

SOLD

By

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The high sun above the sandy village gave my neck a beating. I lowered my eyes to avoid its harsh rays. I was walking to school. I had missed three days, but at least now I was going. I knew Didi Katie would say something about this. I knew how our awkward conversation would unfold when I walked into the room. She would grin her big white teeth at me and say, “We miss you, Sadhiri!” And I would find the courage to say, “My little sister was sick, and I was taking care of her, cooking the food, cleaning the house, and walking for water! What’s your distress?”

I reached the school. I won’t admit that I slowed my pace. The school was only a shabby hut made by a group of Americans who came and left in a hurry. I hardly remember their faces. But I’m sure they don’t remember ours either; however, pride was embedded in their memories.

There’s a sign across the exterior of the school. If we didn’t ask Didi Priya, we wouldn’t have known it said “the Kikusunhri Village School of Give Hope Ministry.”

I finally quit my stalling and entered the classroom. It was only a bit cooler than outside. The enormous white fans went to work, but after a while, they would only recirculate the hot air. Soon, the classroom would get hotter than outside.

Didi Katie had her back towards the entrance as she wrote the American alphabet on the chalkboard. I took my usual seat in the back where the Red Indian rug folded at the corner, revealing a soiled brown color. It matched the dark soil underneath. Didi Katie turned around, her blonde hair swaying with her, but her maroon scarf staying still. Her ice blue eyes searched the room. She found me. She always finds me

“Sadhiri, welcome back! We missed you.” She batted her eyelashes for something in return. Her body never got used to the Indian heat. She sweated through her maroon and gold

salwar; huge droplets of sweat fell down the side of her face. She ignored them. I guess there isn't any point to give thought to something that would only come back.

“Yes, Didi Katie,” I replied pathetically. I'll ask Didi Priya what does “welcome back” means, I thought. She was better with English than me.

Didi Priya came in the room. She was Didi Katie's translator; if she wasn't here then Didi Katie wouldn't be here. I'm still deciding out if that's a good thing. I like Didi Priya. She was good in English, but she still stayed in the village. I love her. And she loves me. She will always be one of us.

Six years ago, she helped my mother give birth to my sister, Aksha. The news spread quickly when my mother went into labor, and Priya came storming in our house. She had gone to school to be a midwife. This is where she learned English. Aksha wasn't the first baby she help delivered. I think it was her fifteenth, maybe sixteenth. Priya wanted Aksha to be her last baby. Soon after she was born, my mother died. Priya blamed herself, but we all knew that my mother was running a high fever and labor took a toll on her weak body. Priya was just a midwife, not a doctor.

“Namaskar, Didi Priya,” I said, smiling ear to ear.

Namaskar, Sadhiri!” she said in excitement. She walked over to me; her long hair bouncing in sync with her every step. She gave me one of her warm hug and a wet kiss on the forehead.

“How are you? How's Aksha?” Her green salwar kameze brought out her eyes.

“We are both fine. Aksha is feeling better. I left her to sleep before I came.” I remained in her arms. I took in her scent of a faint floral aroma and a tint of herbs.

“I will come over later when I can,” she promised.

“Okay, Didi Priya, I’ll be waiting.”

“Namaskar, class!” Didi Katie interrupted. Priya gently released me, giving my shoulder a light squeeze. She moved to the front in order to be in service of the demanding American. Didi Katie smiled at her, ignoring the droplet of sweat she grazed over her upper lip and into her mouth. They exchanged some words in English. I couldn’t understand any of it.

For the rest of class time, Didi Katie talked out of her American mouth. She spoke of hope and what education could bring for us villagers. She talked until her head turned red, fizzle of spit foamed at the corner of her mouth. She was determined to make us believe that we could get out of this place. She’s trying to bring the American Dream to India, but there’s only one thing; this isn’t America.

I don’t like Americans. They always want to be the heroes. They come and go, only satisfying themselves. They think they’ve helped us in some way, dropping a little wisdom here; playing games with us there and taking a picture of it, but they leave us the same way we were before they came.

In fact, we’ve been given an injustice, a disservice. As village kids, we never gave thought to the future, a life outside this sandy village, speaking English in some business office, never. Then, these people come and give us pieces of sunlight, pieces of hope, but reality hits like a storm, dark clouds hovers, and the sun never shines.

I don’t have a dream. I never had a vision. I only live day by day. After two years in this school, I only learned “Hi, my name is Sadhiri.” “What is your name?” and “Jesus loves you.” They are meaningless words that won’t take me anywhere. They are not magical words that bring rice to this village, rupees in my father’s pocket, and happiness in the home.

After her lengthy introduction, she finally got to the alphabet, but by then, it was time to go. Most of us needed to prepare food for the day, I being one of them. I didn't stay for the goodbyes. I smiled at Priya and left.

Aksha was outside playing with the other village kids her age when I came back from school. I was glad she felt better. I worry when I leave her for school. I decided to work on the wheat outside to keep an eye on Aksha. She was a troublemaker. She looked like one, too. Her hair was fluffy, full with lazy curls. Her left eye crossed and it usually twitched when she was lying or when gets too excited.

"Aksha, be careful. What did I tell you about climbing trees?" I yelled as she started to climb a tree. Her curious friends only stood still and looked upon her. Her dress bounced as with every stride, revealing her dark blue underwear. She should feel ashamed.

"I don't remember what you said about trees. I'm always careful, Didi," she replied. Her left eye twitched.

"I told you, girls don't climb trees."

"But I'm a little girl. Little girls climb trees." I began to work on the wheat. There was no point in arguing about climbing trees with a six year old. I was the mother to my sister, and it was a tiring job. At fifteen years old, I wish I was climbing trees. I practically raised Aksha. Of course, I had the help of the women of the village. And I was grateful for that.

"Didi, look, look at me!" Aksha shouted from the top of the tree. I rolled my eyes. I am not congratulating disobedience, although, I am impressed that she could climb that high.

"Okay, now get down, Aksha. You climbed that stupid tree."

"I climbed a very high stupid tree," Aksha corrected me. Suddenly, her friends lost interest of her achievement and jumped in the water. Aksha watched them. Her eyes twitched.

“Can you help me with this food, Aksha? We’d be spending time together,” I tempted her, trying to distract her.

“But we’re spending time together now. Why do I need to help you with food?”

“Nevermind.”

I needed to have this food prepared before my father came home. He’s a fisherman and works at a dock near the village. Sometimes he would bring fish, but I never know until he brings it. He never knows, either.

He took it really bad when my mother died. He cried. He never cries. For the longest time, I think he blamed Aksha. Once, I heard him telling one of the fathers that he thinks Aksha is of the devil. Her left eye and crazy hair told him so. And when it twitched, an evil spirit was moving inside of her. I cried that night with Aksha tucked in my arms. I felt like I needed to protect her. If anyone came for her, they would have to get to me first.

He wasn’t the only one that felt that way. I heard other people too. It was her hair. It was her left eye and the way it twitches. And she was the demon girl that killed her mother. One day, everyone stopped with their horrific speculations when Aksha spat on one of the village boy’s bruised ankle, and it healed the next day. Oh, the nice things I heard about Aksha. It was funny how things turned around. Soon after that incident, people turned their accusations towards my dead mother. She was evil. Aksha, the good, needed to kill the bad, even if it was her own mother. I cried.

Didi Katie’s van pulled up to pick her up, a gust of sandy wind followed after it. Didi Katie practically ran to her van, or her wide leaps could have been seen as running. When the van pulled away, Didi Katie waved goodbye from behind her glass of protection. She waved at

the kids that ran after the van. She was lucky that she could leave to a better place. She can pick up and go whenever she wants to. This village wasn't her life.

I began to soak the wheat in the warm water, always having one eye on Aksha. She finally came down the tree. Of course, being Aksha, she would unfailingly find something to do other than jumping in that water. I gave her the eye, my own signature feature; she was the only one that knew what it meant. In her small hands were big chunks of rocks that she tried to throw across the body of water near her conquered tree, attempting to make them skip. Whenever a rock hit the water, it wouldn't skip; instead it made a small swirl where the rock sunk. Sometimes, she would miss the water all together and hit a tree, the sand, a house, and worse---a person.

Being both a mother and a sister to Aksha, I sometimes let her get away with most things. I pitied her. She was a lively girl with a dead mother. She never knew her mother, only what I described to her. She has no memory of her or an image of the beautiful woman that carried her. To Aksha, she was a nobody, just a story, a character, a once upon a time---a myth. It was truly sad. Aksha was so much like her.

I thank the gods and even this Jesus man for granting me time with my precious mother. Other than Priya, she was my closest friend. When she died, I had no time to mourn her death. My father practically threw Aksha at me. It had been six years and I hadn't had the time to cry. Aksha may have inherited her personality, but I her looks. She had big, dark almond eyes and long lashes. Her head was shaped like a heart, and she had long dark hair that fell on high cheekbones. Her lips were pink and full.

We did everything together. She taught me how to cook, clean, and how to properly care for myself as a young woman. When I was younger, after a full day of work, we would lie under

the dark blanket of the quiescent sky and watch the stars twinkle one by one, almost as if they sung a silent song for us. Somewhere in the distant, fire crackled and a smoky aroma quickly filled the air. I would lie between my mother's breasts and she would sing me an old Indian song. She smelled of different spices. And her long hair covered my head, her arms wrapped tightly around my body. I would fall asleep there.

Usually when we were cooking, she would tell me the blissful times of her and my father before they had me. Although, they were arranged to marry, they had fallen in love with each other. Often, for my sake, she would put her index finger in her mouth, then hold it up in the air and say, "Uh huh, I feel it, Sadhiri. You will be married soon. And to the best man in Kikusonhri."

"When, mother?"

She would wet her finger again, "Soon, maybe later."

"Is it Sanjay?" I asked anxiously. My mother gave a worried look when she looked to see if anyone was of earshot

"It could be."

That was my old life. In those days, I wanted to get married. I wanted to be like the wife my mother was to my father. I wanted to marry Sanjay, but everything has changed. I don't think anyone would want to marry me. To them, I already have a child. And worse, that child was a girl, not a boy to carry the name or to take in a dowry. No boy has talked to me since the death of my mother, no one, not even Sanjay, which broke my heart further.

Sanjay was the boy I grew up with. When we were younger, we were more like siblings. We fought and argued, threw things at each other, and played tricks on one another. One day, he climbed a tree, and I followed after him, but my mother pulled me down. She told me that girls



didn't climb trees. Sanjay and I swam together, we would fetch water together, and we learned our Hindi prayers together.

We did everything together until one day, my breasts grew and my hips widened, and he grew taller and had facial hair. We tried to make it work, but people started talking. It was inappropriate and detrimental to her reputation for an unmarried girl to run around with a man that wasn't her husband.

"If you want to be around that Sanjay boy, then he must marry you," my father demanded. "No daughter of mine will be seen so reckless and undisciplined."

Sanjay married Maya three years ago. I went to the wedding and smiled the whole time. When the day was over, my jaw hurt for faking so long.

"Aksha, come inside."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going inside."

"But..."

"Don't argue with me." Aksha dropped the rocks and followed me inside with her head hung low. While I finished dinner, she sat in front of the door, looking outside.

I made rice, vegetables, and reheated fish from couple of days ago. The sun started to go down; therefore, my father should be coming home soon.

"Aksha, go get the cups in the cupboard for me, please," I asked.

"I don't want to," she mumbled. Her small body sat in the door's frame. Her hands held up her face, but her face didn't hold her drooping lips that frowned.

"One..two..." Aksha got up and did what I asked. I only got to three once, and Aksha made sure that never happened again. One day, she refused to listen to me when I asked her to

come back while she was walking away from me. That day she spent all of daylight running around, I wanted her inside and she wanted to run some more, this time with boys.

“I’ll be back soon, okay, Didi.”

“No, come back now. You had enough running for today.”

“But I’m not tired,” she claimed as she continued to walk away from me.

“If I get to three and you are not by my side, you will be in trouble.”

Aksha stared at me.

“One...”

She turned her back towards me. Her curls lazily bounced.

“Two...”

She started to walk.

“Three...”

She picked up her pace, but I reached her faster than she expected. I spanked her in front her friends and in the privacy of our home. For five, she learned quickly.

My father entered the small door frame as I finished pouring the last of the coconut juice. The juice spilled and landed on the carpet when a man walked in after him. I have seen this man before, the way he would prowl the village and smell of nice cologne. He was an Indian man in some kind of business. He had short dark hair and was clean shaven. He always wore dressy shoes that sparkled and a button down shirt with dressy pants. His sunglasses sat on the top of his head. His watch covered his whole wrist.

Whenever I saw him, I get an unsettled rumbling in my stomach, and my throat clenched. Every time he came, a girl in the village goes missing, and no one ever brings her up.

“Sadhiri, this is Ravi,” my father announced.

“Namaskar.” I bowed. I could hear my heart thumping out of my chest. Aksha must have sense my uneasiness, because she stood still, watching the strange man. Her eyes were twitchless.

“He has come to give you a job. A good paying job,” my father continued.

“I don’t want it.”

“Don’t be foolish,” the man said.

“We need the money, Sadhiri,” my father reminded. “You are fifteen and unwed, and...”

“Beautiful. You can bring in a lot of money,” the man added. His eyes slowly searched my body. I felt sick to my stomach.

“What will I be doing? Will I be here, home?”

“No...”

“No, but you will be living in a nice furnished room with the finest Indian furniture.”

“I don’t want to leave Aksha.”

“She could come to.” He looked at Aksha, as if he just discovered her potential, or his next possibility. Outside, I could hear someone beating a carpet with a tree branch.

“Sadhiri, you must go. I’m your father, I order you.”

“Father, you don’t know this man. How can you trust him with me?”

“Sadhiri, how dare you test me!” The carpet beating grew louder, in sync with my heart.

“I am an honorable man,” the man chipped in.

“You must leave tonight, Sadhiri.” my father ordered.

“Tonight! What about Aksha? Who will look after her?”

“Don’t worry about Aksha.”

“But she doesn’t know how to care for herself,” I pleaded. A group of kids skidded pass our house, laughter filled the small door frame. I wish that was Aksha.

“Aksha is six years old; you should have taught her something.”

“Then I can’t leave.”

“You have no choice, Sadhiri,” my father said.

“Didi Priya, I want to see Didi Priya,” I cried. Aksha began to cry too. I knocked a cup down and juice fell down my orange salwar. I pushed pass my father who tried to grab me, but I made it outside. My father ran after me, but I ran faster. I fell, scraping my knee, but I got up. I made it to Priya’s house. My father followed me in.

“Didi Priya!” I ran into her arms.

“Sadhiri, what is going on? What’s the matter? Is Aksha okay?” She saw my father run in after me. Something was boiling in the tea kettle.

“Sadhiri, come to me now!” my father demanded.

“I don’t want to go, Didi Priya. Don’t let him take me,” I begged.

“Don’t let who take you? What is going on, Amit?” she asked my father. My father ignored her.

“Sadhiri, let’s go,” he ordered. Whatever was boiling made a startling, screeching sound. Steam followed after.

“I don’t want to leave Aksha, Didi Priya.” Priya understood what was going on now. She held me tight and gave my father the longest coldest stare.

“Don’t do this to her.”

“This is none of your business, Priya.” My father felt resentment towards Priya for the death of his wife. He never liked her. To him, she had too much education. Women should never be smarter than men.

“What would Chandra say about this? For heaven’s sake, Sadhiri looks just like her!”

“Don’t you dare bring her up! Sadhiri, come now!” The boiled water rattled louder as if it was taking my place.

I buried my face in Priya’s neck, and then I felt a strong hand pulling on my arm. I screamed. I held tightly to Priya. Priya held tightly to me.

“How dare you do this to her! To Aksha! You know Sadhiri is all Aksha has.” My father slapped Priya in the face, the impact left a red mark. If Priya’s husband was here, he would have condoned it. She was testing a man’s authority. However, Priya was strong. She took the slap and still held on to me.

“If she doesn’t want to go, I can take the younger one,” the man suggested. The wrestling between us stopped as we saw the man standing in the door frame, holding Aksha’s hand.

“Who are you? Leave this girl alone! I spit in your face,” Priya screamed.

“Amit, I can take this one, if the eldest one refuses,” he repeated, ignoring Priya. “Or you can give back what I have paid you,” he added.

“Fine, take her instead,” my father gritted. “Are you satisfied, Sadhiri?”

I immediately untangled myself from Priya.

“Take me,” I demanded. I am my sister’s keeper. I am her mother and sister. I must protect her. The water settled, a burning smell filled the air.

“That’s a good girl,” the man said. I grabbed Aksha from him.

“Priya, take care of Aksha for me,” I said. Priya grabbed Aksha from me.

“Don’t take her, please,” Priya begged the man. “You can have me.”

The man guffawed, his tooth with the gold crown visible. “You’re an old married woman.” He waved Priya off with his well-manicured hand. Priya was only twenty-one. “I have no use for you.”

The man grabbed my arm. I wrestled out of it and ran to hug Aksha. I may never see her again. Aksha warm cheeks rubbed against mine. Her tears fell down my salwar.

“I love you with all my heart, Aksha. Be good to father and Priya, okay?”

“Where are you going, Didi?” She was choking. A faint sound of laughing children reached us.

“Somewhere.”

“Somewhere far?” She forced back tears, but they betrayed her again and ran down her cheeks. In the distance, a mother called out to her child, immediate footsteps followed. For a moment it sounded like my mother calling me.

“I don’t know,” I cried.

“Will I see again?”

“I hope so,” I whispered. My voice was drowning in my tears.

“Why are you crying, Didi?”

“Because you’re crying,” I lied. “Can I sleep with her one last time?” I asked.

“No, she can’t,” the man said. “My driver waits for us.”

I hugged Aksha, her small body limp in my arms. I hugged Priya, whose face was covered in tears. I whispered to her, “Tell Didi Katie.” Priya nodded.

That night, I left with a man I didn’t know. He talked promises in my ears, probably the same he did with the other girls. He said I will see my family again, but I have never seen the

other girls again. We entered the city. This was my first time in the city. The streets were filled with lights and high buildings, busy cars and bodies. And somewhere in the distance awaits a grand opportunity for hopeful heroes.