

Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

VOL: 9, No.: 2, AUTUMN 2019

SHORT FICTION

REFREED, INDEXED, BLIND PEER REVIEWED

About Us: <http://pintersociety.com/about/>

Editorial Board: <http://pintersociety.com/editorial-board/>

Submission Guidelines: <http://pintersociety.com/submission-guidelines/>

Call for Papers: <http://pintersociety.com/call-for-papers/>

All Open Access articles published by LLILJ are available online, with free access, under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial License as listed on

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Individual users are allowed non-commercial re-use, sharing and reproduction of the content in any medium, with proper citation of the original publication in LLILJ. For commercial re-use or republication permission, please contact

lapislazulijournal@gmail.com

JUST ONCESubhash Chandra

Mom and I finished our dinner, but dare not leave the dining table.

“Both of you are in a hurry to wolf food. But the least you can do is give me company,” Papa had said in a gruff voice a few days back. “I don’t like having meals without my family at the dining table.”

I had wanted to ask him how he could have his dinner at ‘somebody’s’ house without us. But the words rose from my throat, quivered on my lips and died.

One evening, he came home pretty late -- after 11:00 PM. As I got up to serve, he announced curtly, “No need. I’ve had dinner.”

An ominous silence sprawled on the table. Mom and I looked at him with a sense of foreboding.

“Maggie and I have decided to move in,” he continued.

“We’ve rented a house. You can keep this one,” he said, casting a magnanimous glance at us.

Mom and I had suspected it for some time. He’d get cross with mother over trifles. He’d scold me for lack of manners if, while laying the table, I placed the plate before mother first.

“You don’t know the basic courtesies.”

If I didn’t wear a smile, while opening the door for him, he would call me ungrateful.

“It doesn’t cost you to make me feel welcome, when I get back home after the day’s hard work.”

What about his disappearance from home for days without explanation? The words again expired on my lips, which had turned a graveyard.

Mom’s head drooped. After he settled on a sofa chair, and flicked the television on, she murmured softly – *I am no longer young ... and pretty.*

Why do even middle aged men want younger and fuller bodies? They are beasts! I felt revolted by father. In fact, by all men!

The next morning, he put a few things in the boot of the car and drove away without as much as a glance at us. We had ceased to exist for him.

We took stock of the situation. Thank God, we had a roof over our heads. But we needed to survive. I had not yet completed graduation. It wasn’t easy to get a job without the degree.

Mom talked to the Matron whom we met at the Church every Sunday.

She used her influence and got me employed at the hospital as a Nursing Assistant. But actually I was an attendant, supposed to do all kinds of menial jobs like a peon does in an office. The salary was pittance. But it'd keep our body and soul together. We became more deferential to the Matron than to the priest at the Church.

Mom is a devout Christian, and took me to the Church on Sundays since I was a child. She'd make me read the Bible at home every evening.

"The Lord looks after his flock," she would tell me.

When I was growing up, Papa forbade me to mix with neighbourhood boys.

"They are all louts. They would put a baby inside your belly and you will be ruined."

Once in a while, he would rifle through my books to ensure that I was not reading the 'wrong' kind.

I was mild and shy by nature and obeyed my parents to a T. At the all-girls college, I had kept aloof and did not have any close friends. I lived in a bubble made up of the Church, the Bible and home. I knew nothing about the world.

#

And then this happened.

I was posted in the Maternity Ward, located in a different building at a distance of about a kilometre from the main building. The Matron came there every day to check things and spent a couple of hours. One day she summoned me to her cabin.

"How's our little angel this morning?" she asked.

Since childhood, I had looked at the Nurses as angels. The Matron was an archangel for me. But for her we would have starved.

At the age of ten I was in a hospital for tonsillitis surgery. I adored the Nurses going about in their spotless, white dress, with a crown-like head-gear, tending on the sick and giving them moral support with kind, smiling words: *You will get well soon; or will you remember me when you have gone home?*

The Matron kept smiling for a few seconds and then said in a gentle voice, "You're one of God's chosen few."

I wondered why she said that.

"Jisha, you've got a chance to do good. If you lose it you'd regret all your life. Remember, you are a Nurse."

I was not. I was not given even the Nurse's uniform.

"It's our moral duty to help a patient. If we can't cure him, we can sure lessen his pain."

She mumbled a prayer and crossed herself.

Then she came to the point. My jaw dropped.

But fornication is mortal sin according to the Bible, I thought.

“It would be just once,” she continued.

But it’d be a sin nonetheless.

She went on to pile up more arguments. “Remember my child what Jesus said in the Bible, ‘Go out and live and love everyone,’” she said and again mumbled and crossed herself.

But there was no such line from the Lord in the Bible which I knew by heart.

What the Matron suggested didn’t sound right. There was something slimy about it.

#

At night I lay awake until late, thinking about it.

As a young girl, after the Sermon, I’d wander around the Church when mother talked to some of the regulars. The walls were adorned with framed pictures: Jesus sitting with a small girl on his knees – *I thought it was me* -- with three children in front of him and smiling; Jesus walking holding the hand of a little kid – *I was the one holding His hand*; Jesus walking up the slope, bearing the Cross and finally, He himself on the Cross, hands and feet nailed and bloodied. I’d invariably cry when I came to this painting.

“Why do you cry, Jisha? He sacrificed Himself for us all, to redeem our sins,” Mom would say.

Perhaps, the Matron was right. In her long career, she had seen much suffering, pain, teetering hope... and death. Perhaps, her advice came from a kind heart. But still I could not wish away the bizarreness of the suggestion.

I knew mother could not be trusted. So, I thought it best to confide in my friend and confidante, Elena. She was the senior most among the staff, but did not talk to me condescendingly despite my lower status. She was the one who had made me feel at ease when I joined. Soon we became close friends and I had shared with her my family story.

She had exclaimed, “You know Jisha, all men are dirty pigs.”

She told me about her life; it was startlingly similar to mine.

When I told Elena about the Matron’s suggestion, she grew red in the face with anger. “So, now it is you.”

I looked at her uncomprehending.

“She is a bloody fake! She was a nymphomaniac in her youth. She seduced young people who stayed with their patients as attendants. She was reasonably pretty. So most of them fell for her and looked forward to the nights with her. She did not spare patients either.”

“Oh!”

“And she is crafty as fox. You know what prayer she mouths silently? She apologises to the Lord for her sins and pleads for forgiveness?”

“But then why is she pressuring me to sleep with that patient.”

“To increase the tribe of sinners, so that she would not feel she is the only one. She has done that with two other girls. She tried that with me, too, when I had just joined. But I ticked her off. She hates my guts but I scare the lights out of her. She remains distant and formal with me, but never dares to harass me. ”

“Who are those girls?”

“They left soon after.”

“Oh!”

“Shout into her good ear to go to hell to which she would be consigned eventually, anyway.”

“Good ear?”

“She is nearly deaf in the left one,” Elena explained.

#

“I am sorry Matron, I won’t be able to do it.”

“It’s up to you, child.”

She was no longer insistent and did not talk about it again. Then I was transferred to the General Wing in the main building. Here, I witnessed agony and suffering in the raw, day in and day out. The groans, the lightless eyes of the patients scorched me.

In a couple of days, I knew who the patient was. Whenever I went to check his pulse, temperature etc., he looked at me with eyes that I could read. All girls can decode the male gaze. He was in his late twenties and looked vulnerable and fragile. Pity choked my bosom. He behaved in a most gentlemanly fashion. Wished me good morning, and when I finished making notes in the chart for the doctors, he smiled his thanks weakly.

In a week’s time, something happened that shook me to the core. I witnessed death for the first time since I had joined. In the Maternity Ward I had seen only life coming into being. Here I saw life wilt, wither and finish.

A patient had suddenly begun to gasp and gurgle. His face was contorted from pain. I quickly wheeled an oxygen cylinder to his bed, put the mask on his face and called the doctor. Even as the doctor was trying to save him, he went limp. He was a case of terminal cancer.

Lying in bed at night, I felt deeply troubled. The scared eyes and twisted face of the dying patient haunted me for days. I kept thinking of death and the ephemerality of life; I thought of the young patient who desired me.

I was the chosen one - The child on Christ's lap.

I went to the Matron the next morning.

“Yes, Jisha.”

“But he has AIDS, Matron.”

A mild smile flickered around her mouth.

“So what? You can ask him to take precautions. The hospital has a vending machine. Take out one and give it to him.”

I asked her how he could think of such things with death looming on him.

“The libido does not die till the brain is dead. You will be rewarded by Jesus for fulfilling a dying man's wish.”

#

“Oh *no!* What have you done, you fool? Knowing he has full blown AIDS, you went ahead.”

“But I took precautions.”

“Did he kiss you?”

“Yes.”

“Wetly?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes dilated and she shook her head repeatedly. Why did you have to go and do this? I had told you to give an emphatic NO to the witch. ”

“She did not pressure me.”

“Then?”

“I did it of my own accord. I could not stand the fire of longing in his eyes every time I went near his bed.”

But Elena kept shaking her head.

“I had witnessed a patient dying,” I added.

“What has that got to do with your act?”

“I ... well ... made the young man's death easy. He may not have much time left.”

“Well, I hope, all would be well.”

#

After a month I got myself tested for HIV.

The report was negative.

“Now is everything okay?”

“Yes,” Elena said in an anorexic tone.

#

I was confident nothing would happen to me. I had walked in His footsteps.

About eight months passed. I went about my work with alacrity and bouncing energy. But Elena continued to look lugubrious whenever I ran into her.

One morning, on getting up I felt tired and sapped. I did not feel like going to the hospital. But I did.

At the hospital the whole day, I dragged myself about. In fifteen days, I caught a cold that would not respond to treatment. Soon chest congestion and fever followed.

Elena stopped hiding her fears and got me tested again.

The report was positive.

I was admitted to hospital.

Coincidentally, the bed I got was next to the young man's who had died. Now there was a middle aged man on that bed. Sometimes, our gaze met, but he had no interest in talking to me.

#

Elena is looking after me. She tells me, it can be controlled in my case.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Every morning she comes to check my parameters and repeats the assurance. I believe her. I believe in miracles.

The Matron was sure I'd come to no harm. But at times doubt shoved my faith aside and I detested her.

It has been a month.

I am feeling better today; I am going to be fine... Yesss...

BIO-NOTE

Dr. Subhash Chandra retired as Associate Professor of English from Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi. He has published four critical books and several research articles. He has also published short stories in Indian and Foreign journals. His maiden collection of short stories titled “Not Just Another Story” was published by LiFi books in early 2017. His second collection of short stories appeared in 2018, titled “Beyond the Canopy of Icicles” by Authorspress. He is on the advisory board of the e-journal, “Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific” (ANU, Canberra).

Email id.: sub_chandra@rediffmail.com

