

NO RIVER TO CROSS

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Shanti gazed out of the window, watching the rain beating down onto the houses and open spaces of the neighbourhood. She eased herself comfortably into her wheelchair, fascinated by the steam rising from the ground as the sheets of water raced over the hot wheelways between the buildings, the sounds rising and fading as the wind orchestrated the rhythm of the raindrops. Beyond the well-drained and protected areas of the village the countryside would be starting to flood. Her strong magic fingers fussed endlessly over the new clay pot she was making. Shanti was a romantic. In the security of her home she remembered another windy rainy day when she was a child, when she and all the members of her community lived in the world of the able-bodied.

Shanti had been late again for school. She was a determined little child and gritting her teeth she had dragged her lame leg through the mud churned up by the pounding rain. Closing her mouth tight she had walked on and on, long passed the usual river crossing, to the safe spot during the rainy season. Crossing the river had been more difficult than expected and she had been frightened, feeling alone and unsure about continuing the journey. But she had reached the school, all muddy and wet, and she was pleased with her success. Why then had the teacher shouted at her? 'You silly child! You must stay at home when it rains. Cripples don't belong in places where they cannot manage.'

Mr Pahad was the history teacher and that day he was giving a lesson on South Africa. He was always in a bad mood when he talked about racism and apartheid. The heavy rain made him feel worse. Now, he would probably have to carry Shanti home. He would get mud on his suit and tonight he was going to a magnificent banquet where he was to receive an award from the State Governor for his outstanding contribution to the welfare of disabled children at his school. Mr Pahad grumbled to himself as he unfolded the map of South Africa. 'South Africa', he started his lesson, 'was divided into segregated areas for black and white people. The racist government used to claim that segregating people into their own areas and services was the best possible way to meet the individual needs of the different social groups...' Suddenly, he had a thought. What if all disabled people, children, adults and older people, were sent to their own place. Then everything could be designed to meet their special needs. Special schools, special sport, special employment and special housing – everything could be special in their own area. A special village! They would never have to cross the river in the rainy season, or any season!

All that day, whenever he had a moment, Mr Pahad wrote and re-wrote his speech for the banquet. He was so excited that he forgot that he should have helped Shanti cross the river on her way home and then it was too late anyway. The rain was pounding down and she could not drag herself through the mud a second time at the end of the day. Everyone had gone home and Shanti and the teacher stared at each – he with dismay and Shanti with growing curiosity. She had guessed he was up to something and knew that it had to do with her, but what was he going to do? The expression on Mr Pahad's face slowly changed and he had another idea. He smiled at Shanti, took her by the hand and led her to his car. He was going to take her to the banquet! Shanti would be shown to the dinner guests. She looked so sweet and shy with her muddy dress and twisted foot. He would say that she couldn't cross the river and if all the able-bodied made donations they could build a disabled village on the other side. Then all the disabled people in the district could live there. 'We are going to a banquet' he had said, and not a word more.

Shanti had sat in the back seat, looking dreamily out the car window as she listened to the sounds of the car racing through the mud that had flooded onto the road. 'Earlier Mr Pahad had shouted at her for coming to school through the mud. Now, here they were in the middle of the same storm travelling to a banquet! Very confusing. Why did able-bodied people make all sorts of gadgets for themselves, to help them travel over rough ground, through rain and wind,' she wondered, 'but said that disabled people should stay at home whenever there was the slightest difficulty?' The rest of the evening was blurred in her memory. But she did remember the food and how the servants had brought it to the table in their spotless uniforms. Not a drop of mud anywhere except all over her dress. She had wanted to use the washroom before going into the banquet but Mr Pahad had insisted, 'No, no. I want everyone to see you the way you are.' She felt so ashamed – the token cripple at the dinner. Mr Pahad made his speech, paraded Shanti in front of the assembly, and explained his proposal for the disabled village. Everyone seemed pleased, they clapped and cheered, arranged committees to collect money, to agree about where the village would be built and how to assess the disabled people who would be sent there. It was agreed that this was to be a disabled village only for wheelchair users. If this worked out well other villages would be built for the blind, deaf and people with learning difficulties.

Shanti could not remember how she got home that night. No one had talked to her but she had been kissed and patted on the head often enough to bring her close to tears. Soon after the banquet night there was much activity in the region, committee meetings, demonstrations, conferences and grand celebrities appealing for funds. Shanti had her picture painted for a large poster which was stuck up everywhere – 'Shanti and others like her need your help. Give generously for the disabled village.' No one ever asked Shanti or her disabled friends whether this is what they wanted.

Then the day arrived for the village to be opened by Mr Pahad. Flags were flying and there was food for everyone. The disabled people were all sitting in their shiny new wheelchairs, lined up in rows and introduced to the famous guests. Speeches were made and more awards given to Mr Pahad for the wonderful thing he had just done to the 'wheelchair-bound'. Then they went away and the able-bodied carers took control. Days rolled past, one into another, as the helpers established a convenient routine to get the residents out of bed in the morning and back into bed at night. During the day they had occupational therapy.

At first all the residents hated being taken away from their homes and being organised by able-bodied carers. But as time passed they found that being together in an accessible environment gave them an opportunity to learn new things about themselves. Being together and being able to meet more or less when they wished meant they could share ideas and feelings. Shanti always remembered the strong feeling of relief when she discovered that she was not the only one who had been shouted at for not managing quite so well in the able-bodied world. Then the disabled residents discovered that in this accessible village, where everything was arranged for people who lived in wheelchairs, they could do all sorts of things which they were prevented from doing 'beyond the river' as they now called the able-bodied world. They could do their own shopping and, they realised, if only the able-bodied helpers would give permission, the counters could be lowered so that they could also work in the shops serving customers. But this idea was rejected by the carers, after consulting Mr Pahad. After all, the reason why the disabled were in the village was because they could not manage to do the things that able-bodied people could do!

Difficulties between residents and staff steadily grew as each suggestion for more control over their lives was turned down. The village residents organised their own committee and began plotting a

revolution. There were those who felt that if only they could change Mr Pahad's attitude this would surely lead to him giving the residents more rights over their lives. All they needed to prove was that there was discrimination and to make a good presentation of their case. Others felt that it had nothing to do with the strength of their argument or the presentation but just that able-bodied people could not understand the experiences of disability. The argument went on for hours and residents became worried that the helpers would discover what they were plotting. Then Shanti spoke out in public for the first time in her life. 'I know Mr Pahad', she said. 'He has many awards for helping the disabled. So why does he need to listen to us? We should do what we know is right. That way we will get the rewards and show others that we know what we want.' So it was agreed, no more begging for their rights.

The next Monday, when all the helpers went over the river for their regular monthly staff meeting with Mr Pahad, the disabled residents barred the village gates, closed off all entrances and exits and flooded pathways leading to the village. Shanti, being the smallest and lightest, was lifted onto a wall where she could watch for the returning helpers while disabled villagers prepared for battle. 'They're coming, they're coming.' Shanti remembered screaming with excitement. Oh what a wonderful war! From where she sat she could see everything. First the helpers were surprised. They never expected disabled people to do anything without their assistance. Then they got angry when their feet got wet and muddy in the pathways and they found all the entrances closed. When they realised jobs might be lost they were certain that 'the disabled' needed their help. They broke down the gate and rushed in. Bonk! bonk! They banged their heads and fell down. A low ceiling of poles had been tied into place with just enough room for wheelchair users to move freely underneath but too low for the 'walkers'. Then a row of villagers moved forward, pushing the dazed carers out of the village with scoops that had been fitted to the front of each wheelchair. The helpers had enough and ran away. Shanti had learnt a lot about herself that day. She never wanted anyone to decide what was best for her, or other disabled people, again.

After the revolution there was much to do and it was not long before the village began to look and feel very different. The pathways and roads were dug up and replaced with wheelways. Doorways and ceilings were lowered to a more comfortable height for wheelchair users. The shops, the school, and places of employment were all changed to suit life in a wheelchair. People adopted new fashions in clothing and the shoe shop began selling fancy tyres for wheelchairs. Memory of the able-bodied soon faded and the villagers forgot that they were supposed to be disabled. In this village they were the 'normal'.

A vivid flash of lightning followed by the rolling roar of thunder brought Shanti's dreams down to earth, as well as the pot she was making. It crashed into a million pieces onto the floor. In the sudden glare of light Shanti saw an able-bodied person struggling on the main wheelway. Then another, and another. A whole stream of able-bodied people escaping the storm. The river had burst its banks again and flooded the able-bodied world. In they came into the nearest houses and 'bonk' crashed their heads on the door lintels and ceilings. Their feet got stuck in the wheelway tracks and there was nowhere accessible for them to stay. Soon the village doctors were patching up the able-bodied and Shanti was helping with the food. Poor people. They had to eat off the floor because there were no tables. Villagers had long ago designed wheelchair attachments which they used for eating and as work surfaces.

The next few months were busy as the villagers tried to cope with the able-bodied. They seemed so helpless, unable to get out of the old community centre building that had become their residential

home, without damaging their feet in the wheelway tracks. Special transport was invented so that a little trolley for the able-bodied could be attached to a wheelchair and pulled along the wheelways. Who was going to look after them? They could not work as everything was designed for people in wheelchairs and soon able-bodied cripples in ill-fitting clothing made for wheelchair users sat about on wheelway corners begging for food and money. The special transport made regular trips taking the able-bodied from their residential home to the day centre where they could do some basket work and other useful occupational therapy. And worst of all was the chronic problem of bruised heads as the able-bodied continued to bash their foreheads against the doorways and ceilings. The village doctors diagnosed this as 'cerebral indigene' and recommended either a harness which could keep the able-bodied bent double at wheelchair height or padded guards which were strapped to the forehead.

Years passed and Shanti became increasingly concerned about welfare for able-bodied cripples. She was asked to organise a public appeal for money to provide the able-bodied with 'care in the community'. Shanti knew they needed help but felt there was something wrong with the idea of 'caring' for able-bodied people, even if they were disabled in this village. When someone suggested that instead of care the money might be used to set up a special place where the able-bodied could live Shanti's childhood memories of Mr Pahad, and the way his ignorance about disability had been rewarded, came rushing back.

'Disability isn't something that you have', she wrote in big letters on the back of an old envelope, 'it is something that happens to you when one group of people create barriers by designing the world only for their style of living. In the able-bodied world steps are convenient for them but disabling for wheelchair users. In the world of wheelchair users low doorways and ceiling are convenient but disabling to able-bodied people. The solution is not to avoid the problem of the flooding river by keeping people each to their own side but to build up the banks and construct bridges. In this way all social groups, including disabled people, can meet and make their own particular contribution to the welfare of society. Each group bringing its own experiences and ideas to make a rich environment celebrating human difference.' Shanti was a romantic. Now she had a mission in life!