

ALONE NO MORE
Author: Purabi Sinha Das

Lenny stirred; she flung an arm across her eyes. Once again, she had forgotten to draw the strip of orange cloth that acted as curtain across the tiny opening in the mud wall of the hut and now the glaring sun scolded her to be up and about.

She turned on her stomach. Her life, she reflected, had been like a desert; not unlike the place she was in now. Only, here, she had re-discovered the beauty of life, something that had eluded her for a long time. She waited, then, for another feeling, the one she had tried so hard to stamp out, the one that would drag her down to the depths of sorrow. A sorrow that she had been helpless to fight against.

In the minutes that followed, and after, Lenny realized she was no longer sad. No longer was she bent on destroying her life. People here had helped, especially the old man.

The rooster in the neighbour's yard crowed. She opened one eye.

I should get up.

Flinging aside the thin grey sheet, Lenny slid out of the low string bed loving the texture of the uneven floor on her bare feet. She sniffed the air. This scent of earth, hard to define, but so homey. She remembered how she used to sneeze at this same odour that came from the cow dung mix used to keep the floor clean and smooth. Intrigued, she watched the other women in the village and one day, having done the floor she was surveying the result of her handiwork when the old man arrived. Lenny wished she could have captured his expression on camera.

She drew water out of the large clay pot sitting in one corner, drank deep out of a clay cup saving some to wash her face. A few drops landed on the floor. She clicked her tongue. Every drop was precious in the desert, she had learned. What a newbie she had been in those early days. Living in a desert needed some getting used to. Parched dry most times and yet with

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its own particular life-giving strength – like the bits of green around this hut which the goat chewed, yielding enough milk for their needs.

How she had managed to make her way from a bustling city in Canada to this tiny village in Rajasthan, India, was something she would always be proud of. The helplessness and anger she had felt after mama was gone also acted as catalyst to her decision to leave home. For once, Lenny had followed her heart. She had withdrawn all her savings, emptied the tin box in the kitchen of all the change mama had saved and bought herself a one-way ticket to India. The rest, she decided, was up to fate.

The old man had come to the market to pick up supplies from the store where Lenny was admiring lengths of cloth in shades she had only seen in her dreams. He was accompanied by his daughter who struck up conversation with Lenny. “How are you?” she said in halting English.

Only too glad to respond to a friendly greeting, Lenny said, “I am well. Your English is so good, where did you learn it?” She immediately fell in love with the two-piece outfit the girl was wearing—flowing white top slit at the sides and thin pants. She wore flat sandals.

“School,” she said.

They began to chat and bit by bit Lenny’s story came out. Asha turned to her father and said something in their dialect. He nodded gravely. When they invited her to stay in their village, Lenny accepted hoping to rest and think up a plan. With hardly any money left, she knew she was in a tight spot. She stayed.

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He taught her to sew; something Lenny found she enjoyed. She lived rent-free. As if she, Lenny, was also his daughter.

Two years had gone by with Lenny living in the old man's house, here in a desert village far from the country she came from. She allowed herself a small smile thinking of those first days using signs to make herself understood until gradually she had picked up the local dialect. And even taught him some English words and was delighted to witness a side that contrasted with his serious visage. Both looked forward to their language classes after the evening meal when, more often than not, Lenny dissolved into peals of laughter while he tried to hide the grin lurking under his white moustache.

Giving her clothes a shake – she had learned to sleep in her daytime clothes, a long blouse worn over a pleated ankle length skirt – Lenny covered her hair with a red bandana; then stood by the door, listening. *Enough of standing around.* She stepped out and in her usual quick manner, flung herself on the floor in the doorway. Under the thatched roof, the merciless rays of the sun seemed to lose some of its venom.

Needle and thread in hand the old man was already at work. A sewing machine by his side.

Lenny swept her eyes along the wall of the front stoop. She had spent an entire afternoon one day painting it and what had emerged from her artistic endeavour was not the traditional white paisley, a design found on the walls of most Rajasthani homes, but red delicious apples, perfectly shaped green pears with slender necks, and orange tomatoes—things she loved and missed. Especially the orange tomatoes mama used to bring home. Engrossed in her painting she

had not been aware of his presence, until, happening to flick a strand of hair from her eyes, she saw his silent form, concern written large on his face.

She smiled an apology. He merely nodded, stepped across the lintel, and returned with a brass bowl filled with fresh goat's milk which he offered her. She was thirsty and drank eagerly, the clean and earthy flavour of the milk doing its usual happy dance inside her mouth. He gave her the best, always. Right then and there Lenny promised to herself that she would take up most of the sewing so that he could rest his hands. Those withered hands with their talonlike fingers, bent, and, darkened, from hard work, had shocked the daylights out of her.

Asha, who lived a mile north of the village, got cloths, long plain strips about two feet in length, pristine white, from someone in the city who was supposed to be a big man working in an office. Asha and her husband dyed the strips according to instruction. Lenny had gleaned this information from her. The man in the office paid twenty-two rupees per bag of hundred cloths; she brought the dyed cloths to her father for him to embroider.

One day, he told her to leave one white but she had argued. He insisted. She tried to snatch it but he stopped her with a raised hand as his rheumy eyes slipped past her shoulder. "Go home, the babes must be hungry." He grunted in satisfaction as he unfolded the sparkling white length.

Today, Asha was back with the load of dyed cloths.

Lenny noted the deep ridges on his forehead and leaned forward to help take out the lengths, counting as they fell out of a black plastic bag. Red, brown, orange, violet, indigo, green and blue. Colours of the rainbow.

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“You must finish them all, not just one or two. They gave us two days, this time, big store order and we need to be fast.” Asha’s urgings came flying at him, like darts on a dartboard, hitting and pricking his brittle skin.

“Yes, yes...I know. Now don’t waste time. GO.” He pointed at her bike leaning against the dusty hedge bordering the hut.

Lenny turned away. Why was Asha so rude to her father? He was growing older by the minute. It was time for him to rest, not work so hard all the time.

Asha left finally, shouting instructions that could be heard loud and clear over the clanging of her rusty bike, and pedaled out of the yard in a frenzy.

They worked together in silence, and when he showed signs of fatigue, she urged him to rest. Within two days, and as promised, the heap of multi-coloured cloths transformed into scarfs with intricate embroidery and mirror-work to be sold in the city to women to wrap around their head, or drape across the shoulder. Lenny gazed at the magical mound, longing etched in her heart, but refused to ask for one.

Next morning, when Lenny awoke, she found a white scarf at the foot of the cot. She picked it up with a sense of wonder. Within each embroidered paisley in grey thread, same colour as her cap which the goat had eaten one day and she had tried hard not to cry, she sensed the kindness and charity of the old man.

Drawing the white scarf around her, Lenny walked to the front stoop and took her place beside the old man.