



SHALINI

- A Short Story



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Shalini and Vaijanath became untouchables suddenly for her family. Shalini fell in love with an already married Vaijanath who had a child from his first wife. What did she see in him to go with him into a secret marriage? For Vaijanath, it was Shalini's dusky beauty and her education that worked as attraction and to add to it we may reckon his not so happy first marriage.

He would do small paintings. This could be the draw for her as she had an aesthetic eye for art. They got married. Vaijanath took Shalu, which was how he called her, to a city near his village. They decided to carry forth their life journey by settling in the city of Latur. It's a mid-sized city in the state of Maharashtra. Shalini had no complaints about her marriage and relations with Vaijanath. But of course, she had complaints about her family. They didn't invite her after her marriage to Vaijanath to any of their family gatherings or functions. She became non-existent for them. Shalu's brother had warned all the family members, her other sisters, not to have any connections with her. They were affluent high caste people in the village. They blamed Shalu for bringing a stigma to the family.

Here in the city, Vaijanath comforted Shalu and became a pillar of strength for her. At times Shalu would feel nostalgic and wish to see her mother back in the village. Vaijanath kept telling her that no one from her family wanted to meet her. He further told her that they didn't even want to see her face. The story of this hatred wasn't all gloomy in Shalu's family. Her mother was craving to see her daughter coming back to her, but couldn't open her mouth as she knew how her desire of seeing her run-away daughter would end up. Poor mother!

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She kept looking at Shalu's childhood photos all her life. When she died, she died calling her name. Shalu wasn't informed of her death. Later when Shalu got to know this, she cried relentlessly. She felt about it and suffered all this.

Vaijanth kept going to the village on the weekends. He would spend two, three days, sometimes even more if required in the village. He was taking care of his first family. In the course of time he had two more children from his first wife. For some reason Vaijanath couldn't get along well with her. But the big thing was they were still together. Here in the city Shalu gave birth to a son. They named him Ravi. He was everything for Shalu. She played, danced, laughed, cried with him. For her he was the world apart from Vaijanath. The only relative she had outside her own family. Ravi was reared passionately by her. She would tell him many stories from Hindu mythologies, the stories from the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. Vaijanath's ancestors were Shaivas. They worshipped Lord Shiva. Hence Shalu and Ravi followed that mode of belief.

As years passed, Ravi grew up into a tall and bearded man with average looks. He couldn't do well in school. Despite Shalu's continual supervision and guidance he grew negative about education. Studies never interested him. He was more active outside school but for all the wrong reasons. As he reached 9th he started smoking with his friends, he was found near the Pan thelas quite often smoking and chewing tobacco. He thought doing those things was something manly. When Shalu got a whiff of it she beat him hard once. She even told Vaijanath and consequently he too beat him with a cane. Now the occasional beating and scolding had zero effect on Ravi for he was totally transformed into a brat. Shalu blamed it on the wrong company of friends he moved with and also partially on the locality they lived in. Both Shalu and Vaijanath tightened their grip on Ravi. Vaijanth accompanied him to school and also received him at school and brought him home escorted. That became a routine for quite some days which was against Ravi's liking. He didn't like being controlled this way. He sometimes thought to himself that he became a prisoner in his dwelling. He saw his father and mother as jailers. He even imagined them to be ring masters prodding the animal which he thought, he himself was, to act to their wishes. Despite her repeated attempts, Shalu couldn't straighten up Ravi, nor did Ravi care for her emotional appeals. Slowly and steadily he turned into a misguided youth. To add to the worries of his mother, he failed miserably in the 10th grade exams. That sealed his fate to become a man of high standing in the society. Much to Shalu's woes, her husband didn't want Ravi now to continue his studies any further. Vaijanath was reasonable enough to stop Ravi from pursuing studies. He wanted a helping hand in his business of painting. So he thought Ravi could do that and moreover he would remain in his supervision all the time at work. It was a win-win situation.



Shalu dreamed of her son holding a top civil job. Her dreams met no happy end, they burnt like a dim flicker of a candle reaching its end.

It was a huge emotional loss for her. She was moderately educated, hence expected her son to be more educated than her and earn a good living for them. A typical lower middle class parental expectation she had. Ravi started going with his father on the sites. He started liking his new job. He proved a real help to his father. Shalu came to terms with Ravi's new lease of life. She coaxed herself in believing that anyhow her son was helping earn money and had steadied himself up. Mother's heart blooms when she sees her child doing well whatever the field is. When there was no work, Ravi would go with his friends to cinema. Sometimes would go play cricket. After a year or two passed, Ravi now had bloomed into adolescence. He started watching adult films. His visits to Pan-theatres were even more frequented. He was smoking openly without anyone's fear. His logic was, "now I earn money, so nobody can object to this". Yet he feared his father. He would watch the late night cinemas, drink with his friends. To cover up his misconduct, he started inventing lies to tell his parents. His lies were many, for instance, friend's invitation to be with him as his parents were away, function at friend's home, stayed with a friend in hospital attending to his sick mother, etc. He became adept in the art of lying. Gradually Shalini and Vaijanath discovered Ravi's habits and lies.

Shalini often demanded of Vaijanath an equal division of property among his two sons. Ravi had an elder step brother and two sisters. But Vaijanath was scared of his first wife and his elder son. He often told Shalini that Ravi would only get the house which Vaijanath had built up in the city. Not more than that. Vaijanath had some 10 acres of farm in the village. As per the law Ravi should get his share in the farm, but Vaijanath always negated that idea. Shalini was let down by her husband thus. Ravi's now twenty-five and an arrogant individual, that's how his impression was formed in his locality. But he loved his mother, he was polite to her and his father. He resorted to drinking. It became a routine for him. He changed his profession from painting to driving. He had become a personal driver for an officer's family in his neighbourhood. He was disciplined in the job he was doing, but that discipline would go away as soon as he was off duty. He even tried his hand at gambling to make a killing. His father, an ageing man was unable to keep control over him. He gave up on him which made Shalu more anxious about her son's future. She heavily adjusted herself to Ravi's whims yet loved him more and more. She would wait for him when he was away with his boss. She wouldn't eat her dinners until he returned home. The mother and son would converse over dinners. That was the only time Shalu could talk to Ravi, express her anxieties about him, and warn him of wrong doings, show care and love for him. Ravi was oblivious to her powerful affections, nonetheless he loved her.

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Ravi's marriage took place. Manisha came into his life. Marriage brought some rhythm in his otherwise wayward life. It changed him into a family man. He started coming home early, taking interest in family matters. A baby girl was born in a year. She took after Shalini. People said she was a spitting image of her. Now Ravi was getting serious about his family's future. Vaijanath handed him powers of the family and retired from his work. Ravi became the head of his family. He had to take care of four lives. His driver's job wasn't enough to run the family. Shalini proved a help, she took up a small job to supplement family income. She along with Manisha, started making pappad for a food factory. It was a home job, hence was easy for Shalini. After two years of marriage, Manisha had some sort of mental disorder. She had that from her childhood and that was later revealed. But Ravi's in-laws didn't disclose it at the time of marriage.

Manisha would lose her cool, suddenly would become violent, she wouldn't feed her child at times, would sit for hours passively staring at some object. This became quite a routine in the days to come. Ravi took her to many psychiatrists in the city. But her mental health went into tizzy once or twice in a month regularly. The medicines from the local doctor weren't yielding good results. A big part of Ravi's earnings was spent on her treatment. But to his disappointment she wasn't recovering. The subsequent frustration sent Ravi into the old habit of drinking. He started borrowing money from money lenders. Shalini was so pained with all that was happening to her son. But she put up a happy face and encouraged her son. She kept telling him things would get better. Shalini was a Shiva devotee and very religious. In her prayers she wanted nothing but a happy life for her son. On the contrary Ravi's life was in doldrums. Her heart was crying inside for her son's plight. Ravi was going under heavy debts day by day. His wife's treatment was costing him a fortune now which he didn't have. To add to his injury, Vaijanath turned a diabetic and his regular check-ups and medicines also took a heavy toll on his meager income. The result was more and more borrowings from people. He lied to many people to borrow money. The money lenders started queuing up outside his house to get their money back. Shalini sold her jewelry to return some of the debts. Ravi's relations with Manisha turned a total discord gradually. Some women in the area told him his wife was feigning her madness to sit and relax and to escape the house work. Other women in the neighborhood gossiped that Shalini's high handedness towards Manisha drove her mad. But nothing of that was true. He sometimes beat her heavily, as a result she would fall unconscious and behave erratically after she gained consciousness. Shalini became a mute witness to the frequent occurrences of this kind. She saw her son's life slipping away slowly. Her prayers had more complaints than compassion to God.

Ravi's troubles were not leaving him. They courted him, followed him. Now it was Shalini's turn. She fell sick and was unable to recover for many days. She wasn't well for a long time, but she didn't reveal her ill health to Ravi. She knew how much he was struggling financially.

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Her illness grew inside her and burst out one day. She was on and off the bed. It had become chronic. All the three members of the family needed hospital treatments regularly. This broke Ravi. He had to take care of his two daughters along with them. The second daughter was born amidst all the turmoil. Their upbringing, education, needed money. Ravi's life turned from bad to miserable. He started drinking uncontrollably to escape his predicament. But of no use, he was drowning in debts. Soon the family discovered that Shalini had developed blood cancer. The cancer was in its last stage and her health was irrecoverable, the doctor said. That night Ravi cried like a child on his mother's shoulder. The news totally shattered the whole family. Vaijanath who appeared to be stoic and courageous so far was moved to tears. They all knew Shalini had little time left. For days everything in the house looked so somber and parched. Ravi wasn't eating well, he would mostly stay outside drinking. Manisha too was not her sane self. The children weren't looked after carefully. They were missing school for a number of days. Shalini was watching all this with her sunken, pale eyes. She rose to the occasion and once again put up a happy face. One day she declared to them she was not going to die soon. Her Lord would wither away her monstrous sickness. That filled everyone with some hope.

Shalini knew inside that she was not going to make it. Her time was up and anytime she would merge into the divine. But with her open eyes she couldn't see her family disintegrating into nothingness. The struggle she made right from her marriage to Vaijanath, her many ups and downs throughout, all that was coming to such an undesired end. She couldn't accept it. She, with her dying body, stood by Ravi to encourage him, to catapult him again on a steady track of life. Ravi went to the extreme south of India to bring herbal medicines for Shalu. He went every month borrowing money from people. His debt was rising ever higher. Nonetheless he had a hope that his mother would recover due to the herbal medicines. Six months passed, the day had come. Shalini was bed ridden. For ten days she lay in bed, she wasn't eating all the while. She only took coconut water thrice a day. The light in her eyes was fading fast. Her lips were dry and her skin looked dead. She lost her hair. She looked lifeless and very thin. The bangles on her wrists were slipping off easily. She was mustering strength to speak. On the last day, she called everyone near, tried to speak in her feeble, shaky voice. She looked at Vaijanath and with her eyes told him to take care of Ravi. Then she looked at her granddaughters, gave a long stare at Ravi and left the world with her eyes fixed on her beloved son. She died in the afternoon that day. All hugged her body and cried frantically. Ravi's condition was worse. He lost the life-tree which ever tried to save him from many harsh summers and rough winters of life. He was thus devastated for he loved his mother the most. For days he mourned her death. He went away undeclared and returned after a fortnight.

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Vaijanth died after a year. His elder son took his dead body from the city and cremated him in the village. Ravi was a pariah at his father's funeral. He was an unwelcome guest in the village. Neither his mother's nor his father's first family had anything to do with him. Losing both parents brought in a total havoc in his emotional state of mind. He was deeply attached to his mother and father. His mother's death he couldn't forgo. To forget his great despair he turned into a complete drunkard. He stopped working, consequently his boss fired him. The family lost monetary support. Manisha went to her mother with her kids leaving Ravi alone at home. She started getting mental fits frequently thereafter. Ravi had no money for her treatment. And amidst all the family chaos she conceived for the third time. A new life was sprouting inside her womb when her own was at stake. She stayed a long time with her parents and came back to Ravi with a baby boy. She came in the hope that Ravi for the sake of his children at least would become normal. She hoped that things would get better with passing of time. But she was wrong. Ravi's drinking habit was ruining his life. His children would eat whatever was available at home. They looked weak and famished always. Manisha was unable to put up with the situation anymore. There were often fights between them. Ravi somehow got back to work. He wanted to repay his debts. He didn't want to bring stigma to his dead parents. He was trying hard to return his debts, but that wasn't an easy task. His debt grew very high with interest. Money lenders were torturing him now and then for their money, there was nothing valuable in the house which could save Ravi from constant harassment. There was only one thing, the house itself. The toll of all the sufferings took away one more life, this time it was Manisha. Unable to bear the discord and her mental disorder, she self-immolated herself. She burnt heavily all over. The flames made deep holes in her body and laid open her bones. She died in the government hospital.

Ravi's children were taken off by his in laws. What had life made out of him? He goes to work every day and returns home to meet the emptiness of the house. He sits back leaning against the wall sometimes, stares at the photo frame of his mother on the wall. He sleeps empty stomached sometimes, looks at the sky continuously at night as if trying to find Shalini's face among the stars.