



What a morning!

By Anna Campbell

Rehabilitation stories are usually held up as beacons of hope - happy endings to horrible histories. There is however, always a dark side to the moon; sometimes such stories highlight the work that remains: the entrenchment of prejudice and the mountain of education still required in the field of mental health. Unfortunately for Seedi, resident of the Community Living Project in Kovalam, her's is one of the latter tales I discovered when I joined Porkodi and Chaitali, of The Banyan, on a home visit.

We entered, what appeared to me, a very clean, neat complex of apartments and trooped (Porkodi, Chaitali, Seedi, her mother, her sister and myself) to the penultimate door that was open, ready. Out came the objector from behind her television filled front room, her daughter at her heels. The niceties lasted only a few moments before the crux of the issue was propelled out, over the noise of the room. I was unable to understand of course, but watched, impotent, as the gestures, from both sides, became wilder, the fingers more direct and the faces screwed with frustration.

My assumption was that there was a concrete problem; that an event had occurred to precipitate this level of agitation. I, myself, have encountered territorial neighbours in the past and recognized the tone of personal injury in the woman's voice - but then I was always aware that I was aggravating them slightly with my disregard of their wishes! These misconceptions of goading were later blown out of the water: Seedi had returned to her home the day before - she had not set foot in the door before the verbal banishment began. The allegation was that Seedi had 'scared' the objector's eight year old son; my personal opinion is that the level of noise coming from the woman's mouth was scarier than Seedi could have been if she tried, as she howled at God to be spared from a girl with mental illness. Not a murderer, paedophile or thief but a... recovered schizophrenic! She extolled the possibility of Seedi biting, beating and jumping off the roof - of metaphorically soiling her tidy back garden.

Another astonishing thing was that the lambasting was taking place as if Seedi was not there. My personal instinct was to push Seedi forward and ask the houseowner exactly how this heartbreakingly vulnerable face could be causing her so much stress; and why she wasn't embarrassed to behave this way in front of her own children; and exactly how she could possibly be the victim in this instance; and finally, why she couldn't in the very least identify and empathise with the plight of a single mother who was, quite obviously, carrying more than she could bear. My 'Nandri' level Tamil couldn't stretch here and my passively, winking white skin was not having its usual effect.

By this time the other members of the tidy little complex were raising their voices and gathering round. There was nothing to be done but bid a retreat. This woman and her allies were not budging one inch on this issue. Like George Banks, they literally couldn't see past the end of their noses to the young girl in a Salvar, as neat and clean

as their houses, that simply wanted to return home to live with her mother and family. A simple and justified desire.

With the community against them what choice do Seedi, her mother and younger sister have? Their, already small, world is shrinking by the second. 1000 r/s is their monthly budget that is brought in from three domestic cleaning jobs. Seedi's mother is old and her body is protesting the hardships it has endured. There is no father. And now this. The problem is not limited to the accommodation; the stigma delivered by this woman is reflected in Seedi's own family. The pressure of poverty means that they cannot afford anomalies like this within their network - the burden is too great - it piles the weight of discrimination on top of that of their myriad other deficiencies that push the family further down into the deep well of difficulty.

There is support available for this family; The Banyan can put pressure on various authorities that have mild sympathy for their plight, but the damage is done - the family doesn't want help, they want the problem to go away. One woman has tipped the scales. One woman's obstinate ignorance has meant that Seedi's home coming is causing more problems than the family can cope with. One woman's blind discrimination against someone with mental illness has ensured that Seedi's extended family is identified by the community as an unnecessary disturbance of their relative peace. One woman's total disregard for the rights of another woman has destroyed a chance to start afresh after almost a decade in limbo. One woman's desperate attempt to protect her nuclear world has meant that Seedi hasn't had the opportunity to show her family that living with mental illness can be a rewarding challenge for the family. Discrimination, stigma and unfounded fear still run deep and ruin opportunities - in no family, or community is this justified.

I hope that time brings a happy alternative ending here.