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Abstract

Of all the relatives I acquired when I got married, Revati was the very worst. When I first met her, I too had read of sati, dowry deaths and child widows. I would shudder as I put down the book or newspaper. I pictured an innocent girl brutally held down, her head shaved clean and her bangles broken.

GITHA HARIHARAN

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Of all the relatives I acquired when I got married, Revati was the very worst.

When I first met her, I too had read of sati, dowry deaths and child widows. I would shudder as I put down the book or newspaper. I pictured an innocent girl brutally held down, her head shaved clean and her bangles broken.

I also imagined a sequel to what I read. The child grew into a beautiful woman, very much like the heroine in a film I once saw. In the film, the heroine-widow is loved by a modern young man who finds her goodness and her quiet, selfless beauty irresistible. Because of the strength of his convictions, he resists his family's protests.

Maybe they can't all find husbands, I thought. But they could then devote their lives to the family, to the people around them. Ascetic and saintly, they could bring love to the unloved, compassion to the sick.

The possibilities were endless, till I met Revati. She gazed at me in my bridal finery, her face filling with a wistfulness, hideously unashamed and undisguised. She could not keep her hand away from my sari of Benarsi silk.

It's soft, soft, just like baby skin, she moaned. Her hand, which had never shown an inclination to touch a baby, stroked the sari again and again.

I was embarrassed at first. Later I found that no one in my new family noticed that I avoided her. They sometimes humoured her, as long as it put them to no great trouble. The rest of the time she was merely tolerated, as if she was an undesirable but orphaned child.

Revati was married when she was ten. Within a year, her husband died. For years she did not know that she was a child widow.

The family rallied round Revati's parents. Her father, grief turning him liberal, agreed to have a tutor come home. There was, of course, no question of sending her to the village school.

Later, when she was old enough, she was sent to Madras for a degree. A distant relative found her a job in a small town, in a school with a hostel for the teachers. So the family made up, in some sense, for her marriage. She was independent, she deposited her own earnings in a bank account, and she had more than enough for her old age.

Fifty years later, the family's memory of her tragedy was somewhat blunted. They had seen in their midst love marriages, modern arranged marriages like mine, with the couple meeting and going out unescorted, and a nephew who had settled in America and married a blonde.

As Revati grew old, the family, even those who had lived through the details of her story, felt a kind of disbelief when she arrived at their doorstep with monotonous regularity, sweaty and hungry.

She was an unpleasant reminder of a world gone by. A child widow was a thing of the past, a page from a history textbook that should be safely contained between cardboard covers. Not what she was, as large as life, walking, talking, eating large mouthfuls of our food.

Perhaps it would have been easier, we all thought, if Revati had been different somehow. Beautiful maybe, or even just more attractive, or loving. Or if she had been a good cook or helpful with the children.

But she was short, squat, with a scaly, swarthy skin, coarse grey hair, and shamelessly aggressive buck teeth. Her midriff hung out between sari and choli, two distinct, folded bulges of flab.

Her long sessions in the bathrooms, oblivious of the restless queue outside and the water problem, were part of the punishment we were put through when she visited.

What Revati did in the bathroom was a subject of endless and humorous speculation in the family. She would sit around like the rest of us, gossiping. Then, when she was sure no one would notice, she would make a swift and sly getaway. We would only realise she was gone when we heard the old stone door of the bathroom shut. In a few minutes we would hear her splashing loudly, as if she was enjoying her bath out of spite.

The other problem was food. She ate enough for two men, unaffected by details such as how much she was leaving in the dishes for the rest of us.

Eat, she would advise me in that hoarse, dry voice so unlike a woman's. She shovelled another handful of sticky rice into her open mouth. Then she paused for a sip of water, which she gargled round and round in her mouth before swallowing it in a loud and sudden gulp.

Eat, so that you're strong. So the ghosts don't get you, she said. Having given me this valuable tip in a matter-of-fact tone, she emptied the glass of water onto her right hand and washed it on her plate. The dry red chillies she had not eaten floated around like corpses in the murky water.

I have never seen anyone eat like Revati. Usually we women wait till all the children have eaten, then the men, before we sit down to eat what is left over.

But Revati, in spite of being completely grey, never noticed any of these feminine niceties. She would sit with the children, and stuff the food, great big balls of it all mixed up, into her mouth.

She would open her mouth horribly wide, but even then some of the food would miss its mark and fly sideways. At the end of the meal, she

always asked for a glass of warm milk and a banana. She poured the milk on a plate, peeled the banana and squeezed it between her fingers, so that the pulp oozed out onto the milk. Then she would stir the mess lovingly, and bending forward, slurp it off her hand.

Nobody said it in so many words, but clearly, something had to be done about Revati. It was ten years since she had retired from her teaching career. She now lived alone, at least for a small part of the year. The rest of the time she visited her brothers and sisters for long stretches, her bulky frame in the wrong place at the wrong time, always in the way.

Swiftly, without much discussion, the family acted. A poor cousin (a very distant one) was sent for. He was a strong, muscular young man but a little weak in the head. He was perfectly harmless, a rather sweet, docile big baby. He went to live with Revati, as companion and bodyguard.

For more than a year, Revati did not visit us. Then without warning they arrived one hot, sultry morning, grimy with dust.

Revati had grown even fatter and she spoke and moved slowly, like a soft, swollen balloon filled with stale air. Otherwise she was just the same: she still ate too much, sighed greedily when she saw our new saris, and bathed for hours on end.

The idiot seemed devoted to her. He followed her about like a dog follows its mistress. He was the only one among us who listened patiently to her endless monologue on what she called the gas problem.

There are three kinds of burps, she would lecture to him, heaving herself into my father-in-law's favourite chair. Her body filled up every inch of it.

You have the deep, satisfying burp that races up all the way from your stomach. You almost have nothing to do with it. It comes up on its own, as loud and relieving as a good fart.

The idiot nodded sagely, a solemn look on his smooth shaven face.

Then you have the impotent ones, harmless little bubbles of gas. But you have to force them out from the throat.

The worst, let me warn you, is the burning sort. It comes straight from the heart. It swells and swells inside so that you can't eat. The pain spreads wildly so that you can hardly breathe. Finally, when you are ready to put an end to it all, you burp, but it is sharp and it stings, leaving a sour liquid in your mouth.

A few weeks into Revati's visit, her gas problem became so acute that it seemed to touch her brain a little. She began to see things – what exactly she saw it was not clear because she refused to describe it. But from her sweaty, trembling upper lip, and her fear of being alone, we decided it was some imaginary ghost or demon.

We've let her live too long with that idiot, said my mother-in-law, shaking her head. But she said nothing to her sister when she had the idiot sprinkle water mixed with purifying turmeric everywhere she walked.

One afternoon, when the entire household was asleep, I found Revati and the idiot alone in a room upstairs.

Oh, press my legs, press my head, she moaned. He squeezed her ankle and she burped, a tentative bird-like cheep. He massaged her legs and I heard a long, hissing burp. He pressed down hard on her thighs and kneaded her flabby midriff like dough. She made a huge, full throated noise – a belching sound that went on and on.

It was all innocent, of course. She was an old woman, at least seventy. He was only an imbecile. But I still thought I should let my mother-in-law know.

Again, there was some muted discussion, conducted, at least among the women, in discreet whispers and corners. How were we to make Revati understand?

Finally, the idiot was sent away with a hundred rupee note in his pocket and some vague promises of a regular job. Revati seemed to take it surprisingly well. Everyone humoured her whims for a while, and she basked in the glow of her newfound attention.

Some days later, I woke with a start in the middle of the night. I felt a dry, soft, wrinkled hulk of flesh near me, and then I heard a scream. In the same instant, my husband and I jumped up to switch on the light.

Revati lay on our bed, her eyes rolling about wildly. Her huge body jerked as if she was in the throes of a fit.

There, he's there. He's laughing at me, she screamed.

Doors opened and closed, and the others crowded into the room, staring. No one asked her what she saw. Then my mother-in-law, looking old and haggard, came in and shooed them all away.

Go, go and sleep, this is women's business. I'll see to it, she said, with such weariness that they filed out, one after the other, like shamefaced children.

I could not leave the room. My eyes were riveted by Revati, now no longer in a wild convulsion but whimpering softly.

I went to her, in a daze of terror, shock and self-loathing. I sat by her side, my hand on her hot, throbbing forehead. Together, through the night, my mother-in-law and I sat on either side of Revati, stroking the trembling body back to stillness, enticing her wandering mind back to us.