

The Widow

by Rushwrites

When the village slept, the men came knocking.

The young, the married, the old.

They had one thing in common: they were all horny and thought she was an easy lay.

'If only he were alive' she thought, wistfully. She had gotten married when she was all of 19. She knew not a soul, save for the 70-something nearly-deaf, distant relative that accompanied her to her new home. She had a boy a year later. His father was a really good man. Everyone agreed. The crows too. When the village buried their dead, they put food near the body, stepped back and waited. The crows would then gather to peck at the food. Only then would they bury the body. If the crows came quickly, it signified that the dead man, woman or child had led a good life. It must be true, why else did they have to wait two hours before a solitary crow made the obligatory swoop when Madappa died? Tales could be written about how bad a person he was. But not today, not in this story.

At first, the villagers were helpful. Then the women realized how the men looked at her. So young, so pitiful. She found the frail bonds of friendship were tenuous at best, especially when faced with self-preservation. She understood, and let it be. She started locking her door at night.

And one night, after a game of ispeetu, a drunk middle aged unmarried man banged on her door. She didn't respond, and he went away. Her neighbour told the others, and the women, perhaps conceding that she may not be a threat, were less frosty at the water pump the next morning. And then she found out that one of the women, Shantamma, who constantly suspected her husband of

infidelity, was poisoning the others against her.

She begged her brother to let her come back home. His wife wouldn't hear of it, and convinced him she was cursed with bad luck, being a vidhave. She couldn't leave her husband's village, where she had no friends.

She tried to be respectful and understanding, but it didn't seem to work. She grew tired and weary. Then she decided to do something about it.

Shantamma had a 16 year old son.

It was almost too easy, luring him.

Revenge was sweet, indeed. And it was comforting to have a warm body next to hers, even if for a brief interlude.

She wanted to give her son a good education. But her husband's land was tied up in a property dispute. She had tried talking to the members of the Panchayat, but they seemed to think that the land belonged to the half-brother, good for nothing who would probably sell the land for booze money and skip village again.

She got the village chief to pay her a visit. The need to hide, the codes, the secrecy almost made it thrilling. As she locked her door, making sure the deaf woman and her child were sleeping, she looked at the man in front of her and said quietly, "I need my husband's land". As the look of comprehension about the trade dawned on his face, she smiled and said, "There is no such thing as a free lunch". "Bring it up at the next Panchayat meeting, I will take care of it" he said.

She knew what she was doing was wrong, and that her son would be called names when he was old enough to understand. She had to eke

out a living from her acre of land. Soon.

Already, the men were beginning to be less restrained around her.

She ignored the discreet coughs on the other side of the door. Most of the times. Her loneliness was isolating. The comfort of a man's touch, gratifying.

She wanted to tell Shantamma she should have worried more about her son, and less about her husband going astray. He was besotted with her. And she let him be.

As she stood by her husband's grave an indeterminate amount of time later, she wondered if the crows would come when she died.

