old, was fiercely protective.

Kamla had washed utensils in many houses like ours to put the boys through school and now the three eldest ones had jobs and wives. And though the sons often told her to stop working, she still came to our house. Weren't the wives reason enough to have some independent money?

The father, as is often the case in such families, was a



carefree bottle-swiggling drunkard.

Premvati was born when I used to play with dolls. She grew up on my old dresses and books.

But that day, Premvati was not to be found.

Kamla had looked for Premvati furtively, quietly, in all her corners and hiding places, without letting anyone know, especially her brothers. We wanted to send for the police but Kamla was adamant. Her colony would crucify her girl.

She would never be married off. Her brothers would cut her up. As it is, it is so much trouble finding a suitable boy.

At last we managed to send her back home. Kamla finally decided to lie for the present, to tell them that Premvati had gone to spend the night with her Nani. Tomorrow she may come back and no one would know.

As Kamla walked out of the door, a tiny voice called out from under the hanging covers of the wooden sofa—an antique lying in the veranda long before I was even born.

“Ma’s gone, Didi?”

I literally dragged her out by her pigtails.

She got another slap that day—from me this time.

Later I gave her food and made her sleep in my room, next to my bed. She curled up like a puppy. And her face was streaked with dried tears. My slap had made her cry, for she never thought that a person who laughed so much with her could also get angry with her.

I then had to spend a tiresome half an hour making her stop crying. She was so subdued. So un-Premvati^{sh}.

And yet, I don’t know why, she always made me smile. Even in her grubbiest, most hopeless state.



Kamla now got serious about Premvati’s marriage. I tried to tell her



she is just fourteen—or maybe sixteen, for who remembers the birth date of daughters? But the risk of having a rebellious daughter at home: no parent is willing to take it.

I knew the more rebellious she got, the sooner she would be married off.

I know all about it, of course, since I too was to be married off. Well, not that I was rebellious. I was bored and irritable. There was a constant stream of photographs coming and going. There was this MBA in Bombay, an engineer in Bangalore, a government officer in Delhi... actually, I really couldn’t understand how one could love and marry a photograph.

But my friends were getting married and I didn’t want to study, though it really disappointed my Papa. Mother said, “Learn dress-designing.” That didn’t appeal to me at all.

I didn’t know what else there was to do.

It somehow seems strange that at a certain stage in life, when you do not know what you want to do with yourself, people assume that you are pining for a man. People will nag a son saying, “Choose a career! Haven’t you chosen one yet?” But of a daughter they will say, “Let’s find her a husband; find a husband for her, quick!”

And then I too was old enough—at that marriageable age—and

thought I might as well, you know, get married. But even that seemed boring ... you know. Get married, cook, have kids, take them through their board exams, pack them off to college and then get them married.

Long life and short neat plans!

I had, kind of, liked the boy across the wall. When we were kids we used to play together in the streets. But there was a big gap between us. We were fairly rich and they were—well,

you know, middling. And now we were grownup and hadn’t talked for years. He had grown tall and sweet. But we wouldn’t talk to each other. We just smiled. He was ... jus’ ok. And his was a poor family. And imagine spending your whole life in the same colony! That too seemed boring.

Then a photograph came all the way from Hawaii—of an Indian, a professor. Every one of us was involved in the discussion later that night. Bhabhi said he was ugly, Bhaiya said, “So what, Hawaii’s beautiful.” Papa said his father’s a retired principal secretary to the chief minister—must be influential. I personally didn’t like his rose-pink shirt and the broad tie. But I liked the idea of Hawaii.

There was another guy—the orthodontist son of a dentist, but in Kanpur—that hot, crowded ugly city. It was very confusing. I looked at Ma. She was the most decisive member of our family. And she loved us all like only mothers can.

It seems that Kamla was quicker than my people, for she came in one day happy and carrying a big box of *mithai* (sweets). “I have found a match for Premvati. He is doing a BA at the local college. Being of dhobi caste, he will easily get a job, you know—OBCs have job reservations.”

Meanwhile I was still confused. And there was Bhabhi looking across the wall suspiciously. I was mad at her! I hadn't even exchanged five words with him.

The orthodontist would be rich ... Hawaii all by itself sounded too good to be true. They say the weather's good in Bangalore, and Bombay's hip! It was all very confusing.

Then a few days later, Kamla came in great panic shouting, "Premvati! Premvati! She has run away! Save her! Save my daughter!"

"Where...?"

"...with that harijan boy who lives across from our house. It's so much lower a caste than ours! What to do?"

"Is he also a student?"

"No! He has a job. A doctor in a village.... He was always bright. You know there are reservations in the medical college for harijans."

All said and done it sounded like a very neat arrangement to me. I told her so.

"What's the harm? Looks like you've exchanged a jobless boy for a doctor son-in-law."

"Oh! But Didiji save her!"

It was too confusing. If Premvati was smart enough to elope with a doctor, why did she need to be saved?

Meanwhile, my marriage too got fixed up that very day and I was happy enough. There would be lots of lovely clothes and shopping to gladden any heart. It was a gay time.

Premvati was all but forgotten

The next day, there was great excitement in the colony. Apparently, the boy across the wall had qualified in the IAS. He would be a highranking officer and Papa was quite impressed.

That was the day this boy came over with his mother—with a box of *mithai*. I hadn't seen him this close. He was quite nice. And he was smiling.



Bhabhi too smiled. "You too must share our joy! Neeta's got engaged! Imagine! Lucky girl!"

I couldn't say anything. Soon they went away. I thought of what could have been.

That day I really thought of what could have been.

I didn't remain in this frame of mind for long. For there came Kamla with her trouble and this time it was really big trouble.

The brothers had cut Premvati up into seven pieces. I wondered if it was with that same mango-cutting toka? They had chased her across half the district and caught up with the runaway couple. The doctor-boy they didn't touch. Not easy to mess up with a doctor, and that too a harijan. These days there are these minority commissions to watchdog any crime against them.

"But why? WHY?" Can you imagine my shock?

"He belonged to a lower caste!"

"But the police...?"

"Who will tell the police?"

"Why didn't they just fetch her back? She was after all a minor!"

"No one wants a girl like that in the house," Kamla sounded uptight.

I couldn't have imagined that people do this to girls in their families.

There was nothing to do but to console her and fetch her some water in her usual cup.

She sighed, "Oh! Well. I suppose, God has his own logic for making us behave so.... If Premvati had to go, she had to go.... Think of the trouble she would have caused me her whole life."

I suppose she had a point. Premvati had always been a heap of trouble.

So that was it—Premvati as seasonal as a monsoon river. And there she was, gone like a river dried up in summer.

And I got married, and I left my little town where everyone knew everyone.

Life's not as neatly tied up as I thought it would be, not so predictable.... I don't need to worry about Board exams. I can't really decide whether I am happy, but there's been nothing to be very unhappy about either.

And this place is beautiful. The weather's just constant and neither has life been too hot or cold. There's turquoise sky all around and sparkling crystal-blue water rising to the horizon. That's how it is here in Hawaii. But believe me, there are days when I remember the monsoon rivers of my country. Oh! The uncontrolled flow of that muddy water of my hometown!

And, of all people from my hometown, it is that grubby Premvati who comes to my mind again and again.

I don't know why, honestly. □

This story is based on a real incident. Such incidents are not too uncommon in certain societies. However, there also must be some fictional elements in it, for instance, I really cannot believe that doting brothers would cut up their sister into seven pieces.

The author is Associate Professor of English, Kashi Vidyapeeth, Varanasi.