

Hide! You're a Woman

by **Seetha Anagol**

The Jeep tailgates us. I cower further down in the backseat of the taxi. We are in the Bandipur National Forest, bordering the State of Kerala, in South India, on our way to Calicut.

We race past the tall, dry sandalwood and teak trees, blurring browns, yellows and greens. The gray langur's chatter is muffled and the occasional jungle fowl pierces the forest with its shrill *ku kayak kyuk kyuk*. The unexpected drop in temperature makes me shiver, and I cling to the warmth of the setting sun. Pulling the loose ends of my cotton saree over my head and shoulders, I bob up to check on Senthil, the taxi driver.

The headlights are on. Senthil glances in the rearview mirror, once, twice, and wipes his forehead with a brown hand-towel. With his free hand, he maneuvers the steering wheel deftly over the dirt road.

"Don't look up, Madam. Please." His thick, deep southern accent annoys me. I am already edgy with the tense situation in which we've found ourselves. I recoil from his warning and sink further into the seat.

The drunken yelling and singing from the jeep gets louder. I no longer hear the monkeys' chatter.

This is the mid-90s. Non-profits working for the empowerment of women are preparing a policy document to present at the United Nations Conference in Beijing. A coordination unit has been set up in New Delhi and in Bangalore to execute the task, with support from several national and international donor agencies.

I have the exciting and critical task of coordinating the effort for non-profits in South India, with the assistance of an able, but small team. The time frame to complete the task is fast approaching. I'm scheduled to reach Calicut by dusk to

meet with women's non-profit organizations from neighboring areas, which work to improve the lives of indigenous tribal and rural women inhabiting the region.

Getting plane or train tickets to Calicut on short notice is impossible. The only option is a taxi. The shortest route cuts across the forest, where bandits and hoodlums haunt the road and rob tourists. I've been warned that to travel here is unsafe for a woman.

The deadline to complete the assignment and my belief in the work we are doing propels me to make the trip despite the danger. Our office checks the taxi rental company's credentials before hiring one. The rental company assures us that they will assign Senthil, a very reliable, safe driver. He often ferries passengers on this route to and from Bangalore to Calicut.

Shrinking down in the resin seat, I stare at the zig-zag patterns on the jute-mat at my feet and pray our tires will not blow out on the mud track.

Senthil hisses under his breath. "Oh, no ... they'll bang our car if they get any closer. I see their side flaps are folded all the way to the roof. The crazy men are waving toddy bottles in the air. Mam, hide! Please. At no cost should they see you."

We are way past the police check post, where Senthil stopped briefly. Two guards snored on aluminum, green chairs, in their creased uniforms, basking in the late afternoon sun. One of the officers inspected the travel documents.

The Jeep was parked behind us at the check post. The men stepped out of the Jeep to smoke beedis. I got a quick peek through the side-view mirror and sighed. Five men in total. One had a baseball cap on, another wore khaki pants and a safari shirt. I assumed the man with the goatee was the driver, who had gone to pee behind the bushes.

"Bad men, bad business." Senthil wrinkled his bulbous nose and turned on the ignition.

I shook my head. "Did you see how they tossed the cigarette butts and plastic bags out by the dirt road? Drinking in a moving vehicle? Tch."

"Bad men, bad business." After a pause he added, "Mam, these men can get nasty when they drink ... um ... toddy. Believe me, I've got into a fight or two

with drunks on the road. I don't want them to see you alone in this car ... um ... they even rape women in gangs, you know." Senthil looked at me in the rearview mirror. His face was grim.

I nodded my head and closed my fists in frustration. Why do we women have to watch our backs always, the fear of assault, sexual or otherwise, restricting our movements at every step? Sighing, I distracted my mind by going over the approaching conference activities: need to get input from women's groups in Hyderabad and Chennai, approve posters and local women's stories to be published by our office, audit of budget for the first quarter, attend forthcoming regional preparatory conferences in Bangladesh and Malaysia

My distraction is interrupted. The Jeep is now next to us, side by side, sharing the narrow jungle path. Senthil is silent, almost in a trance. He maintains a steady pace with his foot on the accelerator. Why can't he slow down and allow the Jeep to pass? Is he afraid that they will go ahead, block our way and force us to stop the vehicle? My heart is racing. My pale fingers clutch the folds of the crumpled saree. My tongue is as dry as sandpaper.

A moment later, our taxi jerks to the left of the road, as Senthil makes room for the Jeep to finally pass us on the right. The tires screech and groan. My elbow knocks hard against the side-door. A numbing tingle runs up my arm. I clench my teeth and choke on the dust in the air, kicked up by the vehicles.

The knots in my shoulders tighten and my legs are asleep. But my mind is hyper-alert. I thank my stars that the doors are locked. Huh, small comfort. Like it would prevent the bad guys from getting to me! I hold my breath. What's next?

Piercing honks. Shrieks. "Woohoo, we did it! You slow idiot." The Jeep zooms ahead. The sounds fade in the distance.

Stunned into silence, we don't speak for the next half-hour. When at last I return to an upright position, I'm a tangled mass, emerging out of the rabbit hole—vertebrae by vertebrae. Stretching my aching limbs, I look out of the window the same time as Senthil does. The Jeep is nowhere in sight.

"Those drunken rascals just wanted to race us." He wipes the sweat off his forehead again with his hand towel. "Whew."

I attempt a weak smile. Both of us reach for our bottles, gulping water down parched throats like thirsty crows.

The women from the non-profit groups in Calicut include several demands in the draft policy document, mainly the immediate closure of toddy shops in Kerala and measures to stop violence against women. On the return journey, I'm in no hurry to take any short cuts, so I direct Senthil to drive the longer, but safer route.



Seetha Anagol lives in Annapolis, Maryland with her husband and daughter. Her short stories and personal essays have been published in newspapers in India and the U.S. She has just completed writing her first novel.