

DREAMER

Sarojini Sahoo *

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Mother was combing their hair very neatly. Their hair had not been oiled for a long time; it was dry and waving around. She had gone to Sabari and asked for oil for one rupee. Sabari made oil by grinding castor seeds. She sells them to the shopkeeper and kept a little leftover from that.

Mother did not have any money. She said, "Keep this glass as a deposit. When I get money, I will pay you back and then take the glass back.

" Sabari twisted her mouth and said, "What will I do with the glass? A steel glass is the same as broken clay to me.

" Mother said, "I have a brass bowl, but I am attached to that bowl. When I look at the bowl I feel as if I had a bowl of rice. Don't turn your attention to that."

"If you could feel your stomach just by looking at the bowl, why would you want to keep your glass with me? Show me the container. I treat your daughters as mine. Go. Get lost from here. I don't have time for you.

" Mother was very happy. She mixed water to the oil and put it on their hair. While combing their hair in the wooden comb, she also killed a few lice as well. But she did not know how to make braids. She had never braided anyone's hair before. She still tried but wasn't happy with the result.

Her elder daughter said, "Maa, you leave it. Let me braid her hair." Now the elder baby took the place of her mother. Her mother got up and went inside. Elder daughter said, "Mother does not know anything. Don't you see? She wanted to get coconut oil from the shopkeeper but finally she settled for castor oil from Sabari. Your hair has gotten so stuck together that the comb cannot go inside now. You have to look at the granddaughter of Pradhan. See how she pulls the hair from the sides of her ears and has two raids and then joins them with the braid in the centre? I also know how to make braids like that. However, mother has got castor oil so the hairs are twisting and looking like the tail of a mouse." The younger daughter was very disappointed when she heard about the tail of a mouse. She ran and got a small mirror and started looking at her face closely. She looked at her face while twisting her lips and blowing her cheeks. Her hair was

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looking like a newly tarred road. Her forehead appeared broad. She gave the beaded hair band that she had once bought from the market to the elder sister and said, "Put it in the beginning of the braid; if you put it on the end it won't show."

"Then what should I put in the end?" her elder sister asked.

"Put your ribbon there," she replied, pointing.

"If you will put everything, what will I put?" her elder sister questioned.

The younger baby did not say anything. She knew that her elder sister did not have to go anywhere. However, she did not say a word fearing that her mother will be angry if she said that.

The elder daughter braided her hair neatly and put the beaded rubber band at the beginning of the braid and put a ribbon at the end, making the ribbon look like a flower. She wet the end of her saree and wiped her younger sister's face, who then looked at her reflection in the mirror, smiled, and ran out of the house.

Then elder daughter then combed her own hair with a comb. She parted the hair into three sections and braided them. While pulling the thread from the roof to tie the end of the braid, mother came out of the house and shouted, "What did you do with the red ribbon? Why are you putting on this dirty thread?" Mother did not approve of the elder sister's hairdo but kept quiet because as she did not know how to braid hair.

Mother handed her elder daughter a wooden charcoal and instructed, "Go and get your teeth cleaned." She also told her if she took a bath also, then she could put on a nice saree as well.

The elder daughter took out a red printed saree from a box and looked for her younger sister. The younger one was chatting with two other girls on the village road. The elder daughter called her in a loud voice and she came inside running and asked her elder sister, "Why did you call me?"

"Let's go to the canal," the elder daughter replied. She went inside the house, got a saree from the box, and said, "Let's go."

Both of them had grown up together. The elder one had inherited her looks from the father and so looked a bit rough. The younger one looked exactly like their mother, always with a smile. Since childhood, both of them had gone together to fetch mahula, to cut sticks to make brooms. They also went together to pluck kendu leaves. Sometimes, they even collected the seeds of the sala tree.

Their mother exchanged the mahula flowers for salt and rice from the shopkeeper. Both sisters put the mahula sticks meant for the broom on rows to dry on the village road. When the sticks dried up, the two sisters put the sticks together, braided them, and made them into brooms. While the brooms sold for five rupees at the market in Dharmgad, in their own village, they got two rupees for a piece. A hundred kendu leaves fetched one rupee. These are not everyday earnings. But they didn't always get mahula or kendu leaves. Sometimes they come back empty-handed.

When that happened, mother would shout at them and try to hit them, accusing that they just came back without anything. Then, both of them would run away to collect some roots to eat and would be starving. Their stomachs would make all kinds of noises, always prompting her to ask her elder sister, “Listen Didi (elder sister), put your ears here. The birds are chirping.” Her elder sister would sit down and put her ears to her stomach and would smile when she heard the sounds. Then she would say, “Wait. Let’s listen to the sounds of the birds in your stomach.” When her elder sister stood up, she would put her ears to the elder sister’s stomach, listen carefully, and say, “Didi, I can hear a sound like ‘kan’ in your stomach.” Both of them would laugh their hearts out. They would each pluck a bunch of Kurehi flowers and put them in their hair and would set out to look for roots to eat.

Mother did not let them go for kanda that day. They did not go near the bushes, and didn’t even cross the canal. Mother said, “I have already made contacts. Everything will be alright. You will see how our days of misery will be over soon.”

Their father used to say the same thing. “Our misery will be over.” He said that and set out with their two brothers one afternoon in the scorching sun. They never came back. Mother said their father had little brains and that if he had them, he would have gone to Raipur. Many from their village went to Raipur, the city within their reach. No one knew where their father went. They could not reach there. He never came back after he left that day. Her mother said their brothers must have become rich and settled down there with their families.

They had been listening to the story since they were five or six years old. They were very young then. Their father left the village with several other people from the village. Mother had gone up to the end of the village to see him off and had said, “Please feed the boys. Come back as soon as you finish the work.” But neither their father nor their brothers ever returned.

Mother borrowed money from local money lenders by keeping their things, one by one, as collateral. But their father and brothers never came back. Mother had brought the girls up by working on the farms of people and taking care of goats. But neither her father nor her brothers ever returned.

One day, Purandar Majhi and Sanatan Nag returned to the village from one of their many trips. People from all over the village heard of their arrival and flocked to their houses. By then, Purander Majhi’s father had passed away and Sanatan’s wife, Katayini, had left the village. Sanatan Nag looked like an old vulture; Purander was limping. Their master, it seemed, never gave them any food. They said that they had not seen their father.

The water in the canal only covered their feet. Elder sister scrubbed younger one’s skin and gave her a bath. She put water on her by folding her palms. After her bath, younger one asked, “Didi, will I put on your red saree?”

Elder daughter laughed and said, “How can I wear your kurta? You may wear the red saree, if you want.” Elder one squeezed the wet saree, folded it twice, wrapped it around her body, and returned home. Both of them chatted on their way home. Younger asked her elder, “Wasn’t mum mentioning that someone’s coming to our home today?”

“Yes. Ravi Nahak will come,” the elder one replied.

The younger one responded, “Didi, the birds have started flying in my stomach.”

“Oh no, I can’t put my ears and listen to them now,” her elder sister said repulsively.

Then the younger one continued. “Look Didi, cucumbers are hanging from creepers in Pradhan’s garden.”

“Don’t look inside there,” the elder one ordered.

“What would I lose by looking at them?” the younger one questioned.

Elder daughter then got angry and said, “If you keep looking at them, I am leaving.” She did not stay there and younger one then followed after her elder sister.

When they came home, mother shouted at her younger daughter when she saw her in the red saree. Even the elder daughter had to listen to accusations from their mother. Finally, younger one put on her frock and her elder sister wore the saree.

They went over to the verandah and sat there. Their mother had opened the door and it seemed was whispering with somebody.

“Didi, the bird in my stomach has started chirping again. Mother is really foolish to get oil in exchange for the glass. Would it not have been better if she had gotten some rice from the shopkeeper?” Then after a short moment, she continued, “You sit here. I will be back shortly.”

The younger one then ran to the village road. Her elder sister yelled from behind, “Don’t enter Pradhan’s garden,” not sure if she heard it or not.

Meanwhile, mother was painting the mud wall and muttering accusations on Ravi. Elder one was sitting in the same place when the younger one came back with a few water lilies.

Elder asked younger, “Where did you get those water lilies?” She did not answer. “Nobody saw you when you entered their pond?” the elder questioned.

The younger one replied, “I did not enter the pond. A man was going to the temple with the flowers on a bicycle. I just got four of them.” Mother then snatched the water lilies from her hand and went inside. The boiled stems of the water lilies were very tasty. She had eaten them once.

Evening approached beginning an end to the day. Mother was still accusing Ravi and his forefathers. Younger one was too scared to ask her elder sister why mother was scolding elder. None of them ate anything that night. Instead, all three of them shut their doors and went to sleep.

Younger one woke up at daybreak with the call from her elder sister. “Wake up, wake up,” the elder was yelling. “Let’s go out and see where mother has gone early in the morning.”

“She must have gone to the fields”, younger replied to elder.

“No I don’t think so. How can she be in the fields for so long? I have been awake since when it was still dark and mother was not here then either.”

“Then she must have gone to the forest,” younger said.

Both the sisters huddled together. Mother was not back. Elder sister brought the broom and started sweeping the verandah. Then she mixed coloured mud with cow dung and wiped the mud oven. Still their mother was not back. Younger one worried, “Didi, let’s go and look for mother.”

Elder’s face appeared as if she would break down into tears. She said, “Should we inform Aunt from next door?”

They did not know what to do. Finally, both of them got out of their door of dried leaves. On the way, their aunt caught them and asked, “Where is your mother? I haven’t seen her since morning?”

“She has gone to the forest to dig some roots,” the elder one responded.

There was no forest anymore and whatever they referred to as forest did not have any roots which they could use as food. “Where has mother been since morning?” the aunt pressed on.

The girls had not eaten anything the night before. Their mother must have gone to get something. Younger one’s attention again went to the cucumber in Pradhan’s garden. She said, “Look Didi, it’s been hanging there since yesterday; no one has plucked it yet.” Elder gave younger a sharp slap on her hand.

She screamed and shouted, “Why did you hit me?”

“You don’t look that way. Pradhan’s farm worker will hit you naked,” the elder responded angrily.

Finally, they saw their mother coming from afar swinging on the borders of the fields. “There she is,” younger one said and left her sister and ran toward her mother. Mother was carrying half a kilo of rice in her saree and two fish in a polythene bag. Younger was so happy to see the rice and the fish that she shouted, “Didi, we will have a feast in the house today.”

The elder one, who by now had caught up to her, put her palm over the younger sister’s mouth and said, “Shut up. Somebody may hear you.”

“So what? Let everyone hear that our mother has brought home rice and fish.”

Her elder sister eyes started glistening but again, the light went out in them. Maybe they were subdued because she was thinking how her mother got the money. Moreover, where had she been so early in the morning?

The elder one did not move forward but kept waiting there under the Peepul tree. However, the younger one ran over to her mother. Her elder sister cut a grass with her teeth and started sucking the juice but then remembered the brass bowl that was in the house wasn't there anymore.

After their mother joined them, all three of them started walking. The elder one asked her mother, "Did you give the brass bowl to the shopkeeper?"

Mother answered, "Why would I give that to the shopkeeper? That's the only thing left."

The elder continued questioning their mother. "Where did you go early in the morning? Why didn't you let us know before you left?"

"I have been to the nearby village. If I had not left early, how could I return now? If I were late, I could not have met him?"

"Whom did mother want to meet?" the elder asked.

"Ravi," she flatly replied. "You know, these people are very shrewd. He had come to our village yesterday but left without meeting me. I went early in the morning so that I can meet him before he leaves for the town."

The elder decided not dig for any more information, having the wisdom to figure out what was going on. Her mother said, "Let's go home as soon as we can. We have a lot to do." So the three of them walked as fast as they could and reached their home. Fortunately, the woman next door woman was not there waiting at the doorstep.

Her mother sent younger one to the neighbour's house to get some fire in the metal ladle. They had not lit their oven the night before so there was no fire in the oven. She jumped up and got hold of the iron ladle and was leaving for the neighbours who lived inside the village road when her mother called out for her loudly from behind. As she came inside the house, her mother addressed her in a very abusive language and said, "Don't jump around about like that. When you go to get fire, if you say anything to anyone I will choke you to death."

She started sobbing and said, "I won't go until you give me a reason for scolding me." She was the youngest in the family and could never tolerate harsh words from anyone. She could not help crying.

The elder one smiled and said, "Look at her, showing off."

Mother asked her to come closer and said, "Listen, if you tell the neighbours that we are having rice and fish, they will ask you a thousand questions. How did you get them? Who got them?"

Your aunt next door does not tolerate us. She will come and peep when we are having food.” She was satisfied to hear her mother’s words. Even then, she danced her way through the village road to get a ladle of fire. She could not suppress her happiness. After passing over four or five houses, she was able to get a few burning wooden pieces.

While mother was trying to put rice on the oven by blowing into the wooden pieces, she gave her elder daughter a bit of oil in the small bowl and asked her to go and take a bath quickly. “Wear the same saree that you wore yesterday,” mother said to her and the elder one had put on the saree she had worn the day before but had taken it off at night. Why is mother asking her sister to wear the saree again the younger one wondered?

The elder one was getting ready to go to the canal. The younger also got ready to accompany her elder sister. The elder’s face did not appear as lackluster as the day before.

Today, there was also more water in the canal compared to the day before. Somewhere on the other side of the hill, it must be raining cats and dogs. When there was rain on the other side of the hill, the water level on this side always increased. When the water level increased, the water smelt fishy and its colour changed.

As the elder one was happily taking her bath, putting her legs in the water she said, “You know, you can have a stomach full of rice with fish that is roasted on fire and smeared with garlic and chilies.” As the younger one took off her frock and entered into the water, her elder sister said, “You have grown up now. Why don’t you become intelligent? How can you take out your dress and get into the water?”

But the younger one got hurriedly into the water and asked her elder sister, “Have you ever eaten fish smeared with garlic and chilies?”

“Yes I have eaten. You also have many times,” the elder stated.

“When did I eat them?” she asked, not really remembering.

“When father was around. You were very small,” the elder replied.

She quickly stepped out of the water and put on the dress. Her elder sister said, “The stitches of your dress are coming out. Look how the stitches have come out right from the underarm to the hand. Mother got this one from the Pradhan’s house. It’s old.”

Both of them came back after taking their baths. Her elder sister had put turmeric on her dark face. Their mother took out a new blouse from a polythene packet and gave it to the elder one and ordered, “Put it on.”

When the younger one saw the new blouse of her sister, she became upset. “You got a new one for her and why not for me? Look I am wearing a torn dress. Look.” She lifted her arm and showed her mother as tears welled up in her eyes.

Mother did not know how to console her youngest daughter. She said, “Let me first finish with your sister and then I will get for you as well, okay?”

Mother made elder one sit down on the verandah and combed her hair neatly. She then brought a necklace of golden and black beads and put it around her sister’s neck. She had a packet of designed bindis around her waist; she took out a bindi in the shape of the temple and put it in the middle of her eyebrows and looked at her for a long time. No, she did not approve of it. Next, she put the bindi in the shape of a snake. No, even that did not satisfy her. Finally, she put a bindi in the shape of a round wheel and said, “Yes, this suits you.”

The younger one was getting jealous seeing her mother decorating her elder sister for such a long time. She stamped her feet and said, “Will you give me some food to eat or will you carry on decorating her?”

“Wait. I will serve you shortly. Why are you shouting?” the mother said. As she got up, she asked the elder one to put kajal in her eyes.

The younger was very jealous and she got the impression that her mother loved her elder daughter more than her. She wanted to put kajal in her eyes but mother did pay any heed to her words. She was so upset that tears welled up in her big brown eyes. Her elder sister hugged and consoled her and said, “Let’s go and eat.”

Mother served them sticky rice on a steel plate. She had roasted the fish and smeared it with chilies and mixed it well. The younger asked, “Ma, why didn’t you put garlic?”

“Where would I get it?” mother replied.

All three of them ate the hot rice from their own corner in the steel plate. After eating, the younger one felt very heavy and sleepy. As she lied down on the sack, she fell asleep...

In her dreams, the younger one saw the canal was full of rice and the house was full of fish but not really. There was a feast somewhere. Everyone was running around with buckets and ladles. The scene was similar to the feast when Pradhan’s daughter got married. There were fish and rice. No, there were shining fish in the canal and on leaf plates, with heaps and heaps of rice. Everyone was just running around. In the backyard of the Pradhan’s house, someone was cutting a big fish. That cucumber was also hanging in Pradhan’s garden as well. Looking around, she saw many people sitting down and eating rice...

Just as she was getting tangled in her dream, she was awakened by her mother’s call. She saw somebody sitting in their home. Still half asleep, she was thinking, ‘Is this man, Ravi?’

Mother had been decorating elder one for the last three days for this man? He seemed quite over-aged. Mother said to her, “Go. Go out and play.”

She was so surprised to hear her mother’s words. Was she still dreaming?

“Go out and play.” What words! Previously, when she went to play hopscotch on the village road, she would be hit. She always heard her mother say, “The silly girl is drawing lines and jumping over broken pieces of burnt earth. Wouldn’t she receive some rice to eat had she gone to school?” She did not like going to school then. The teacher would make her kneel down with stones under her knees. Sometimes, he would even ask her to rub her nose on the ground. She did not go to school anymore. Now she had grown up! It had been almost two years since she left school. She had also forgotten everything about studies. After she failed for three times, her teacher said, “Don’t come to school anymore. Leave your studies.”

Mother would insist on her going to school because she would get some rice to eat as part of the midday meal programme of the school when she did attend. Once, her mother had gone to school and fell at the feet of the teacher and pleaded with him not to strike her name off the school records. The teacher was very angry with her mother. “Your daughter will fail in one class for so many times. Do you think that the government will be feeding her rice and dal till she is old? Give up on her studies. She is not meant for them.” She was not exactly enjoying studying with youngsters and it didn’t exactly help when the teacher was always insulting her all the time either.

She was not to play hopscotch anymore either. She was with her sister, sweeping the floor, cleaning lice from their hair, and going to pluck kendu leaves. And now, her mother asked her to go and play? She was utterly surprised.

She came out of the house and sat next to her elder sister and asked her, “Who is that man sitting inside? Is he Ravi?”

Her elder sister put her hand over her mouth and said, “Shut up.”

Inside the house, mother and Ravi were arguing over the price of something. “Thousand, twelve hundred. You think you will get it so cheap?” her mother loudly quarreled.

The man with mother was saying, “The current rate is thousand. If you ask for two hundred more where will I get it? I am also a poor man like you my dear. Do you think I am making any profit from this?”

Her mother was saying, “Won’t you get your money back in two months? What are you saying? “ Finally they settled for eleven hundred. Her mother asked, “Do you want to see again? You had seen when you came.”

The younger one thought to herself, ‘They did not have any land nor did they have any cows; their only possession was the house. Why was the man attracted to them?’ Although she thought to herself, she did not dare ask her elder sister as her elder sister would again shut her mouth.

She had not gone to the toilet after waking up from her sleep and she badly wanted to go to the toilet. She got up from the verandah to go to the toilet. ‘Mother was waiting for this man for the last three days?’ she wondered to herself. When she went to the toilet, she saw there were two

young bitter gourds hanging from the creeper. She touched the bitter gourds and expressed her love to them. She could not help her excitement and ran and said, “Didi.....”

But her elder sister put her finger to her lips and said, “Quiet. Be quiet.”

She then came closer and said, “Do you know there are two young bitter gourds in the creeper?” Her elder sister was not happy. She was surprised that her sister was not happy. She could not enter the house to give the news to her mother. Mother and that man were still arguing inside the house.

Mother said, “Look, the two of them don’t have the same strength; the elder one has bigger arms and legs. She has got more flesh and she can do more work. You can earn more.”

“That’s true” said the man named Ravi. “However, look, does your elder daughter have a smile on her face? She has a long face all the time. The middleman will burst into tears as soon as he looks at her. He would say, ‘Whom did you get?’ If the police notice her, they will think that we have tormented her so much that her smile has disappeared from her face. I like the younger one, no matter what you say. She is agile. Her arms and legs are steady. Her eyes are very beautiful. She has got your features. She will be quite good for work when she is fed and looked after properly.”

She turned to her elder sister with a questioning look. Her face had become pale. She did not know what to say to her elder sister. She showed the two bitter gourds behind the leaves and laughed. Yet her sister did not laugh. ‘My elder sister is really haughty,’ she thought to herself. ‘Why did her sister always sit around with a long face?’ This Ravi person had also mentioned the same thing!

Mother then came outside and called out for the younger one. She ran up to her mother inquiring why she called her. Her mother will get eleven hundred, she thought. She was asking the man. Once her mother received the money, she would ask her mother to buy a dress for her. She had a blouse for her. Would she give it to her?

Mother hugged and kissed her younger daughter and said in a tearful voice, “You go with him. You will get a stomach full of rice to eat every day. If you miss me or your sister, just ask him and he will bring you to the village to see us.”

She felt like crying. Where would she go leaving behind her mother, her elder sister, and her village? She could not tell her mother that there were two bitter gourds in the garden.

The man lit a bidi , took two puffs and said, “Come, let’s leave quickly. Otherwise, it will be evening by the time we reach where we’re going.”

Mother said, “Let me comb the girl’s hair.”

He said, “Leave it. We will be late.”

The elder one had gone somewhere; mother called out for her tearfully. The elder came and stood next to her with her head down. Now the man said in a threatening voice, “If all three of you start crying, people will gather around. I am leaving. You are good for nothing. Come on, give me my money back.”

Mother angrily responded, “Why are you behaving like that? All right, leave the money. You go ahead. We will follow you. I will see her off till the end of the village. You leave.....”

The man puffed his bidi and left without taking the money. Her mother closed the door of leaves. She asked her mother, “Why didn’t you return his money?”

Mother put the corner of her saree on her mouth and said, “You go. You will get good food and live well.”

“And then, what about Didi? How will she get good food like me?” the younger daughter questioned.

(Translated by Gopa Nayak and edited by Paul McKenna)