

SHOROLIPI

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Lipi was convinced: no number of adjectives would describe her pain. The term "pain" itself seemed unqualified to describe her agony. With one eye swollen shut, and her body writhing in pain, she was struggling to find her way back home. In fact, Lipi would've walked straight ahead if her sister-in-law, Mouri, hadn't been waiting at the mouth of the road leading to their abode.

"Where were you? Abed already went looking for you twice. TWICE. AND WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR EYE? OI, WHAT HAPPENED?" Mouri's voice amplified after every syllable until Lipi was sure everyone from all four corners of the village could hear them. The annoyance in her face was as visible as the strength of her grip on Lipi's arm.

Couldn't Mouri understand her plight just this once? Lipi was in pain. Did she have to grip her bruised arm tightly as she dragged Lipi home? She considered shaking her hand off and making a run for it, but kept acquiesce. She had no better alternative to get home, you see.

Amma will be gentler, she will tend to my wounds and scold this wretched woman for handling my fragile body like this. Ouch. Stop, stop. STOP!

The last word she screamed out, stupefying them on the spot. The two of them were now in their courtyard. And Mouri had her sulphurous gaze pinned at the nuisance at hand.

"What? What?! Why are you screaming? Do you have any idea what you've—"

"Bring her here right away."

Lipi had her back to the owner of the voice but turned towards it even before the third word was pronounced. Alarmed by the commotion outside, Lipi's mother, Jahanara, had sprinted out of the sitting room.

Amma.

Amma will teach this Mouri a lesson. She will take care of my wounds.

Jahanara had on one of her "special occasion" sarees. Lipi loved that particular saree, it resembled the polka dot one Suchitra Sen wore in Agni Pariksha.

Were we supposed to go somewhere?

Her eyes widened by a quarter of a fraction as she registered Lipi's current state. Lipi wanted to run into her mother's arms but Mouri's grip was still steel-bound.

"I was just going to wash her up before taking her in," replied Mouri.

Where?

"There's no time. They plan on returning by sunset," informed Jahanara.

Till what? Who?

"Come here, Lipi."

Mouri loosened her grip and Lipi dashed into her mother's arms.

"What have you done to yourself?" Jahanara looked Lipi up and down before smoothing out her hair with her bare hands.

"Some people have come to meet you. You don't need to say much. Just smile and greet them."

"Who?"

Jahanara doesn't answer. Instead, she stands behind Lipi, putting both her hands on her shoulders and ushering her into the sitting room.

Lipi was perplexed beyond reach. The phonograph at the corner of the room played the Hemanta Mukherjee record

The guests' reactions were quite different, of course. In front of them stood a filthy stripling with only one eye.

"What's wrong with her? Why does she look so... ugly?" the woman asked smugly.

Ugly?

The woman's remarks snapped Lipi back to reality.

"I'm not ugly. It was those damn bees."

The woman was amused by her insolence. Jahanara pinched her shoulder.

"Ow!"

Lipi was visibly startled by Jahanara's action.

"Very well. What's your name, then?"



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

that Kalam, Lipi's brother, saved for very special occasions. That alone would've been enough to catch Lipi on to the fact that something was off. Alas, she was too distracted by the burning hellfire on her body.

Listening to it were two bodies Lipi had never seen before. One man and one woman. The man, unremarkable; but the woman. The woman had Lipi's full attention. Her royal blue silk saree put Amma's outfit to grave shame. She had so many gold ornaments on her that her neck and wrists were practically invisible. Forget Suchitra Sen, this woman right here was the real deal.

"Lipi Meher Khatun. Who are you?"

"You'll know soon enough." The impolite lady now turned to Jahanara, "Show me her hands and feet."

Hands and feet?

Jahanara obeyed and raised Lipi's hands, followed by the sleeves of her pyjamas.

What is she doing?

"Now, walk."

Getting chased and bitten by bees is nothing compared to the ache of dealing with this woman. Who does she think she is, a thakurain?

"To where?"

"Just around this room."

"Why?"

"Because she said so," interjected Jahanara, before pushing her further inside the compartment.

Lipi was furious. Who was this woman to boss her around? And why was Amma behaving like this? No, no, no. I am no circus animal.

Lipi did not move.

"Arre, walk. WALK! She's never this disobedient, I swear on the heavens. I don't know what's gotten into her. ARRE!"

SMACK.

Hot, angry tears rushed out of Lipi's eyes.

"No, it's okay. Don't hit her. We've seen enough. She's gritty. Delowar will like her. Consider this marriage finalised."

The man had finally spoken.

"I heard they own a boat."

"Yes, and?"

"You're going to a household that has its own boat, pagli. You should be brimming with joy."

Joy? Did Mitali just suggest Lipi be overjoyed at having to leave her little life, here, at home?

"Great, I'll just trade your family for a boat, then. That'll give you something to be joyous about."

Lipi yanks her poorly-oiled hair out of Mitali's hands and stands to leave the porch, where they sat just moments ago.

"Arre, wait. I'm not even done oiling your hair!" yells Mitali.

"Maybe if you had put your mind to that instead of spewing nonsense, you would've been done by yesterday!" Lipi yells back.

"Come back. What are you being so stubborn for? Everybody gets married some day or the other—"

"Lalalalalalala...," Lipi sticks her fingers into her ears, essentially blocking out all the noise her voice couldn't. She then turns to run out of the house, convinced that one more word from Mitali will wipe her out completely.

Lipi runs and runs, determined to get as far away from where she started as possible. She could feel all her pain infuse into her tears and stream violently down her face, subsiding that sunken feeling in her chest.

There is no point in staying for you, Amma. You didn't think twice before deciding to give me away. You only think of me as a burden. You'll understand my worth when I'm gone. Farewell.

The writer runs every day. Out of time, ramen and K-drama episodes. Send her an email at n.nusaibaah@gmail.com to join her on this rigorous workout.