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Liberation

-Translated by **Sujatha Gopal** from the original story 'Vimukti' by Saleem

She would be relieved if she kills him! She contemplated once again.

This thought has been haunting her for quite some time...

For over a month now, this thought has been tormenting her...

He is her husband... her partner of thirty years...

How to kill him... should she strangle him...no...can she endure that piteous look he would give her? Her hands would tremble then...her grip will loosen. Her heart will melt.

Should she mix poison in his food and feed him? Seeing him struggle for his life, can she tolerate that...she would want to give him an antidote then, wouldn't she?

An overdose of sleeping pills? Yes, that would be good... He would quietly pass on into the other world peacefully.

He began to cough incessantly... gasping for breath... if he dies now, what a relief!

She went into the room with a glass of water. His eyes were filled with tears from coughing hard. Compassion filled her heart. Her love for him made her breathless.

She adjusted the pillow and helped him sit comfortably. She held the glass to his lips and helped him sip the water slowly. She then wiped his lips with the free end of her *saree*. He looked at her... was that to thank her or was it a look of distress? Like a child looking at the mother after she has nursed him...No, it wasn't that ...his eyes seem to be conveying the anguish of one caught in the whirlpool of despair. As if requesting her to pardon him for being dependent on her and causing her endless misery...

"Do you need anything else?" she asked

He tried to nod his head, muttering something incoherently.

Strange guttural sounds from his mouth ... sounds that only she understood.

"I have to cook. I am going into the kitchen. If you need anything call for me," she said.

She immediately realized her folly and looked at him.

He looked at her. His looks touched her as if to say, "Don't worry...I am not hurt...It is true, isn't it? I cannot talk to you...I cannot engage into a conversation with you and can't even call you."

His eyes were wet with tears.

Tears flooded her eyes too. She could not let him see her cry. She does not have the liberty to wash away her pain with tears. She rushed into the kitchen, stuffed her mouth with the free end of her *saree* and cried her heart out without a sound.

What has become of him in these five years! Like a skeleton confined to the bed... vegetable existence!

She recollected the amorous glances he gave her when they met for the first time, when he had come to see her and finalize the marriage alliance.

A handsome man with sharp features and an enchanting smile!

“Don’t you want to ask her anything?” prodded his mother.

“What is your name?” he asked.

Did he come to finalize the marriage without finding out her antecedents?

She was furious, but controlled herself.

“Isn’t it customary to introduce yourself first before you ask about me?” she questioned.

Silence reigned in that noisy room for some time.

“We had assumed that the girl was an innocent one. She is sharp-witted,” the future mother-in-law commented.

He smiled and said, “She has said the right thing, hasn’t she *amma*? My name is Sivaram. I work as a medical representative. Now I hope you do not have any objection? What is your name?” he asked.

“Sujatha,” she answered.

“What a nice name!” he complimented her. An unknown happiness had surrounded her back then.

“Girls hardly study in our village, but our daughter has completed her graduation. Please do not attribute that to her behavior. Please forgive her for the audacity she has displayed this evening,” father pleaded with them.

“We will let you know after we get back home,” said his mother.

“Why dilly dally till then? I like the girl and if she also approves of me we could finalize the marriage date,” he said looking at her mischievously.

She looked at him and their eyes met. His eyes twinkled with a naughty smile.

She not only developed a respect for him at that moment but also realized that she had fallen in love with him.

From the day she married him, every day of her life was filled with happiness. Bliss blossomed in her marital heaven.

They were blessed with two daughters. Both the daughters studied engineering, married software engineers and were settled in America and Australia respectively.

When things seemed to be going on smoothly, the unexpected happened.

Sujatha suddenly came out of the reverie. She was fazed. Did that incident cause her to shudder? Did she hear some sounds? She concentrated and listened.

She heard the sound once again... like the cry of an animal in the throes of death.

Her husband was calling out to her.

She ran into the room.

Shadows of pain had marred his face...

“Do you want to relieve yourself?” she asked

His face muscles twitched and he made some rasping sounds.

She reached for the pan under the bed and helped him relieve himself.

She then went into the washroom, emptied the bed pan, cleaned it and came into the room.

She kept the pan under the bed.

“Shall I go?” she asked.

He silently let her go.

The *sambhar* she had kept on the stove was boiling like the pain in her heart, threatening to overflow.

Five years back, when he was returning home, he was hit by a lorry. The scooter was completely damaged. He was in coma for four days. The doctors did not give any hope of survival. His spine was damaged and the doctors had warned that even if he survived, he would be an invalid throughout his life. He would need to be looked after like a child.

He survived but was paralyzed for life.

She only hoped for his survival. Her husband had given her a life of happiness and comfort. She had decided to serve him.

She realized in ten days that her husband couldn't talk. He lost his speech permanently. She cried that day inconsolably. If only her husband could share his pain, his memories, his tears with her that would be enough she thought. Her fate did not allow her that concession.

Financial insecurity worried her even more. Whatever money they had saved was spent on performing the daughters' marriage. Their dream of owning a house remained unfulfilled. She firmly believed that it was below her dignity to ask her sons-in-law for monetary help. She bought a computer and learnt desk top publishing in English and Telugu. She worked from home and earned about eight thousand rupees a month.

Shivram got a compensation of five lakh rupees from the company as he was still in service. She put that amount in a fixed deposit. That money, however had to be spent on medicines and consultation of doctors. She never wished that he should die rather than go through the painful ordeal. The thought of killing him too never occurred even once. She loved him.

A month ago, she discovered that she was suffering from uterine cancer. The doctor had told her that the disease was in the final stage. She was not perturbed of the impending death but about her husband's life.

Who will look after him? Who will take care of his needs? Who will feed him? Who will care for him? Who will give him selfless affection?

Had they been financially secure, she would have availed nursing services. If she had money, she would have got him admitted in an old age home. Money...she did not have...She can not die in peace leaving him behind in such miserable conditions...It was then that she decided to kill him.

She went into the room and stood staring at him. He was sleeping. She couldn't control her tears. His handsome face was now unrecognizable. He looked like a stranger. His body like a skeleton now. Wasn't it this body that gave her conjugal pleasure? Wasn't it this body that gifted her motherhood?

Can she kill her husband... can she muster the courage for such an inhuman act? Can she strangle him like she strangled her thoughts a little while ago? Does she have an alternative? Her daughters are happily married...will the sons-in-law allow them to look after their father even if they want to? Do daughters have that liberty? She can not destroy their lives ...She has no other option, but to kill him.

It is a crime to kill someone, isn't it? That too the husband, whom she loves so dearly. Mercy killing isn't wrong she has heard people say. This isn't mercy killing, this is merciless killing...Her husband never pleaded with her to kill him...he wants to live and she was aware of that desire. He was frightened of death. She remembered how he was moved by his mother's death. He always felt sorry for causing her trouble, but never longed to die.

Killing him would be a crime, not an act of love. She did not want to think about ethics, religious compulsions and retributions. She wants him to go away peacefully.

She never ever gave a thought to the power money had, but now she realized that without money, one was powerless. If she were financially secure, she would have ensured that her husband lived comfortably till his last breath.

Now she realized that not having a son was a curse. A son would have been a support to them. Shivram never discriminated between a girl and a boy. He always said it did not matter that they had daughters...it matters. In this patriarchal society, men had more privileges. Daughters do not enjoy the same privileges...Sons were at least morally bound to look after the parents. If they didn't, at least they can be dragged to the court for maintenance.

The following day is a Sunday. She has to do something.

That day she snuggled close to him and tried to sleep. Nightmares tormented her.

The next morning, she bathed him, helped him wear ironed clothes, fed him his favourite meal.

She went into the kitchen to fetch a glass of water. She then took a fistful of sleeping tablets and was about to drop them into the glass...how could she be doing this...she who never harmed anyone was about to kill her husband...how could she kill someone like this!

She felt numb...is this the only solution? Is there no other alternative? Does she have the right to end some one's life so cruelly? Why should she play 'God' with his life? Why should she bother how he would live after her death? Hasn't she looked after him well.

The cancer is in its advanced stage. Who will look after her when she gets bedridden... who will look after him after she is gone? Oh god! Spare even an enemy from such torture...

Tears welled in her eyes...no, she cannot kill her husband...let the destiny take its own course...who is she to turn against fate...She came to a conclusion and removed her hand from the glass...unbearable pain shot through her stomach and she clenched her teeth. The tablets fell into the glass.

There was a sound from Shivram's room. A cry for water...like a desperate cry in the last moments of death...

Saree : A six yard unstitched cloth teamed with a blouse worn by Indian women .

Amma: Mother. Also used as a word of endearment or to refer to an elderly woman.

Sambhar: A soup made of lentils and vegetables with seasoning.