

The Word Catcher by Dr Ranjana Sunil Alexiose

She looked like anyone else in the crowd, my little sister. We called her Venice. Venetia is how she liked it. She grew up on words. We all did! But we didn't stop to think about it, not until she stopped thinking about it.

When she was born, my grandmother said, 'Another girl!'

Later, when I sat contemplating about it, I thanked God that her infant ears had neither the power nor the need to listen to all the giggles and tongue-in-cheek sympathizing that went on in that cold hospital ward. No one noticed my mother quietly wiping her tears off. I do not know if she felt my mother's stifled sobs as she held her across her and poured her heart into the baby folds over and over.

"It's God's wish." They said. My baby sister twisted gawkily in the cradle.

She grew up on words, as I said. We all did.

Years past by, as we all kept on quietly surviving on the feasts offered by life. Now she could even comprehend and infer. That is what they teach you in school- to comprehend, what you wish to and what you don't wish to.

She actually learned to infer on her own. "You're lucky to go to school." They said.

It was tradition to go to school when we were small, and so we went. There was a time before, that; you went to school only if you were very lucky. My mother was never lucky to go to school; neither was my grandmother the product of any of the local schools that now sprang up in our neighborhood. And so I can say that schools make no difference!

A neighbor once told my mother. "She's darker than her sisters.' My grandmother nodded miserably, yet my mother continued to quietly chop the vegetables in front of her.

Today, I know how many thoughts could have been flooding her weak chest, worries about her little daughter, her powerlessness to protect her from the sinister words of the world.

My little sister heard it and sprint off to play. She was slowly getting used to too many words, you know.

When my mother died they clicked their tongues and pitied the girls, as we sat around her white, lifeless body.

My little sister had brought ill-luck they said.'

"Only if she was a boy. She is so plain and dark. Who will marry her?"

My little Venice clung on to those words. She ate them up and they carved through from within her.

I didn't know, or I would have hid her in my dress folds.

Words hung in the air, day and night, even when my father married again and we got a new mother.

A mother is a blessing, she holds on to her children when the world leads a war against them, cuddling her little ones and hiding them from the venomous outpourings of the world. A new mother can hardly be a mother. We did not complain. Our father was always a different and superior being, very far from our world.

I do not know what happened to my little Venice for a long time, after I had left to work in a far away city. When I got married I wrote to her.

"I'm so happy for you." She told me.

When Venice grew up she left my father and new mother's house with all that she had collected. Words pricked and poked through the tight bundle she carried out of the house.

She grew up on words you know, and maybe so she seldom spoke.

She set upon to live in a dark cast and heartless world. When she asked for work they watched her with menacing looks. My little Venice grew up on words, you know, so when they talked she was quiet.

When my Venice prayed she neither blamed nor fret. She thanked God for what he was kind to give her. She was able to walk, to work and to give birth. Life was kind with my little Venice for she was gifted with a baby boy, a treasure and reason to live for.

"I did a favor my marrying you, who else would have agreed to live with such a repulsive woman." Her husband yelled.

Venice tried not to listen to his words. It hurt less when she cuddled the baby close to her.

Her little boy grew up into a handsome army man. Yet he never forgot the warmth of his loving mother. He wrote to her as often as possible. She again learned to cling onto words. This time they brought to her beautiful memories of bringing her child up. Venice tearfully remembered herself as a child in my mother's arms. My mother's words flowed into her ears like soft music. "You're my angel, my darling...."

She looked like the rest of the crowd, but she had a different kind of heart in her weak chest. It was bigger than it should have been. Actually it had grown with her or the words she grew upon.

Now I stand by her corpse. I am holding tight her son's shivering hand in mine. I wonder why she died before me?

The doctor says that her heart had become too big for her weak chest to carry.

They say, you die when you catch an illness. My Venice died because she was a word-catcher.

Heavens! Greet my little sister in joy and love, for she lived with a pure heart and never fret nor complained. Let not words follow her anymore, for she grew up on words.

Dr Ranjana Sunil Alexiose writes stories.

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