

A Different Kind Of Truth

One woman challenges a bad marriage and a heartless society, for the sake of her child and herself **By Chandrika R Krishnan**

Today is the most important day of my life – my daughter's graduation day. She's going to receive an award for being the best performer in her college, and I'm all dressed to act the part of the "proud parent". The ceremony began and the college principal (a man who my daughter deeply respects) started his speech. 'As you stand on the threshold of the real world, remember that for any change you'd like to bring in your life, be it in your career or your personal life, there will be people advising you against the action, particularly your family members. The decision you'll take will be yours to carry out. You have to remember that honesty, hard work and sincerity alone will take you places.'

I could hardly pay heed to his words after that. They sounded so true and yet so false. I sat detached, as my past flashed in front of my eyes and I was taken back to my youth, my marriage, and the time when I learnt that when the going gets tough, the only person who can help you was yourself.

I was short, dark and born under an inauspicious star. My parents found it difficult to find me a husband. I was the eldest and needed to get married soon to make way

for my younger sisters. My father was a government clerk and couldn't educate us beyond the 10th standard.

My dowry was fixed at ₹1 lakh to a man who was a government employee like my father. It was reduced from ₹1.75 lakhs after an uncle, who knew both families, intervened. In lieu of the reduced amount, my in-laws cut down their share of the gifts to the bride.

Once the marriage was solemnised, the in-laws' eternal demand for various items began. Initially, my mother-in-law berated me about how a neighbour's daughter had taken so many gifts for her in-laws or that another one's daughter-in-law had been gifted a car by her parents for her husband. Slowly, the demands became overt and she asked for a motorbike for her son to go to work. I was sent to my parents' house to collect money a number of times, but I was never able to ask my old, burdened parents to pay for such luxuries for my husband. My parents remained unaware of my turmoil. I used to come back empty-handed to my husband's home, and with every return, the tirade against me increased. I realised that my husband wanted me to service him and I tried to please him in every way possible, hoping that some day he would love me, and bring an end to the mental torture I was put through.

Eventually, small accidents started happening with me – the handle of a

hot kettle would suddenly come loose or I would slip on a loose tile on the stairs as I went to dry the family's laundry on the terrace. Soon enough, I was ordered to bring ₹1.5 lakhs for my sister-in-law's wedding.

'Oh, it's so good to see you,' my father said, when I got to my parents' place. 'Bina's marriage has been fixed. They haven't demanded dowry. I just need to perform a decent wedding.' I smiled but I was weeping inside. I went to the kitchen.

'Ma, all's not well at my place,' I began. 'Please help me cut this onion,' was her only reply. 'Ma, did you hear me? I can't go back without money. Please let me stay here and I'll work anywhere. I will be a maid, a baby-sitter, anything! Please don't send me to that house. They will kill me.'

'Don't be melodramatic Mina. I'm sure those were real accidents. You must have been careless. Moreover, what will Bina's in-laws say? They might break the marriage. You must go back and work on changing your husband and your in-laws' mindset.'

My father and siblings walked in and mistook my genuine tears for onion fumes. I turned to look at my mother and muttered, 'Ma, where do I go now?' Her shoulders slumped in defeat and she had no answer. I knew this was hard for her but she was in the clutches of an uncaring society and lacked the courage to go against it.

I bid goodbye to my family, kissed my sister and wished her all the happiness in life. All the time, my heart was crying for help. I couldn't go back to my husband's house. I walked towards a railway track. I knew that my end wouldn't affect my marital home, and my parents would deal with it. I was about to throw myself in front of the coming train when the edge of my saree got caught in a shrub on the side of the track. It was too late to take suicidal action, but soon enough to overcome my momentary insanity.

I realised that ending my life was only too easy; I needed to be selfish and live for myself. I would survive, learn to face the world and move on alone. I walked up to the train station and got into the next train that entered

lady of the house was sympathetic and took me to a hospital to abort the child, only to find that I was four months gone. The turmoil that I had undergone had made me miss out on the obvious signs. My employers' sympathy for the young, pregnant widow was much more than I could wish for. She helped me through my pregnancy and I dedicated my life to the household. Once in a while, I felt the qualm of cheating the nice woman about my marital status... She was so kind to me that one day, I confided in her.

When I told her about my past, my employer exclaimed, 'How dare you? If you can lie on such important things, I don't feel I can trust you anymore.' All my pleas for compassion fell on deaf ears. I paid the price of honesty. I

suffered in my life was made small as compared to this moment.

She began, 'I know that you are all waiting for a speech in which I'd thank my mother for all that she has done for me – but what she did for me was out of her sense of duty for having given birth to me.' Her opening remark was received by a stunned silence. Megha continued, 'I'm not going to talk about the struggle my mother and I underwent to reach this place in our lives. I'd rather dwell on the lessons we learnt on the journey. My best teacher is my mother. She taught me to believe in myself, have the courage to follow that belief and put in hard work to follow my dreams.'

She further continued, 'My mother taught me that it doesn't always pay to be honest, and that a little subterfuge is okay as long as it doesn't harm others.' With an apologetic glance at the principal, Megha said, 'She also taught me that hard work and sincerity alone doesn't take you places, you should also be a little self-centred. She taught me that nothing's a sacrifice till your conscience is clear.'

Megha smiled at my unabashed tears and said, 'My words go against all that we've been taught. We take pride in being honest and hardworking. If my mother had been sensitive to the needs of her family, maybe she wouldn't have been alive. If she hadn't resorted to a few lies, I wouldn't have been alive. We learnt the hard way that the world is a changing place and we need to alter our value system, while taking care that we don't hurt others or succeed at the cost of others. For all the lessons you taught me Ma, I am grateful. I had to be a little self-centred or I would not have got this.' Saying this, she held up her prize. She looked me in the eye and added, 'Thanks to you, I won't ever need to ask, "Ma, where do I go now?"' ■

Truth and values can be relative... A little subterfuge is okay if it doesn't harm anyone

the platform. I hid in the washrooms to avoid penalty for travelling without ticket, and reached a new city. I was penniless, homeless and had no one in the strange new place. I wasn't aware that there were NGOs that helped battered woman but I did know that a maid is much wanted in the upwardly-mobile, and well-to-do homes.

I pawned my mangalsutra to start out in the new city. I didn't place much emphasis on its sanctity. I went to big houses for employment as I needed accommodation to stay. I also learnt early on that people were sympathetic if they thought you were a young widow rather than a woman who had run away to save her skin. Soon, I found a house that boasted of maids' quarters, and I started working there.

My happiness wasn't long lived. Soon, I found myself pregnant. The

was once again without a job or a roof, but now I had another person to care for. However, having run away from home, and given birth to a child alone, I had the indeterminate strength of a mother. I'd do anything to give my daughter a happy childhood. I moved from one job to another, working hard, making sure that my daughter studied in a good school and went to college.

'Megha!' boomed the name on the microphone. I had almost missed the important moment in my reverie and was brought back to the present by the thundering applause. My daughter was being honoured for being the brightest student in her class. Tears stung my eyes when I saw her resplendent in the black robe, walking to the dais to get her award. She received the plaque and looked at me, and all the trouble and anguish I had