

'Call No Man Happy....'

- N D Dani

She lost her husband when she was probably not more than twenty five. The drink-addicted man beat her frequently but depended on his wife to run the household which gradually swelled to six. All the children were girls, begotten by the drunkard husband in the elusive hope of having a male heir. When she took up work at our house as a washerwoman, her youngest daughter was two years old. We didn't have a washing machine then or probably being old-fashioned didn't want to have one with my wife's strange notions about the washing machine ruining the clothes by being treated in a machine. Neelam was a quick worker more in the sense of being a worker who believes in disposing of her work in a jiffy than in the positive sense. Perhaps she did this because she had to wash clothes at several houses to take care of her four daughters and the alcoholic husband. We were not too happy with the quality of her work but let her continue because nobody else, so honest and regular, was available. My wife continued to complain and Neelam continued to wash our clothes. She lost her alcoholic husband while she was in our employ. Commiseration was the spontaneous response. When she recovered from the shock of the loss, she resumed her work. We decided to do a little more than merely to commiserate. My wife encouraged Neelam to open a savings bank account in the State Bank of India in the Godavarinagar branch. At the end of the year she had collected enough money in her savings account to start a Fixed Deposit in her name. The amount kept growing and we hoped that it would be of great help to her in settling her daughters' weddings. In the meantime, she got her daughters admitted to a local Hindi medium school. One day I discovered the motivation behind her sacrifice to give her daughters education. I saw her trying to write the letters of her name on the floor in water. She had managed to learn how to scribble the three letters in her name in Hindi and when I caught her scribbling her name on the floor in the laundry water, I was struck with this poor, illiterate widow's desire to have education. Seeing me see her write her name in water, she blushed and wiped out the letters with a wave of her hand over the floor water. Parents try to realize their dreams in their children. All parents, I should like to believe, have this desire though their dreams may take different forms depending upon what they had missed out in their lives. This woman had not seen the inside of a school so she sent all of her four daughters, yes all of them, one after the other to school. Pooja and Mamta, the two elder ones were only two-years apart from each other and went to the same school while the third and the fourth ones, being very small, followed suit after a few years. The girls worked in the homes and went to school. They did better than many of their better off classmates. Neelam managed to get a one-room

house under an LDA (Lucknow Development Authority) scheme meant for the very poor. We were happy that her life was changing for the better. We hoped that her daughters would compensate for her losses. Mamta and Pooja, were found qualified, on the basis of their marks in the Intermediate results, to win laptops from the State government under the free laptop distribution scheme meant to lure the young voters. Mamta and Pooja gave severe heartburns to several girls and boys because they had two laptops free. Pooja, in the meantime, had completed her B.Com. from a very good girls' College in the City. Pooja was on her way to completing her B.A.. The two other daughters were still in the school. As for Neelam, who had lost her husband in her twenties, we didn't get to hear of any liaisons about her. She may have had a fling or two. Not very unusual at her age. But no live-in relationships or marriage although anyone would have gladly agreed to marriage, given her age and her looks and complexion. Yes, her daughters – four daughters – must have discouraged every wooer. She decided to give her life to bring up and educate her four daughters. She behaved like a most responsible parent. Her husband drank to excess; she had never touched a drop of alcohol. Finally, my wife decided to buy an automatic LG washing machine and that meant the end of Neelam's employment in our household. She kept in touch, though. The girls, particularly, Mamta and Pooja inherited the features of their mother. Neelam had told Mrs Mehrotra where her eldest daughter now worked as a maid-cum-cook-cum-waiter that she had offers of marriage for both the girls. Mamta's betrothed was working in a big local jeweller's shop and Pooja had been okayed by the mother of a young man, from her caste, working as a peon in the Vidhan Sabha Secretariat. We were happy that finally this courageous woman had won the day. This woman has not seen the play 'Vagina Monologues'. She had never sat on any Committees meant to listen to suffering women's tales. She had not bared her body and walked on the road in birthday suit to assert her feminine rights to the patriarchal world. She had not read Simone de Beauvoir. Nor had she seen the books of Betty Friedan or Germaine Greer. She had not burnt her bras; nor had she got her uterus removed surgically. In fact, four children – four daughters – had taken birth in her uterus. She has never been photographed by any English language magazine and never has her picture adorned the front cover page of any hip, glossy magazine. She is one of the thousands, nay lakhs of women, who are furrowing their lonely, unsupported plough in this otherwise not a very supportive world. The Greeks cautioned against hubris. They warned that hubris could lead to tragedy. This woman – Neelam – was a picture of soft-spokenness and silent service. If she had anything it was perseverance and defiance to her own suffering. But tragedy did strike. Pooja complained of low backache. Neelam took her to the local quack in her locality. He gave her some pain reliever. The pain disappeared only to appear again. This time the painkillers didn't work. She took him to Dr Chhabaria, the best neuro-surgeon in the city. Dr Chhabaria prescribed some tests and asked Neelam to have biopsy report. His suspicion was confirmed. Pooja was in

an advanced state of cancer of the lower region of the spinal cord. He advised her to take her daughter to the KG Universities' Cancer ward and gave her a letter for Dr Sinha. Neelam took Pooja for chemotherapy periodically in a hired to and fro auto. The treatment went on for six months. All her money saved by living a simple and hard life evaporated. Her Fixed Deposit in the State Bank of India had to be prematurely closed to arrange money for the expensive treatment of her dear eldest daughter Pooja. Last I heard of Pooja's disease, I learnt from Mrs Mehrotra that she was confined to bed as the lower half of her body was paralyzed. Her wedding is now an impossibility although her might-have-been in-laws have visited her several times since she was discovered with third degree malignancy of the spinal cord. Fate has struck. Fate has struck this indomitable woman – Neelam – most cruelly. Renaissance, which was in fact an imported idea from the ancient Greece, emphasized character being destiny and as pointed out above, cautioned against excesses, all kinds of excesses. Greeks had written at the entrance to the temple of Apollo in Delphi the following words in Greek: "Nothing in Excess." The Greeks understood that being human, human beings ought to follow the golden mean and not indulge because indulgence invites suffering. But where was anything in excess in the Neelam household. She and her daughters worked in others' houses to make both ends meet. Still tragedy struck. I remember having read Sophocles' 'Oedipus the Rex' many years ago and was appalled by the gravity of the last words of this great play: "*Call no man happy until he is dead*". These words now came to my mind with a shock that has taken away from me, for the time being, the power to think, to explain the existence of suffering and sorrow in this world.

When I read out this narrative to my friend Dr Sujaan and told him that I wanted to send it for publication, this is what he said, "Dani, you are a fool." I didn't say anything. I only gave him a quizzical look. He continued, "So many people die every day. Does anyone lose their sleep over them? My boy, this is karma. Your washerwoman – what did you say is her name? – (I supplied the name again) must have done evil deeds in her previous births. She and her daughter are paying for their misdeeds done in their previous births. Eat, drink and be merry. Bhai, my motto of life is summed up in these words. I don't waste my sentiments for these people. After all, who are these poor people? Scum of the earth. They breed like vermin. They deserve elimination. You think you have written a genuine feminist short story? Get out of this complex fast. People these days are interested in things like 'Vagina Monologues' and Shobha De kind of stuff. Come, come, forget your washerwoman and her sick daughter."

When I ran into Dr Sujaan after a fortnight, I thought it fit to tell him the truth," Sorry, yaar, I didn't accept your advice about that short story of mine. I sent it for publication.

