

‘Where is Suraj?’ I said. Suraj was the owner of Moonshine Events, the event manager we had appointed for the wedding. ‘We will manage last minute’ is what he had told me.

‘At the airport,’ Arijit said.

My father ambled up to the reception desk. ‘Everything okay, beta?’

I explained the situation to him.

‘Thirty rooms! The Gulatis have 120 guests,’ my father said.

‘Exactly.’ I threw up my hands.

Mom and Kamla bua came to the reception as well. ‘I told Sudarshan also, why all this Goa business? Delhi has so many nice banquet halls and farmhouses. Seems like you have money to waste,’ Kamla bua said.

I wanted to retort but my mother gave me the Mother Look.

*They are our guests*, I reminded myself. I let out a huge breath.

‘How many from our side?’ my mother said.

‘Mehta family has 117 guests, ma’am,’ Arijit said, counting from his reservation sheets.

‘If we only have eighty, that is forty rooms for each side,’ I said. ‘Let’s reallocate. Stop the check-ins for the Mehtas right now.’

Arijit signalled the smiling ladies at the counter. They stopped the smiles and the check-ins and put the shell necklaces back in the drawer.

‘How can we reduce the rooms for the boy’s side?’ my mother said in a shocked voice.

‘What else to do?’ I said.

‘How many rooms are they expecting?’ she said.

‘Fifty,’ I said. ‘Call them now. They will readjust their allocations on the way here.’

‘How can you ask the boy’s side to adjust?’ Kamla bua said. ‘Aparna, are you serious?’

My mother looked at Kamla bua and me.

‘But how can we manage in only thirty rooms?’ I said and turned to my father. ‘Dad, call them.’

‘Sudarshan, don’t insult them before they even arrive,’ Kamla bua said. ‘We will manage in thirty rooms. It’s okay. Some of us will sleep on the floor.’

‘Nobody needs to sleep on the floor, bua,’ I said. ‘I am sorry this screw-up happened. But if we have forty rooms each, it is three to a room. With so many kids anyway, it should be fine.’

‘We can manage in thirty,’ my mother said.

‘Mom? That’s four to a room. While the Gulatis will have so much space. Let’s tell them.’

‘No,’ my mother said. ‘We can’t do that.’

‘Why?’

‘They are the boy’s side. Little bit also you don’t understand?’

I didn’t want to lose it at my own wedding, definitely not in the first hour of arrival. I turned to my father. ‘Dad, it’s no big deal. His family will understand. We are here for six nights. It will get too tight for us,’ I said.

Dad, of course, would not listen. These two women, his wife and sister, controlled his remote. For once, both of them were on the same page as well.

‘Beta, these are norms. You don’t understand. We have to keep them comfortable. Girl’s side is expected to adjust,’ he said.

I argued for five more minutes. It didn’t work. I had to relent. And do what the girl’s side needs to do—adjust.

‘You and Aditi take a room,’ my mother said, referring to my sister.

‘Let her be with her husband. What will jiju think?’ I said.

‘Anil will adjust with the other gents,’ Kamla bua said.

Over the next twenty minutes the two women sorted the extended Mehta family comprising 117 people into thirty rooms. They used a complex algorithm with criteria like the people sharing the room should not hate each other (warring relatives were put in different rooms) or be potentially attracted to each other (mixed gender rooms were avoided, even if it involved people aged eighty-plus). Kids were packed five to a room, often with a grandparent. Kamla bua, herself a widow, dramatically offered to sleep on the floor in my parents’ room, causing my father to offer his own bed and sleep on the floor instead. Of course, Arijit kept saying that they would put extra beds in the room. But how can you compare sleeping on an extra Marriott bed with the Punjabi bua’s eternal sacrifice of sleeping on the floor?

‘I am happy with roti and achaar,’ Kamla bua said.

‘It’s the Marriott. There is enough food, bua,’ I said.

‘I am just saying.’

‘Can you please focus on the reallocations? We all need to be checked in before the Gulatis arrive,’ I said.

In the middle of this chaos, I forgot what I had come here for. I had come to change my life forever. To do something I’d never believed in my whole life. To do something I never thought I would. I had come to have an arranged marriage.

Here I was, lost in logistics, guest arrangements and bua tantrums. I took a moment to reflect.

*I will be married in a week. To a guy I hardly know. This guy and I are to share a bed, home and life for the rest of my life.*

*Why isn’t it sinking in? Why am I fighting with Suraj on chat instead?*

Me: Major screw-up on rooms, Suraj. Not cool.

Suraj: Sorry. Really sorry. Political reasons. Tried. Really.

Me: What else is going to get screwed up?

Suraj: Nothing. IndiGo from Mumbai just landed. We are ready to receive guests. See you soon.

I went to the Mehta–Gulati check-in desk. All my family guests had checked in. Some did grumble about sharing a room with three others but most seemed fine. Mom said that the grumblers were the jealous types, the relatives who couldn’t stand the fact that we had reached a level where we could do a destination wedding in Goa. The supportive ones, according to mom, were those who understood what it was like to be the girl’s side.

‘Do not use this “girl’s side” and “boy’s side” logic with me again. I don’t like it,’ I said. Mom and I were sitting in the lobby, ensuring that the staff readied the special check-in desk for the Gulatis.

‘Can you stop waving your feminism flag for a week? This is a wedding, not an NGO activist venue,’ my mother said.

‘But. . .’

‘I know you are paying for it. Still, beta, protocol is protocol.’

‘It is a sexist protocol.’

‘Did you figure out your parlour appointments? Aditi also wants hair and make-up all six days.’

I love how my mother can throw another topic into the conversation if she doesn’t want to answer me.

‘Of course she does,’ I said.

‘Now go change,’ mom said.

‘What?’

‘You are going to meet the boy’s side in jeans and T-shirt? And look at your neck!’

‘Again you said “boy’s side”. And what’s wrong with my neck?’

‘There is no jewellery. Go change into a salwar-kameez and wear a chain from my jewellery box.’

‘I have just arrived. I am working to settle the guests in. Why am I expected to doll up? Is the boy expected to dress up right after he gets off a flight?’

My mother folded her hands. When logic fails, she does this, brings both her hands together dramatically. Strangely, it works.

I relented and stood up. She handed me the key cards to her and my room. I went to her room first. I took out a gold necklace, the thinnest and least hideous of them all. *Why am I agreeing to this?* I wondered even as I wore it. *Maybe because I failed when I did things my way. All the women’s empowerment and feminism bullshit didn’t really take me anywhere, right? Maybe Kamla bua and mom’s way was the right way.*

I went to my room. Four huge suitcases were crammed into the walking space in the corridor. Two giant bags belonged to my sister, who had essentially packed a retail store’s worth of dresses for herself.

I opened one of my suitcases, took out a yellow silk salwar-kameez with a slim zari border. My mother had told me, no cottons this week. I undressed. I looked at myself in the mirror. My wavy hair had grown, and now reached my shoulders. I looked slim—the two-month diet before the wedding had helped. The black La Perla lingerie I had purchased in Hong Kong also gave a little lift here and a little tuck there. *Expensive underwear can make any woman look sexy*, a little voice in my head said. Some men in the past had called me sexy, but they could have been biased. *Why am I always so hard on myself? Why couldn’t they have genuinely found me sexy?* Well, it didn’t matter now. I would be undressing in front of a new man soon. The thought made me shudder.

I walked closer to the mirror. I saw my face up-close. ‘It’s all happening, Radhika,’ I said out loud.

Hi, I am Radhika Mehta and I am getting married this week. I am twenty-seven years old. I grew up in Delhi. I now work in London, at Goldman Sachs, an investment bank. I am a vice president in the Distressed Debt Group. Thank you for reading my story. However, let me warn you. You may not like me too much. One, I make a lot of money. Two, I have an opinion on everything. Three, I’ve had sex. Now if I was a guy you would be okay with all of this. But since I am a girl these three things don’t really make me too likeable, do they?

I am also a bit of a nerd. My sister, Aditi, and I went to school together in Delhi at Springdales, Pusa Road. She is just a year older than me. My parents wanted a son for their firstborn. When Aditi came, they had to undo the damage as soon as possible. Hence, my father, SBI Naraina Vihar Branch Manager Sudarshan Mehta, decided to have another child with his homemaker wife, Aparna Mehta. Sadly for them, the second was also a girl, which was me. It is rumoured that they tried again twice; both times my mother had an abortion because it was a girl. I confronted her on this topic years ago, but she brushed it off.

‘I don’t remember, actually,’ she said, ‘but I am happy with my two daughters.’

‘You don’t remember two abortions?’

‘You will judge me, so no point telling you. You don’t know what it is like to be without a

son.'

I had stopped asking her after that.

In school, Aditi didi was a hundred times more popular than me. She was the girl boys had crushes on. I was the girl who started to wear spectacles in class six. Aditi didi is fair-complexioned. I am what they call wheatish in matrimonial ads (why don't they call white-skinned people rice-ish?). We look like the before-after pictures in a fairness cream ad; I'm the before picture, of course. Aditi didi started dieting from age twelve, and waxed her legs from age thirteen. I topped my class at age twelve, and won the Maths Olympiad at age thirteen. Clearly, she was the cooler one. In school, people either didn't notice me or made fun of me. I preferred the former. Hence, I stayed in the background, with my books. Once, in class ten, a boy asked me out in front of the whole class. He gave me a red rose along with an Archies greeting card. Overwhelmed, I cried tears of joy. Turned out it was a prank. The entire class laughed as he squeezed the rose and ink sprayed across my face. My spectacles protected my eyes, thankfully.

That day I realized I had only one thing going for me—academics. In class twelve I was the school topper. I ranked among the top five in Delhi, which, come to think of it, was a major loser-like thing to do. Unlike me, Aditi didi had barely passed class twelve a year ago. However, she did win the unofficial title of Miss Hotness at her farewell. In some ways, oh well, in every way, that was a bigger achievement than topping CBSE.

Have you heard about the insane cut-offs at Delhi University? I am the kind of student that causes them. I scored a 98 per cent aggregate in class twelve. Then I joined Shri Ram College of Commerce, or SRCC. People say it is one of the best colleges for nerds. At SRCC, I realized that I was nerdier than even the regular nerds. I topped there too. I never bunked a class. I hardly spoke to any boys, I made few friends. With bad school memories, I wanted to survive college with as little human contact as possible.

I finished college and took the CAT for MBA entrance. As you can guess, nerdy me hit a 99.7 percentile. I made it to IIM Ahmedabad. In contrast, Aditi didi had finished her graduation from Amity University the year before and wanted to get married. She had two criteria for her groom. One, the boy had to be rich. Second, well, there was no second criterion really. She said something like she wanted to be a housewife and look after her husband. Fortunately, rich Punjabi men in Delhi who can't woo women on their own are only too happy to oblige girls like her. Aditi didi married Anil, owner of three sanitaryware shops in Paharganj and two Honda CR-Vs. They had their wedding the same year I joined IIMA.

'You should also get married soon,' didi had told me. 'There's a right time for a girl to marry. Don't delay it.'

'I am twenty-one,' I said. 'I haven't even done my master's yet.'

'The younger the better. Especially for someone like you,' she said.

'What do you mean *especially* for someone like me?'

She never explained. I guess she meant for someone as nerdy as me or as wheatish as me or someone whose breasts weren't the size of footballs, as Punjabi men prefer.

I joined IIMA. I finally found nerd heaven. Everyone studied, and just when you thought you had studied enough, the institute gave you more assignments. My mother called on a regular basis, primarily to discuss her favourite topic. 'Start looking at boys at least. Anil's circle has many good, rich guys.'

'I am not going to marry a man from the circle of sanitaryware shop owners, mom.'

'Why?' my mother said, genuinely confused.

‘You know what, I am not getting married for several years anyway. Forget it. I have class now. Bye.’

I finished with IIMA. Overachiever me had a job offer on Day Zero, the prime slot for recruiters. I got an offer to be an associate at Goldman Sachs, New York. The job paid an annual compensation of 120,000 dollars.

‘Forty-eight lakh rupees a year, four lakhs a month, mom,’ I told her on the phone.

I heard nothing in response. Most likely she had fainted. My father had never crossed a third of this amount in his twenty-five-year career with the State Bank of India.

‘Are you there, mom?’

‘How will I ever find a boy for you?’ she said.

That was her prime concern. Her twenty-three-year-old daughter, who grew up in middle-class West Delhi, had cracked a job at one of the biggest investment banks in the world and all she cared about was its impact on her groom-hunt.

‘Stop it, mom. What boy?’

‘Who wants to marry a girl who earns so much? If the boy earns less, he won’t consider you. If he earns more, why would he marry a working girl?’

‘I have no idea what you are talking about. But I am moving to America. I have a great job. Can you save your melodrama for another time?’

‘Your father wants to speak to you,’ she said and passed him the phone.

‘Goldman Sachs? American, no?’ he said.



My room phone rang, startling me back to reality. *I am in Goa, not IIMA*, I reminded myself.

‘Where are you? The Gulatis are ten minutes away,’ my mother said.

‘Huh? I am here, mom. In my room.’

‘Are you dressed?’

I looked in the mirror.

‘Yeah, almost.’

‘Come down fast. What are you wearing?’

‘The yellow salwar-kameez. Zari border.’

‘Silk?’

‘Yes.’

‘You wore a chain?’

‘Yes.’

‘Come then.’



‘Hey, remember me?’ I heard a voice behind me. I turned around.

‘Brijesh,’ I said to my husband-to-be. ‘Hi.’