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Sleep seemed frightened of her nowadays just as she was frightened of sleep. Blessed or cursed she didn't know, but she must have slept lightly for a few minutes, just long enough for the nightmare to wake her again. When she opened her eyes, the room was dark apart from a faint streak of light from the street lamp that threw the shadows of the trees onto the pale blue walls. Neela felt a chill down her spine. Whether it was because of the English winter, the fright of the nightmare, or the emotional turmoil inside her, she didn't know but she longed for the warmth of her own bed in India.

A rush of wind that leaked through the gap at the bottom of the window made the calendar flutter. Neela saw the bold letters and numbers. The date was the seventh of March 1985.

A year ago, exactly, she remembered the noise and commotion as her parents turned the house upside down, cleaning and scrubbing every inch of it. The furniture was moved from the front room to the shed. In her grandparents' time it had been the finest and most beautiful of its kind, delicately carved with lotuses and swans, but now it was threadbare and the surface veneer was peeling off in ribbons. Her parents borrowed modern furniture from their neighbours to transform their front room.

She could still hear her mother's anxious voice.

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‘Neela, quickly, hang up those new curtains; they will hide those hideous rusty iron bars on the windows.’

After arranging the curtains neatly, Neela went to the back yard and gathered a few *mandara* flowers, their leaves shiny and dark green. She arranged them in a copper vase which she placed on a *tea-poi* in the middle of the room. She looked around, satisfied. The linen curtains, the natural cane furniture with its yellow cushions, and the red *mandaras* complemented one another nicely in that whitewashed front room.

In the kitchen, her mother, Sharda, prepared *samosas* and onion *bajjis* for starters. For the main course, *aloo biriyani*, soft *naan* breads, and crispy *parathas*, accompanied by spiced lentils, deep fried tender okra and stuffed baby aubergines. The tender *rasamalai* and sweet Mango *halva* were the after dinner delicacies.

Parvati, the old *Dadima* from next door was astonished to see so many dishes for so few people. ‘*Hai-Ram!* How much are you preparing, woman?’ she said. ‘You can feed a king and his army with all that food. Today is only the bride-viewing day, not the wedding day!’

The memory of that dear old lady brought a smile to Neela’s lips. She was certainly a *Dadima*, a grandmother to everyone in her village of Gangapoor.

‘I know, *Dadima*,’ her mother said, ‘but since they are coming from London, I have no idea what foods they like, so I decided to make a variety so that they could choose.’

‘I know what you mean, Sharda. But I warn you that if you make this much now, they will expect much more for the wedding,’ said *Dadima*.

‘Yes, you are right,’ sighed her Maa in agreement. ‘But this is nothing compared to the happiness we will get if they agree to marry our girl.’

Neela remembered the excitement, happiness and hope reflected in her parents’ faces. At last, a well-educated man from London was coming to view their beloved daughter.

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They had approached so many suitable boys for Neela, but not one had agreed to marry her. Neela loathed the visits of these potential bridegrooms who came over with their relatives, mostly women folk, and examined her as if she were an ornament. She remembered the humiliation she suffered from the scrutinising stares and the intrusive questions.

‘So Neela, since you haven’t studied much, have you learned anything else?’

‘Can you cook at least?’

‘What about the housework? My son can’t stand a messy house.’

‘Um . . . anything else? Can you sing?’

‘Can you do embroidery?’

‘Nowadays, these young girls can’t do a thing.’

‘Oh, drawing and painting! That’s a surprise! But what use will that be? It’s a waste of time and money.’

While his family watched, weighed and compared her qualities to see if she would be a fit wife for their son, the would-be groom would sit ogling her with greedy eyes. Neela sighed. She knew that in this game of arranged marriages anyone from the boy’s side, even the dog, would rule the girl’s family. When the Interrogation session ended, the real anxiety began, but in the end the results were always the same.

‘Sorry, our boy wants a fair-skinned girl.’

‘Sorry, the dowry you are offering is not enough because your daughter is not a beauty.’

‘We all enjoyed your hospitality . . . but if only your girl’s skin tone was a little lighter . . .’

‘We will think about it but only if you double the dowry.’

She had been through many of these encounters in the last four years and more and more wished that she had gone to college like the wealthy girls in the cities, but with her village school education she could only get a job in the *Charminar* cigarette factory. How many times had she asked her father to let her work there? At least then she

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would be independent, even if she didn't get married. But his answer was always the same.

'Only after my death. As long as I am alive I won't let my daughter work for her living.'

In her community it would be a disgrace for any parent to let their unmarried daughter work. She knew that she would never be independent. It was impossible.

Just when her parents were losing hope, the miracle had happened. Ajay Pattwar had arrived from a foreign land seeking a suitable girl for marriage. Of course, if she were lucky, and he liked her, she would have to leave her beloved parents and her dear friends. She would have to leave India. Her parents told her it would be worth the sacrifice.

Now, as preparations were well underway, Neela was surprised to find the excitement rubbing off on her. Her thoughts focused on this bridegroom: how would he look? Would he be like a film star, perhaps tall and handsome? If so, would he like a girl who was considered dark and plain? *Pundit-ji*, the marriage broker, had said, 'It's not that they can't find a match, no-no.' He clucked his tongue. 'They just want a girl from your cultural background and her personality is far more important than her looks. That's why they are coming from so far away.' He chuckled. 'You never know, you might be in luck.'

The day arrived. A taxi stopped in front of their modest house, causing a stir in that small village. Neela, hearing the commotion, went to her bedroom window and opened its wooden shutters, just a crack. A crowd of children, men and women were gathered around the taxi. She knew that they had followed it from the main road because it was big news when a taxi came to Gangapoor. Her parents, aunties, uncles, and neighbours rushed out to welcome the new guests and invite them in.

Ajay stepped out of the car but remained hidden behind his lavishly-dressed mother, Durga-devi Pattwar. Neela's eyes boggled at the sight of her. How did that bright green, chiffon sari circle her bulging light

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brown flesh and non-existent waist line? No wonder she was blocking any view of her son. Neela gasped to see that the woman's huge neck, wrists, fingers and even her hair – which was twisted in a high bun – were overflowing with gold and emerald jewellery. Through the gate she sailed in slow motion, followed by the long trail of her loud relatives.

Neela's anxiety rose. Her tiny room was like a hot oven. The small table fan, even twirling at high speed, didn't help to cool her. There she stood, surveying her room, so cluttered now with heaps of colourful saris in silk, cotton and chiffon. There was no room left to move; even her bed was laden with jewellery. Gold, silver and pearl necklaces, bangles and earrings, all glittered in half-opened boxes. Her aunties, and her friend Suji, had brought their entire jewellery collections and all their saris so that she could choose. The window sill, used as a dressing table, was overflowing with *Ashoka* face powder, *Eyetex kajal*, a new *Vicco turmeric* vanishing cream, and a bottle of red liquid *vermilion*.

Neela had already sifted through a pile of saris that, one by one, she patiently tried on, standing in front of a full-length mirror. Her aunties and Suji decided how suitable each one was for this bride-viewing occasion. They concluded that the dark colours didn't suit her; pale colours made her look darker, and the bright colours were too loud and distracting. Eventually they settled on a subtle, dusty-pink, silk sari with black brocade and delicate silver embroidery. They teamed it with a matching blouse adorned with tiny black and silver beads. She chose her late grandmother's coral necklace and earrings from the box of jewellery which she and her mother shared.

'You look so elegant. This sari really suits you and shows off your slim figure,' cooed Suji, arranging the sari *pallu* neatly on Neela's shoulders.

'Look at your eyes, they are sparkling already,' Auntie Jaya smiled, looking at Neela's reflection in the mirror as she clipped into her long hair garlands of fresh jasmine flowers.

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The delicate fragrance wafted around her. Neela was in turn excited and nervous. At any moment now they would call her out to the drawing room to introduce her to Ajay, who, if she could reach his expectations, would make her his wife and take her across the seas to that far away wonderland where he lived . . .

‘Neela, come, come quickly. They want to see you now.’ Her mother came rushing in. ‘Take these *jelabis* to offer them.’ She thrust a tray of pastries into her hands before pausing to examine her daughter and to check whether she was presentable for these potential customers.

Neela felt a wave of exhilaration. Her steps faltered. Beads of perspiration broke on her forehead. The tray rattled in her hands. Her quickened heartbeat made her breathless so that she had to stop. Putting the tray down on a table, she leaned on the wall for a moment, dabbing her sari *pallu* on her forehead to wipe away the droplets of sweat. Then, taking a deep breath to compose herself, she took the tray again in her hands. With her eyes downcast, she hesitantly entered the front room where everyone fell silent as they turned towards her. Though she was looking down at her feet, she was aware that all eyes in that room were on her. The guests from London and their relatives sat on the borrowed chairs while her parents and family sat opposite on straw mats on the floor.

‘This is Neela, my daughter.’ Her father stood up, introducing her to the guests.

Neela tried to steady herself again but it was impossible to stop trembling. Carefully placing the tray on a *tea-poi*, she greeted them, ‘*Namastay*,’ with her palms folded together. She kept her head down modestly as she lowered herself to sit between her parents. Suji came and sat behind her for moral support. Patting Neela’s arm, she whispered, ‘Don’t be shy. Look at the bridegroom.’

Neela lifted her eyes slowly and shyly towards Ajay. The first thing she saw was a pair of highly polished shoes shimmering like black glass. Then she noticed his navy suit, white shirt and blue tie. He

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appeared to be business-like or one could say 'London-like'. He was of average height and medium built. His complexion was one or two shades lighter than her own, and his features were thick and wide in his round, clean-shaven face.

'Please have some more almond *burffi*. Neela specially made it with pure *ghee*. She saw the recipe in a magazine,' said Sharada.

Neela heard in her mother's voice the desire to impress the bridegroom with her daughter's culinary skills and literacy.

'No thanks. I've had enough,' Ajay answered in English and looked at his mother.

'He doesn't like Indian sweets. Don't force him,' his mother supported him.

'Would you like to ask Neela anything?' Uncle Das interrupted.

'He can't understand much Hindi,' Durga-devi smiled proudly at her son.

Neela looked up at Ajay curiously while Uncle Das repeated the same question in his strong, Indian-accented English.

'No, not really,' Ajay said in a dry tone, taking at least a minute to answer.

'Neela loves to draw and paint. Did you see those patterns on the threshold? She painted them.' She heard Aunty Jaya's voice and glanced again eagerly at Ajay.

His gaze was fixed on an empty space on the wall. He didn't turn towards her or to the threshold. Was he shy, or was he nervous like her? wondered Neela. Perhaps wearing that dark coloured heavy suit was just too uncomfortable. The day had been scorching hot and unbearably humid. The single ceiling fan wasn't making much of an impression either. It squeaked noisily, as if saying that it was getting old and couldn't go on turning round and round for much longer.

'So, Ajay, it must be completely different from here, the way you do business there, in the UK?' Uncle Das was trying to engage him in conversation.

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‘Definitely, *Das-bhayya*. Do you think they have little tiny shops and weigh things with old fashioned scales and stones like we still do? No, no . . .,’ Uncle Madhu tried to show off his knowledge but was stopped abruptly by his older brother’s dismissive hand gesture.

‘Actually, what sort of business do you do, Ajay?’ Uncle Das continued his conversation with Ajay.

‘He runs a newsagents business. It’s going quite well,’ Durga-devi answered, glancing round at everyone. ‘He is always busy with the business, his hobbies and what not.’ She looked in the direction of Neela and her family, saying, ‘He hardly ever has time to relax or eat properly.’

‘It’s good to have hobbies, otherwise life would become dull like ours.’ Narayan Swaran, Neela’s father, looked appreciatively at Ajay. ‘Most of us don’t have time for any other activities. We only work, eat and sleep.’

‘May I ask what sort of hobbies they are?’ Suji asked suddenly.

Neela looked at Ajay’s well-fed figure and thought that either his mother was lying about him having no time to eat, or his metabolism must be very low.

‘Oh, he likes going to car shows and football and shopping. Of course only in designer shops,’ Durga-devi replied.

‘That’s wonderful. You play football!’ Uncle Madhu was excited.

Ajay squirmed uncomfortably in his chair.

‘And you said shopping . . .?’ Suji enquired.

Could shopping be a hobby? mused Neela.

‘Uh, I told you already, he only shops for designer clothes,’ Durga-devi tried to smile.

What on earth does ‘designer’ mean? Neela wondered.

Neela couldn’t help but notice that while Durga-devi was talking proudly about her son, Ajay was staring at the ceiling and walls, uneasy, oblivious of Neela’s replies. Why wasn’t he saying anything.

‘Is he mute, or what? I wish that queen ant would go and sting him

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hard. Then at least he might open his mouth to scream,' whispered an annoyed Suji, looking at a giant red ant coming out of a tiny crack in the cement floor near Ajay's chair. The image amused Neela so much that she had to cover her mouth with her hand to stop herself giggling. 'Neela doesn't speak much English but she will learn quickly. She is a fast learner,' pleaded Sharda.

Durga-devi waved her hand in the air and said, 'My Ajay doesn't speak much Hindi so your daughter will have to speak English to him. And what she doesn't know, I am sure he will teach her.'

Neela's family continued to treat Ajay and his family as if they were royalty as they invited the guests to eat.

'Please come in.' Her father escorted them into their tiny dining room. 'Sorry we could only offer you these modest seats,' he gestured towards the borrowed, laminated chairs and table. 'They might not be as comfortable as yours in London.'

'Don't worry. It can't be helped. We'll have to adjust.' Durga-devi looked at Sharda and added, 'I know you won't have proper cutlery, but do you at least have some spoons?'

'Oh, I am sorry, I didn't realise! Please forgive me. I will bring them in a minute.' Sharda was tripping over her sari in her haste and panic to reach the kitchen.

'You sit, Maa.' Neela steadied her mother. 'I will go and fetch them.'

'I don't know how you will like our food . . .' Sharda continued worrying.

Neela gave Suji a meaningful look, shaking her head, and Suji in return looked up, and shrugged her shoulders. The image of her parents, respectful in front of Ajay and his mother, their hands folded and their heads bowed like two worthless beggars, would stay in Neela's mind for ever.

'So what would you say, Ajay?' Uncle Das smiled, when the guests started to leave to go to their relatives in the city.

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Ajay didn't answer immediately. Neela understood that he needed some time to think and make up his mind.

She knew that her parents didn't sleep for the whole week. Neela too needed some time to think because there was something about Ajay that didn't quite match his well tailored suit. Perhaps he was not up to her expectations? Expectations! She was surprised she even dared think of that. Was she allowed any expectations? She never really dared to imagine a stunningly handsome husband. But recently she had been secretly dreaming about a man who could cast a spell on her.

The day after the bride-viewing, as the evening was drawing in and cooling down the heat, Neela went and sat on the wooden swing on the veranda at the back of the house. She lightly pressed her feet on the stone floor, making the swing squeak gently.

'What are you doing out here on your own? Dreaming?' Suji came and sat next to her.

Neela looked at her friend thoughtfully but couldn't answer. Suji was newly married and seemed to be in love with her husband. It was Suji who had told her about those intimate magical moments between a man and a woman.

Suji knew what was on Neela's mind. 'So what do you think? Do you like him?'

'I don't know, Suji. Nothing happened to me when I looked at him. No magic or anything of the sort you talked about.'

'Don't worry. When you eventually get married, it will all come with that first touch.'

'Do I have to get married?'

Suji looked astonished. 'What sort of question is that? Of course you have to.'

'Why, what's wrong with the way I am now? I am happy. Why can't I live like this for the rest of my life?'

'Don't be silly, you can't live your whole life unmarried. Even if you

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are happy, what about your parents? How would they feel when people talked about you?’

‘Who cares about people?’

‘You don’t, but your parents do. You know that people talk about unmarried girls over twenty as if they were really cheap,’ she pressed her feet down on the floor to stop the swing and turned to Neela. ‘If you wait another couple of years, they will throw mud at you and you won’t even be able to hold your head high when you walk on the street.’ She stopped for a moment and looked at her friend, ‘It will break your parents’ hearts.’

Neela went quiet for a while, staring at the grey clouds travelling across the sky.

‘Is marriage the ultimate destiny for a girl?’

‘It seems to be here.’ Suji shrugged.

‘I wish girls were free to do whatever they want. Study . . . work . . . fall in love and marry for love . . .’ Neela said languidly, still looking up at the drifting clouds.

‘Fall in love? Marry for love?’ Wide eyed, Suji placed her hands over her chest. ‘*Hai-Ram!* How dare an unmarried girl not just think but utter that sinful word *love*? Your parents will hang you and then hang themselves in shame.’ Suji tied an imaginary rope around her neck, stuck out her tongue and coughed.

Neela’s dark mood dissolved, and the two girls both laughed until tears were running down their faces.

‘The rule, my dear, is to marry first, and love later.’ Suji said placing her thumb on her chest, ‘Like me.’

‘I don’t think he liked me, Suji.’ Neela halted the swing.

‘Don’t be silly. Of course he liked you. You looked so pretty.’

‘Don’t joke, Suji. Didn’t you notice how he seemed more interested in the walls and ceilings than me . . . I suppose I can’t blame him.’

‘Now don’t underestimate yourself. He is not used to this kind of culture . . .’ Suji continued.

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‘Um.’

‘Everything is everyone’s business here. No wonder he felt uneasy about the whole situation.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘His Mum certainly enjoyed the attention and being treated like a queen.’ Suji made a face.

‘Yes, strange . . . very rude I thought.’ said Neela.

‘Aren’t most mothers-in-law? I just ignore the rattle of my one.’ Suji suddenly turned to face Neela. ‘One piece of advice though, you will have to keep an eye on Ajay. His mother obviously rules the roost.’

‘Yes, but . . . I don’t know, Suji. In a way I am dreading their answer. I mean either way.’

Seeing Neela’s eyes widen with fear, Suji laughed. ‘Don’t worry. I will give you some lessons later on how to manipulate your husband and how to keep the mother-in-law at bay.’ She laughed, holding Neela’s hands and pulling her up. ‘That’s enough for today. Let’s go for a walk and watch the sun sink into the Manjeera.’