

Finalist, Fiction

A Stringless Violin

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Emptiness spreads. He sits on a wooden silence. She lies on a damp mat.

Nimisha', they called her. She looked fair in her layette. She was a moon. Kovilan and Kotha were in the moonlight then.

Kovilan belongs to a rare class that of the coconut palm climber. Coconut grove owners have to wait for weeks to get him.

“He is not here”, Kotha says, when the truth struggles in her mouth.

The messenger boy from the land owner goes back in despair. There is no software to read and write in her brain. But we read practical wisdom on her monitor.

Kovilan's palms were transformed into a bowl. He took the grey soil and poured it into the pit. Neighbours and relatives also made contributions of soil. A small mound of sand appeared amid the crowd. A twig cut from a henna plant was planted to mark the head, and another the legs. Holy showers washed the mound.

“Wake up, Koviletta. Wake up, please”.

Kotha's words clanked near his head. It was early morning, a time when the warm rays were kissing the soft dawn under the dew drops.

“What happened?”

“Nimisha is crying. She didn't sleep at all last night. Do you know that? You always sleep like a buffalo”.

Kotha's feeling was an amalgam of grief and anger.

“What's the matter?”

“She has pain in her legs. Fever also. She says her legs are losing their strength.”

They set off. The doctor was in the city. Many pale looking figures sat scattered before his door.

“Rupees fifty or hundred?” They were in confusion about the doctor’s fee.

“Apply an ointment on the legs sparingly. Take these pills after food. Everything will be all right”, the doctor prescribed.

They paid him a hundred rupees.

An owner of a coconut grove, which was near the Kanoli canal, an old canal built by the British, stood holding an umbrella against the sun. Kotha and two other village women got ready to pick up the falling coconuts and carry them in big bamboo baskets. Kovilan climbed up the coconut palms one after another. He worked his fingers to the bone. His calloused legs were kept within a ring rope, which was like his life. His intuition checked the ripeness of the coconuts. He cracked jokes from the coconut palm top. Some of his jokes made the women blush.

The moon was hiding behind the clouds. Polio plucked the strings that moved Nimisha’s legs. Now her legs rested as a stringless violin. She grew along with her mother’s tension and her father’s anxiety.

Kovilan usually climbed upon Today, never upon Yesterday or Tomorrow. His days were green and yellow like the coconut palm leaves. His ways were hackneyed.

Nimisha could not climb upon life. Kovilan cogitated about his daughter.

Local children watched Nimisha, who sat on a wheel-chair in the yard. They smiled at her. But it was unwise to take her with them. Legs were important in their games. Polio had burst her bubble. A sad raga was played on the strings of her mind. Rain drizzled over the Kanoli Canal.

“Ma.....Rain.....Rain.....”

Kotha came out like lightning. She took Nimisha onto the veranda. Then she darted to the paddy farm in front of her thatched home, where she had laid mango peel to dry on an empty sack. She folded the sack, keeping the mango peel inside, and ran back into the kitchen.

Nimisha coughed.....coughed.....coughed.... She spat phlegm out. Her mother took some medicinal powder, made of herbs, and rubbed it on her daughter’s scalp.

“Don’t worry. It’s due to climate change”, the father consoled her.

Nimisha sat coughing in her wheel-chair on the veranda. A flock of local girls passed by, greeting her. She smiled at them- a sweet smile of innocence. But nobody took her to the rural shrine .She had put on a new frock. Like the butterflies on her dress, she too was unable to flit to the yard of the shrine. She blinked back her tears.

Ice-cream sellers flew by on bicycles, sounding horns on their way to the festival ground. A Tamil speaking woman who sold bangles followed them on foot, two big elephants moved dancing and clinking their chains, the mahouts holding poles and sticks accompanying them.....

Nimisha's eyes chased the sights.

She fell into a chasm of desolation. Cough waves shook her lungs. She didn't know that pneumonia was oppressing her soul. Her fingers moved in the rhythmic wind.

By twilight, the drum storm developed again. All the villagers were gathered in front of the shrine.

Few knew Nimisha swooned.

People returning from the festival ground heard about a bolt from the blue and stopped by Nimisha's house. The crowd thickened.

A wrinkled yellow man whispered, "Being holy, an apt day it is."

The wheel-chair withdrew into the dust.

In infinite emptiness, the parents know her truly.

The End