

We called him Kekda (crab), which was a distortion of his name, K K Nair. He was our sixth standard mathematics teacher, and we had been told that we would have him throughout the three middle school years. He taught well in class, and was very punctual with correction work. In appearance, he was a typical curly haired, pinko-white thirty-something malayalee with a scrubbed face. Neither handsome nor ugly, just plain. We hated him. Because he stood leaning against the banisters during the lunch break, ogling up at the billowing skirts of the girls skipping up and down the stairs. Because whenever it was time to declare the results of the fortnightly tests, Kekda would walk into class with a thin, flexible cane, and award us stinging cuts on the calves of our legs. His calculation was simple and painful — less than five marks, four cuts; six to ten marks, three cuts: eleven to fifteen marks two cuts; sixteen to nineteen marks, one cut; full twenty marks, no cuts. There was no student by the end of the first term who had not tasted his cuts, except Amitav, the furiously insecure top boy.

The cuts landed on our bare calves (socks had to be pulled down to the ankles before the operation took place) with a swish of cane cutting the air, and left angry red welts. Before we had finished our sixth standard, every student in the class had got into the strange habit of starting to ‘dance’ as soon as they were summoned to his desk.

In seventh standard, we were joined by a tall, burly girl called Jeniffer, who had failed the exams in the previous year. Rumour had it that she had failed many times before, in different classes. Jeniffer had a sallow brown, unhealthy complexion, and rough, tightly curled hair. Her eyes had a forlorn, watchful look, which

## Short Story

# The Crab

○ Aparna Tambe

never left her — not even when she laughed. She was a ‘grown’ girl — almost a woman, who stuck out among the skinny, nearly breastless thirteen-year-olds. And despite her shabby appearance, she always had lots of money — sometimes as much as five or ten rupees a day, while the rest of us had nothing but miserable 25 paise coins to show, maybe once or twice a week. We envied Jennifer’s ‘riches’. We envied her even more after Sophie, the tallest girl in class

who shared the last bench with Jennifer, told us that she wore a bra.

In the first term Jennifer performed miserably at the fortnightly tests, failing every one of them, getting four cuts every fortnight from Kekda, and loud scoldings and warnings from the rest of the teachers.

To the latter she merely hung her head and blinked, but when it came to Kekda’s cuts, her eyes went wide with fear, and she started to weep with a shrill whispering sound from her throat even before the first cut landed on her leg, and wept copious, ugly tears at her seat for the rest of the period. She never ‘danced’, though.

With the second term, Jennifer’s maths marks suddenly soared. In the first fortnightly test, she scored 16 out of 20 to the disbelief of the whole class. ‘You dith welld’ lisped Kekda in his usual thick accent, pointing at her, once he had finished distributing the test-papers, and the cuts. At the next fortnightly test, Jennifer scored 15, and in the next test, she was again at 16. And all the time, she persistently refused to show her test-papers to anyone.

Then one day, huddled together in the playground in a tight circle with arms around each other’s necks and heads together, some four or five of us learnt the reason. It was Sophie again, eyes popping, voice reduced to a high-pitched whisper, ‘She is having a chakkar with Kekda! When the test is going on, he stands behind her and touches her in bad places!’



We all opened our eyes wide, and gasped exaggeratedly. It was perfectly credible. Everyone was too busy to look around during tests, and Kekda was in the habit of standing at the back of the room, 'to see if anyone is cheating.'

By the end of the day, all the girls in the class knew. Emotions ran riot, utter contempt for Kekda, a mixture of pity, contempt and indignation for Jennifer, and sheer intrigue at the whole incident. We stood in huddles and discussed the impropriety of 'selling one's izzat' (we were a filmi lot) for the sake of a few marks. 'Better to die than doing this!' exclaimed Snehalata, a particularly persistent film-goer. The rest of us nodded doubtfully. Jennifer, left alone, was going from group to group, trying to find a place, only to be rebuffed by meaningful silence. I felt a remote pity for her.

As if by coincidence, the very next day Jennifer's father arrived at lunch time, furious. All students were out in the playground except for a few girls. 'Where is the money?' he blurted out harshly the moment he saw Jennifer, 'Give me the money or I will kill you.' Thin and barely medium height, the man hardly looked an adequate father to the hefty Jennifer. Before anyone could react to his attack, he started talking furiously, 'We are suffering for lack of money, and she steals fifty-fifty rupees from the house everyday!

That was the last money her mother had, and she took it. And ten days of the month still to go! Tell me what you have done with the money! What do you want so much money for you....?' The last two sentences were directed at Jennifer. 'I don't know!' said Jennifer so coolly that we were surprised. It was as if she was not a bit embarrassed. She was blinking very rapidly, though. But her father had already begun to question



us, 'Does she bring money to school? Big money? Ten-ten rupees?'

Yes she does.

'Everyday?'

Yes.

'Why didn't you report her to your teacher?' 'She told us that she gets 600 rupees a month pocket money,' It was Sophie. 'Liar!' spat the father, '600! How could you believe? Are we Birlas? Birlas can give such money. Can we give such money?' And then, at the sight of our blank faces, he added in exasperation, 'You know who the Birlas are?' He wasn't getting the sympathy he wanted. So he started furiously searching the 'jhola' that served as Jennifer's school bag, screaming at her all the time, 'You no good! Why were you born? No good at studies, no good at anything, just eating, sleeping and stealing money on top of that! Just you wait till you get home today!'' The thoroughness of the search itself was astounding, even obscene. He flipped through each of her books and notebooks, shook out the contents of her geometry box, and even her tiffin box. Then he turned the bag inside out and groped it all over. He searched her pockets, made her remove her shoes and socks, and just stopped short of a body-search. Nothing came of it.

At last he gave up. 'When you come home today, you pray to God

and come!' he threatened as he left. His clothes, I noticed, were very worn, and looked as if they had been stitched out of the minimum possible cloth. His slippers were down at the heels. Jennifer's own shoes, I knew, were patched in three or four places. her skirt was badly discoloured, and her terricot blouse thin and stained with overuse.

A gaggle of shocked voices filled the classroom as soon as the thin man left. 'How could you, Jennifer!'

So shocking! Your family is suffering.....And we thought!....' and so on till the bell rang and everyone hushed up.

The next day, during a free period, some of the bolder girls mobbed Jennifer and got her to confess the truth about her maths marks. Then they began to rain advice with a touching sincerity that only thirteen-year-olds have, 'Don't do this Jennifer. Look, how would your parents feel if they found out? Will you get anywhere with all this? He might start blackmailing you. You might get pregnant!' The last bit came in a hushed voice from Snehalata, who had collected a formidable knowledge of 'these things' from the movies. The rest of us stood around and nodded in wise agreement.

Miserable as well as gratified, Jennifer confessed, and promised to stay away from Kekda. Her expression was vacant, and she avoided looking at anyone in particular. But she was back in the fold. All the negative emotions had melted like mist. Jyotsna, the popular and wise-for-her-age head-girl, decided that Jennifer should change her seat, and placed her next to me on the more visible third bench.

She also decreed that the incident was on no account to be let out to the boys in the class. We agreed. They would have hooted her. The outcome was immediately apparent. The next

morning Kekda's surprise was visible to all who knew, and throughout the period he shot glares at Jennifer. The next day he made Jennifer stand up and asked her to solve the problem on the board. She couldn't, of course, and he shouted at her. That became the routine. Everyday he found one or the other way to humiliate her, and fling verbal abuse at her. 'You are a discredit to your parents!', 'You don't deserve to be in this school!' 'You are a bad influence on the other children!' and so on, with the occasional veiled threat, 'I will see how you pass this year!' He even invented a new 'everyday' punishment — rap on the knuckles with the wooden back of the duster. And sure enough, Jennifer got more than her fair share of that too.

If Jennifer suffered, she did not show it. She merely hung her head and blinked rapidly through the ordeal. In the meantime, I was getting to know Jennifer better. And more and more, I was beginning to understand her sheer vulnerability. What if I had been that bad at studies? (I was not brilliant — average at best) Getting nothing but scoldings at school and at home? What if I had had parents who were that poor? Or who abused me so grossly in public?

I tried to imagine if I would have been driven to make the same kind of compromises if my life had been as full of kicks as Jennifer's was. Perhaps those marks in maths were her only hope for being treated with any kind of dignity at home.

One day, about a month after Jennifer's change of seat, Kekda brought out his trump card. 'Bring your father tomorrow!' he thundered, throwing her test paper at her, 'And don't come back to school if you don't.'

Predictably, the next day Jennifer did not turn up. Nor the next day, nor the day after. And every day Kekda



asked for her, 'Jennifer didn't come?' Didn't the man have any shame, I wondered. A full week later, to our surprise, Kekda walked in through the school gates beaming, followed by Jennifer. The forlorn look in her eyes had deepened, and she even looked tense. But the only thing we could get out of her before the morning bell rang was that Kekda had come to her house that morning.

And wonder of wonders, that very day, in the very first period, Jayamma

Miss, our class teacher, arrived followed by an ugly, beaming Kekda.

'Mr Nair,' she announced, 'has complained that some of the taller students are occupying the front benches in the class, and creating inconvenience for the shorter students. Those students will please move back to their original seats. Jennifer Thomas!' We paid no attention to the remaining names. We were looking at Jennifer as she picked up her worn *jhola* and walked to the last bench. Again, Jennifer's face showed no expression, except the deep, deep forlornness in her eyes. Suddenly, illogically, my mind shot back to what my father had told me about crabs in my childhood. Simulating the crab and its prey with his hands, he had said in a hollow, theatrical voice, 'Look my pet, this is a crab! Look at its sharp pinchers! Never go near it, because if it catches you, it never lets you go!' □

## Some good News!

### Moral Victory for Shankar and Devina

Our readers will be happy to know that Shankar Sharma and his wife Devina Mehra of First Global — the financiers of *Tehelka* — whose lives and businesses were wrecked by a vindictive government following the *Tehelka* exposé of corruption in defence deals have been fully exonerated by the Joint Parliamentary Committee(JPC) set up to investigate the charge that they had deliberately brought about a market crash for personal benefit through the *Tehelka* exposé. However, while the JPC has exonerated them, the SEBI ban on their business still needs to be withdrawn, as also the malicious actions of the Income Tax and Enforcement Directorate (ED). Given the slow pace of the judiciary, these matters are still pending. But the JPC exoneration is a big moral victory and should also help them in fighting all other cases. They have filed for discharge in the ED case for which Shankar was arrested and jailed for 75 days. The hearings are nearly over and the judgement is expected soon. We hope to provide a full report on this in the forthcoming issue of MANUSHI. (For details of *Tehelka* exposé and persecution of this couple see MANUSHI No. 128). We wish Shankar and Devina good luck in their battle against injustice.