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ACT 2: Delhi

12

‘What are you reading with such concentration?’ my mother asked as she chopped bhindi on the dining table.

‘It’s the Citibank new employee form. I have to fill fifty pages. They want to know everything, like where was your mother born.’

‘On the way from Lahore to Delhi. Your grandmother delivered me in a makeshift tent near Punjabi Bagh.’

‘I’ll write Delhi,’ I said.

I had come home for the two-month break before joining Citibank. Even in April, Delhi temperature had already crossed forty degree centigrade. There wasn’t much to do, apart from calling Ananya once a day or waiting for her call. I sat with my mother as she prepared lunch. My father wasn’t home, nobody really sure or caring about where he was.

‘Is this the form where you fill your location preference?’ my mother asked.

I looked at her hands, a little more wrinkled then before I left to join college. She cut the top and tail of a bhindi and slit it in the middle.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘You chose Delhi, right?’

I kept quiet.

‘What?’

‘Yes I will,’ I said.

The phone rang. I rushed to pick it up. It was Sunday and cheaper STD rates meant Ananya would call at noon.

‘Hi, my honeybunch,’ Ananya said.

‘Obviously, your mother is not around,’ I said. I spoke in a low volume as my own mother kept her eyes on the bhindi but ears on me.

‘Of course not. She’s gone to buy stuff for *Varsha Porupu* puja tomorrow.’

‘Varsha what?’

‘Varsha Porupu, Tamil new year. Don’t you guys know?’

‘Uh, yes of course, Happy New Year,’ I said.

‘And have you sent in your Citibank form yet?’

‘No, have to fill a few final items,’ I said.

‘You’ve given Chennai as your top location choice?’

‘I will....wait.’

I picked up the phone and went as far from my mother as the curly landline wire allowed me. ‘My mother expects me to put Delhi,’ I whispered.

‘And what do you want? HLL has placed me in Chennai. I told you weeks ago. How are we going to make this work?’

‘We will. But if I come to Chennai, she’ll know it is for you.’

‘Fine, then tell her that.’

‘How?’

‘I don’t know. They didn’t give me a choice, else I would have come to Delhi. I miss you sweets, a lot. Please, baby, come soon.’

‘I’m someone else’s baby too, quite literally. And she is watching me, so I better hang up.’

‘Please say “I love you”.’

‘I do.’

‘No, say it nicely.’

‘Ananya!’

‘Just once. The three words together.’

I looked at my mother. She picked up the last bunch of bhindis and wiped them with a wet cloth. Her shiny knife, symbolic of her current position in my love story, gleamed in the afternoon light.

‘Movies I love. You should see them, too.’

'Aww, that's not fair,' Ananya mock-cried at the other end.

'Bye,' I said.

'OK, love you. Bye,' she ended the call.

I came back to the dining table. Out of guilt, I picked up a few bhindis and started wiping them with a cloth.

'Madrasi girl?'

'Ananya,' I said.

'Stay away from her. They brainwash, these people.'

'Mom, I like her. In fact, I love her.'

'See, I told you. They trap you,' my mother declared.

'Nobody has trapped me, mom,' I said as I thwacked a bhindi on the table. 'She is a nice girl. She is smart, intelligent, good-looking. She has a good job. Why would she need to trap anyone?'

'They like North Indian men.'

'Why? What's so special about North Indian men?'

'North Indians are fairer. The Tamilians have a complex.'

A complexion, complex?' I chuckled.

'Yes, huge,' my mother said.

'Mom, she went to IIMA, she is one of the smartest girls in India. What are you talking about? And not that it matters, but you have seen her. She is fairer than me.'

'The fair ones are the most dangerous. Sridevi and Hema Malini.'

'Mom, stop comparing Ananya to Sridevi and Hema Malini,' I screamed and pushed the bhindi bowl on the table aside with my arm. The bowl pushed the knife, which in turn rammed against my mother's fingers. She winced in pain as drops of blood flooded her right index fingers.

'Mom, I am so sorry,' I said. 'I am so sorry.'

'It's OK. Kill me. Kill me for this girl,' she wailed.

‘Mom, I am not.....’ A drop of blood fell on my Citibank form. *Now would be the time to betray your mother, you idiot*, I thought.

‘I am going to write Delhi,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Nothing. Where are the band-aids? Don’t worry, I will cook the bhindi. Give me the masala.’

I bandaged my mother and had her recline on the sofa. I switched on the TV. I tried to find a channel with a soap opera that didn’t show children disrespecting their parents. I filled each bhindi with masala over the next hour.

‘Do you know how to switch on the gas?’ she screamed form the living room as I hunted for matches in the kitchen.

‘I do. Don’t worry.’

‘I can show you Punjabi girls fair as milk,’ she said, her volume louder than the TV. I ignored her as I checked the cupboard for a vessel. ‘Should we give a matrimonial ad? Verma aunty downstairs gave it; she got fifty responses even though her son is from donation college. You will get five hundred,’ my mother said.

‘Let it be, mom,’ I said.

I ignited the stove and kept the pan over it. I poured cooking oil and opened the drawers to find cumin seeds. It was kept in the same place as when I left home for college over seven years ago.

‘Actually, I have a girl in mind. You have seen Pammi aunty’s daughter?’

‘No. and I don’t want to,’ I said.

‘Wait,’ my mother said as a new wave of energy was unleashed within her. I heard her open the Godrej cupboard in her bedroom. She brought a wedding album to the kitchen. ‘Lower the flame, you’ll burn it. And why haven’t you switched on the exhaust?’ she snatched the ladle from me and took control of the stove. She stirred the bhindi with vigour as she spoke again. ‘Open this album. See the girl dancing in the baraat next to the horse. She is wearing a pink lehnga.’

‘Mom,’ I protested.

‘Listen to me also sometimes. Didn’t I meet Jayalalitha’s family on your request?’

‘What?’

‘Nothing, see the picture.’

I opened the album. It was my second cousin Dinki’s wedding to Deepu. The first five pages of the album were filled with face shots of the boy and girl in various kaleidoscopic combinations and enclosed by heart-filled frames. I flipped through the album and came to the pictures with the horse.

I saw a girl in pink lehnga, her face barely visible under a lot of hair. She was in the middle of a dance step with her hands held high and index fingers pointing up.

‘Isn’t she pretty?’ My mother switched on the other gas stove and put a tawa on it to make rotis. She took out a rolling pin and dough.

‘I can’t make out,’ I said.

‘You should meet her. And here, keep stirring the bhindi while I make the rotis,’ She handed me the ladle.

‘I don’t want to meet anyone.’

‘Only once.’

‘What’s so special about her?’

‘They have six petrol pumps.’

‘What?’

‘Her father. He has six petrol pumps. And the best part is, they have only two daughters. So each son-in-law will get three, just imagine.’

‘What?’ I said as I imagined myself sitting in a gas station.

‘Yes, they are very rich. Petrol pumps sell in cash. Lots of black money.’

‘And what does the girl do? Is she educated?’

‘She is doing something. These days you can do graduation by correspondence also.’

‘Oh, so she is not even going to college?’

‘College degrees you can get easily. They are quite rich.’

'Mom, that's not the point. I can't believe you are going to marry me to a twelfth pass....oh, forget it. Put this album away. And are the rotis done? I am hungry.'

'We can get an educated Punjabi girl.'

'No, I don't like any Punjabi girl.'

'Your mother is a Punjabi,' my mother said in an upset tone.

'That's not the point, mom,' I said and opened the fridge to take out curd. 'I don't want any other girl. I have a girlfriend.'

'You'll marry that Madrasi girl?' my mother asked, seriously shocked for the first time since she found out about Ananya.

'I want to. In time, of course.'

My mother slapped a roti on the tawa and then slapped her forehead.

'Let's eat,' I said, ignoring her demonstrations of disappointment. We placed the food on the living-room coffee table and sat down in front of the TV.

The doorbell rang twice.

'Oh no, it's your father,' my mother said. 'Switch off the TV.'

'It's OK,' I said.

My mother gave me a stern glance. I reluctantly shut the television. My mother opened the door. My father came inside and looked at me. I turned away and came back to the table.

'Lunch?' my mother asked.

My father did not answer. He came to the dining table and examined the food. 'You call this food?' he said.

I glared at him. 'It took mom three hours to make it,' I said.

My mother took out a plate for him.

'I don't want to eat this,' my father said.

'Why don't you say you've already eaten and come?' I butted in again.

My father stared at me and turned to my mother. 'This is the result of your upbringing. All the degrees can go to the dustbin. You only have this at the end.'

This, and a job at Citibank that pays me three times at the start than what you ever earned in your life, I wanted to say but didn't. I pulled the Citibank form close to me.

My father went and touched the TV top. 'It's hot. Who watched TV?'

'I did. Any problem?' I said.

'I hope you leave home soon,' my father said.

I hope you leave this world soon, I responded mentally as I took my plate and left the room.

I lay down in bed at night, waiting to fall asleep. My mind oscillated between wonderful thoughts of Ananya's hair as they brushed against my face when we slept in campus and the argument with my father this afternoon. My mother came to my room and switched on the light.

'I've fixed the meeting. We'll go to Pammi aunty's place day after tomorrow.'

'Mom, I don't.....'

'Don't worry, I've told them we are coming for tea. Let me show you off a little. You wait and see, they will ask me first.'

'I am not interested,' I sat up on my bed.

'Come for the snacks. They are very rich. Even for ordinary guests they give dry fruits.'

'Mom, why should I come, really?'

'Because it will make me happy. Is that reason enough?' she said and I noticed her wrinkled hand with the bandage.

'OK,' I shrugged and slid back into bed. 'Now let me sleep.'

'Excellent,' she said and switched off the lights as she left the room. I allowed my mind to be trapped again by thoughts of my South Indian girl.

13

Pammi aunty lived in Pitampura, a hardcore Punjabi neighbourhood. Each lane in this area has more marble than the Taj Mahal. Every street smells of tomatoes cooking with paneer. We took an auto as my father never allowed us to take the car. My mother told the auto driver to stop a few houses away. We couldn't tell Pammi aunty we hadn't come by car.

'He had a meeting, he dropped us outside and left,' my mother said as Pammi aunty came to greet us at the door.

'He should have come for a cold drink at least,' Pammi aunty said and escorted us in. Pammi aunty's weight roughly matched the decade she lived in, and that correlation had continued into the current nineties. Pammi aunty had been Ms Chandigarh thirty-seven years ago. A rich businessman snapped her soon after the title and gave her a life of extra luxury and extra calories. Now, she weighed more than the three finalists put together.

We walked to five steps to get to their living room. Pammi aunty had difficulty climbing them. 'My knees,' she mumbled as she took the last step.

'You are going for morning walk nowadays?' my mother asked.

'Where Kavita-ji, it is so hot. Plus, I have satsang in the morning. Sit,' Pammi aunty said as she told her maid to get khus sharbat.

We sank into a red velvet sofa with a two-feet deep sponge base.

'Actually, even if you walk to satsang, it can be good exercise,' my mother said.

'Six cars, Kavita-ji. Drivers sitting useless. How to walk?' Pammi aunty asked. She had demonstrated a fine Punjabi skill – of showing off her wealth as part of an innocent conversation.

My mother turned to me to repeat her comment. 'Six cars? Krish, you heard, they have six cars.'

I didn't know how to respond. Maybe I was supposed to applaud. 'Which ones?' I said, only because they kept staring at me.

'I don't know. My husband knows. Just last week he bought a Honda.'

'How much for?' my mother asked. It is almost courteous among Punjabis to encourage someone who is flaunting his wealth to brag some more.

'Seven lakh, plus stereo changed for thirty thousand,' Pammi aunty said.

'Wow!' my mother said. 'He has also got a job with Citibank, four lakh a year.'

To a non-Punjabi, my mother's comment would be considered a non-sequitur. To a Punjabi, it is perfect continuation. We are talking about lakh, after all.

'Good. Your son has turned out bright,' she said.

I guess to be rich is to be bright, as she didn't ask for my IQ.

'Your blessings, Pammi-ji,' my mother said.

'No, no,' Pammi aunty said as she gloated over her possible role in my bagging the job.

We had smiled at each other for another minute when Pammi aunty spoke again. 'Dry fruits?'

'No, no, Pammi-ji, what formalities you are getting into?' my mother demurred.

'Rani, get cashews and those Dubai dates,' Pammi-ji screamed.

My mother gave a mini nod in appreciation of the international nuts. 'Where's our Dolly?' my mother inquired, claiming the heiress of three gas stations as hers without hesitation.

'Here only, Dolly!' Pammi aunty screamed hard to reach the upper floors of the hydrocarbon-funded mansion.

The servants were summoned to call Dolly downstairs.

'She takes forever to have a bath and get ready,' Pammi aunty said in mock anger, as she took a fistful of cashews and forced them in my hands.

'Don't stop our daughter from looking beautiful, Pammi-ji,' my mother said. Yes, Dolly was already ours.

'Who knows ji about whose daughter she will become? We only have two girls, everything is theirs,' Pammi said and spread her arms to show everything. Yes, the sofas, hideous marble coffee tables, curios, fans, air conditioners – everything belonged to the daughters and their future husbands. I have to say, for

a second the thought of owning half this house made me wonder if my mother was right. But the next second the thought of losing Ananya came to me. No, I wouldn't give up Ananya for all the cashews and cash in the world. If only Pammi aunty allowed me to live in this house with Ananya.

Dolly came scurrying down the steps with her perfume reaching us three seconds before her. 'Hello Aunti-ji,' Dolly said and went on to give my mother a tight hug.

'How beautiful our daughter has become!' my mother exclaimed.

Dolly and I greeted each other with slight nods. She wore a wine-red slawar kameez with vertical gold stripes sunning down it. She was abnormally white, and my mother was right; she did remind me of milk. She sucked in her stomach a little, though she wasn't fat. Her ample bosom matched Pammi aunty's and it made me wonder how these women would even wean their children off without suffocating them.

'What are you doing these days, Dolly?' my mother asked.

'BA pass, aunty, correspondence.'

'You are also doing computer course, tell that,' Pammi aunty said and turned to my mother, 'I'll get more snacks?'

Dolly tried to say something but was ignored as we had moved on to the interesting topic of food.

'No, Pammi-ji. This is enough,' my mother said, obviously daring her to serve us more.

'What are you saying? You haven't come at meal time, so I just arranged dome heavy snacks. Raju, get the snacks. And get both the red and green chutneys!' she shrieked to her servant.

Raju and another servant brought in a gigantic tray with samosas, jalebis, chole bhature, milk cake, kachoris and, of course, the red and green chutneys. Twenty thousand calories were plonked on the table.

'You shouldn't have!' my mother said as she signalled the servant to pass the jalebis.

'Nothing ji, just for tasting. You should have come for dinner.'

I felt I would come across as a retard if I didn't talk to Dolly now. 'What computer course are you doing?'

'Microsoft Word, Power Point, Email, I don't know, just started. Looks quite hi-fi.'

'Sure, it does sound like a challenging programme,' I said, and instantly felt guilty for my sarcasm.

'My friends are doing it, so I joined. If it is too difficult, I'll stop. You know all these things, no?'

'Sort of,' I said.

My mother and Pammi aunty had stopped talking the moment Dolly and I began a conversation. Dolly and I became quiet as we noticed them staring at us.

'It's OK. Keep talking,' my mother beamed and looked at Pammi-ji. Both of them gave each other a sly grin. They winked at each other and then folded their hands and looked up to thank God.

Dolly looked at my mother and smiled. 'Aunty-ji tea?' she asked.

'No ji, we don't make our daughters work,' my mother said. The work in this case being screaming at the servant.

'Raju, get tea,' Dolly exerted herself and earned affectionate glances from my mother. *Why couldn't my mother give Ananya one, just one, glance like that?*

'Son, tea?' Pammi aunty offered me. I shook my head. 'You young people have coffee, I know. Should we get coffee? Or wait, what is that new place at the District Centre, Dolly? Where they sell that expensive coffee? Barsaat?'

'Barista, mom.' Dolly switched to a more anglicized accent when asked to describe something trendy.

'Yes, that. Take his there in the Honda. See ji, we are quite modern actually,' she said to my mother.

'Modern is good ji. We are also not old-fashioned. Go Krish, enjoy,' my mother said. Of course, hating Tamilians is not old-fashioned at all.

I stood up to partly enjoy myself with Dolly, but mainly to get away from here and ride in the new Honda.

‘Come here, Dolly,’ Pammi-ji said and did the unthinkable. She slid a hand into her bosom ATM and pulled out a wad of notes. I wondered if Pammi aunty’s cleavage also contained credit cards.

Dolly took the wad and put it in her golden handbag without counting it. She screamed at the servants to scream at the driver to scream at the security guard to open the gate so the Honda could be taken out.

We reached the District Centre, a ghetto of salwar-kameez shops, beauty parlours and STD booths. Dolly insisted on going to her favourite clothes boutique. I watched her choose clothes for half an hour. I wondered if it would be appropriate to call Ananya from one of the STD booths. I dropped the idea and hung around the shop, watching Punjabi mothers and daughters buy salwar kameezes by the dozen. The daughters were all thin and the mothers were all fat. The boutique specialised in these extreme sizes.

‘Healthy figure range is there,’ one salesman said as he pointed a mother to the right direction.

Dolly finished her shopping and paid for three new suits with her wad of notes.

‘You like these?’ she asked, opening her bag.

‘Nice,’ I said as we entered Barista. The air-conditioning and soothing music were a respite from the blazing forty-degree sun outside.

‘One cold coffee with ice-cream,’ Dolly said. ‘What do you want?’

I ordered the same and we sat on the couch, sitting as far apart as possible. We mutely stared at the music channel on the television in front of us.

‘I’ve never spoken to an IITian before,’ she said after some time.

‘You are not missing much,’ I said.

She shifted in her seat. Her clothes bag fell down. She lifted it back up.

‘Sorry, I get nervous in front of hi-fi people,’ she said.

‘Don’t be,’ I said. ‘Enjoy your coffee.’

‘You have a girlfriend, no? South Indian?’

'What?' I jumped off my seat. 'Who told you?'

'Kittu told me,' she said.

Kittu was my first cousin and Shipra masi's daughter. Kittu's father was Pammi aunty's cousin. In some sense, Dolly was my third or fourth cousin, though we weren't related by blood.

'Kittu? How did she know?'

'Shipra masi must have told her. And your mother must have told Shipra masi.'

'And now the whole clan knows,' I guessed.

'Sort of.'

'What else do you know about her?'

'Nothing,' Dolly said as her eyes shifted around.

'Tell me.'

'Oh, some stuff. That she is very aggressive and clever and has you totally under control. But South Indian girls are like that, no?'

'Do you know any South Indian girls?'

'No,' Dolly said as she twirled her straw. 'Sorry, I didn't want to tell you. You guys serious or is it just time-pass?'

I tried to curb my anger. 'What about you? You have a boyfriend?'

'No, no. Never,' she swore.

'Not even time-pass?'

She looked at me. I smiled to show friendliness.

'Just one colony guy. Don't tell my mom, please. Or your mother, or even Kittu.'

'I won.'

'He sent me a teddy bear on Valentine's day.'

'Cute,' I said.

'Have you kissed anyone?' she asked. 'Like this South Indian girl.'

I thought hard about how I should answer her question without saying the truth, that I loved with Ananya in one tiny hostel room for two years.

‘No,’ I said.

‘OK, because this guy is insisting I kiss him. But I don’t want to get pregnant.’

‘How did you meet him?’

‘It’s a very sweet story. He called a wrong number at my home one day. And we started talking. I’ve only met him once.’

‘You are seeing someone who called a wrong number?’

‘He’s not my boyfriend yet. But you know I have a didi in Ludhiana who married a guy who called her as a wrong number. They have two kids now.’

‘Wow,’ I said. I wondered if I should gulp my coffee down so we could leave sooner.

‘Do you like me?’ Dolly asked.

‘What?’

‘You know why we have been sent here, right? For match-making.’

‘Dolly, I can’t marry anyone but Ananya.’

‘Oh, that’s her name. Nice name.’

‘Thanks, and she is nice, too. And I am involved. I am sorry my mother dragged me into this.’

‘But you said you haven’t even kissed her.’

‘I lied. We lived together for two years. But please don’t tell anyone this.’

‘Lived together?’ Her eyebrows peaked. ‘Like *together*? You mean, you have done everything?’

‘That’s not important. I only told you so you don’t feel bad about my lack of interest in you.’

‘Two years? She didn’t get pregnant?’

‘Dolly, stop. Thanks for the coffee.’

‘I can make you forget her,’ Dolly said as she opened out her waist length hair.

'What?'

'I know what guys want.'

'You don't. And try to stay away from wrong numbers.'

We left Barista and drove back in her spacious Honda. I realised this Honda could be mine if only I didn't believe in stupid things like love.

'What should I tell my mother? Dolly asked.

'Say you didn't like me.'

'Why? She'll ask.'

'It's easy to slam an IITian down. Say I am a geek, boring, lecherous, whatever,' I said.

'She doesn't understand all that,' Dolly said.

'OK, tell her Krish has no plans to continue in the bank. He'll quit in a few years to be a writer.'

'Writer?'

'Yes.'

'You are too hi-fi for me,' she said as we reached her house.

14

'I can't believe you said no to Dolly,' my mother said. 'There has to be a reason, no?'

She had brought up the topic for the twentieth time three days later. My father didn't come home until late so my mother had taken the risk and invited her sister home for lunch. Some Indian men cannot stand any happiness in their wives' lives, which includes her meeting her siblings.

'Pammi is buying one more house in the next lane. She told me it is for her daughter,' Shipra masi said, rubbing salt into my mother's wounds. My mother hung her head low.

'You are making the same mistake again. You chose an army person for your own marriage. You said they are sacrificing people. We have seen how much. You have spent your whole life in misery and poverty.'

My mother nodded as she accepted her elder sister's observation. Shipra masi had married rich. Her husband, a sanitary-fittings businessman, had struck gold building toilets. My mother had valued stupid things like virtue, education and nature of profession, and suffered. And according to Shipra masi, I planned to do the same.

'How much will that Madrasin earn?' Shipra masi inquired. 'Dolly would have filled your house. When was the last time you bought anything new? Look, even your dining table shakes.'

Shipra masi banged on the dining table and its legs wobbled. I pressed the top with my palm to neutralize her jerks.

'I say, meet Pammi once again and close it,' Shipra masi suggested. 'What are you thinking?' she said after a minute. 'Do you know Pammi bought the phone, the one you can walk around with everywhere?'

'Cordless....' My mother said.

'Not cordless, the new costing twenty thousand rupees. You can take it all over Delhi. Pass me the pickle,' Shipra masi said. She ate up fast to catch up the lost time she spent on her monologue.

Cell-phones had recently arrived in India. A minute's talktime cost more than a litre of petrol. Needless to say, it was the newest Punjabi flaunt toy in Delhi.

'And what is this writer thing? Dolly said you will leave the bank to be a writer one day.'

'What?' my mother gasped.

'In time, after I have saved some money,' I said and picked up my plate to go to the kitchen.

'This is what happens if you educate children too much,' my masi said.

'I have no idea of him becoming a writer. When did this start?' my mother turned to me as I returned from the kitchen.

'The South Indian girl must have told him. They love books,' Shipra masi said.

I banged my fist on the table. The legs wobbled. Maybe we did need to change it.

'Nobody asked me to be a writer. Anyway, it is none of your business, Shipra masi.'

'Look at him, these black people have done their black magic,' Shipra masi said. 'Don't be foolish, Kavita, tell Pammi he will remain in Citibank and make a lot of money. Get his price properly.'

I glared at everyone at the table, went to the living-room sofa and picked up the newspaper. The matrimonial page opened out. I threw it in disgust.

'Let's look at some educated girls. You want to see educated girls?' my mother threw a pacifier at me.

'I have an educated girl. I like her. She has a job, she is pretty, decent, hard-working and has a lot of integrity. What is your problem?'

'Son,' Shipra masi said, her voice soft for reconciliation, 'that is all fine. But how can we marry Madrasis? Tomorrow your cousins will want to marry a Gujarati.'

'Or Assamese?' my mother added.

'My god!' Shipra masi said.

'So what? Aren't they all Indians? Can't they be good human beings?' I said.

Shipra masi turned to my mother. 'Your son is gone. I am sorry, but this boy belongs to Jayalalitha now.'

The bell rang twice. Panic spread in the house as my father had arrived earlier than usual. I never welcome my father home. However, I was happy as it meant Shipra masi would leave now.

'Hello Jija-ji,' Shipra masi said as my father entered the house.

My father didn't answer. He picked up the newspaper thrown on the floor and folded it.

'I said hello Jija-ji,' Shipra masi said and smiled. She didn't give up easily.

'I like your goodbye more than hello,' my father replied. No one can beat him in the asshole stakes.

'My sister has invited me,' Shipra masi said.

'Useless people invite useless people,' my father said.

Shipra masi turned to my mother. 'I don't come here to get insulted. Only you can bear him. The worst decision of your life,' Shipra masi mumbled as she packed her handbag to leave.

'I would appreciate it if you don't interfere in our family matters,' my father said and gave her a brown bag. It was mithai Shipra masi had brought for us. They exchanged glares.

'Take it or I will throw it in the dustbin,' my father said.

I stood up to argue. My mother signalled me to back off. Shipra masi reached the main door. I came with her to shut it. I touched her feet, more out of ritual than respect.

'Son, now don't make foolish decisions like your mother. Marry a good Punjabi girl before they find out about your father. Dolly is good.'

My father's ears are as sharp as his tongue. 'What is going on? Who is Dolly?' my father shouted.

Shipra masi shut the door and left. Nobody answered.

'Are you seeing girls?' my father demanded of my mother.

My mother kept quiet.

'Did you see a girl?'

'Yes,' I said. I was kind of glad I did, just to piss him off.

'I will....' He screamed at my mother, lifting his hand.

'Don't even fucking think about it!' I came close to him.

'In this house, I make the decisions,' my father said. He picked up a crystal glass and smashed it on the floor. The violence intended at my mother had to come out somehow.

'You sure seem mature enough to take them,' I said and moved towards kitchen.

'Don't walk barefoot,' my mother called out. She bent to pick up the splintered shards. Anger seethed within me. Not only at my father but also my mother; how could she let him get away with this and start cleaning up calmly?

'I don't know why I come to this house,' my father said.

'I was thinking the same thing,' I said.

'Bastard, mind it!' he shouted at me like he did at his army jawans ten years ago.

'Krish, go to the other room,' my mother said.

'He can't be my son. Nobody talks to their father like this.'

'And no father behaves like this,' I said.

My mother pushed me towards the bedroom. My father looked around for new things to shout at or break. He couldn't find much. He turned around and walked out. The loud sound of the door banging shut sent a sigh of relief through the whole house.

My mother came to my room after cleaning up the glass in the living area. She came and sat next to me on the bed. I didn't look at her. She held my chin and turned my face towards her.

'You let him do this, so he does it. Why did you have to start cleaning up?' I sulked.

'Because he'll break the other glasses, too. And then we will have no more glasses left for guests,' my mother said. 'Don't worry. I can manage him.'

I looked at my mother, a tear rolled down her eye. I felt my eyes turn wet, too.

'You have to leave him,' I said after we composed ourselves.

'It's not that simple,' she said.

'I will earn now,' I said.

'I am fine. Ninety percent of the time he is not even here. He goes to his army mess, he visits his partners with whom he tries his harebrained business schemes.'

'What? Like that security agency?' I scoffed.

'Yes, but he picks up fights with customers at the first meeting. Doesn't exactly make them feel safe,' my mother said.

I laughed.

'I can handle him. It is you who gets angry and fights with him,' my mother said.

'He starts it. What was the need to insult Shipra masi?'

'He won't change. Shipra is used to him. I worry how you will stay with him when you work in Delhi. Maybe you should take the company accommodation.'

'Or maybe I should not be in Delhi.'

'What are you saying?'

'I can't stand him.'

'Where are you planning to go?'

'I don't know, mom. I can only give a preference to Citibank. It's no guarantee. Plus, you get posted out after two years.'

'You chose Delhi, no?'

I didn't answer. Somehow the thought of being in Delhi and seeing ditzzy Punjabi girls by day and dad at night didn't seem terribly exciting.

'You come with me wherever I go,' I said.

'Where? I can't leave Delhi. All my relatives are here. You will be in office all day. What will I do in a new city?'

'I want to go to Chennai,' I said.

'Oh God!' my mother's mellow mood shifted gears to overdrive. She got up from the bed. 'I find this harder to deal with than your father. Are you mad?'

'No, I like Ananya. I want to give our relationship a shot.'

'You'll become a Madrasi?'

'I am not becoming. I'm only going there to live. And Citibank transfers you in two years.'

'I should meet an astrologer. I don't know what phase you are going through.'

'There is no phase. I love someone.'

'Love is nothing, son,' my mother patted my cheek and left the room.

I didn't submit the Citibank form until the last date. I kept taking my pen to the 'location preference' question. It had asked for three choices in order. I couldn't fill it.

'You've sent your form?' Ananya asked on the phone.

'I will. Almost ready,' I said

'Are you crazy? It is the last day. You put Chennai, right?'

'Yeah,' I said and hung up.

I gave one final glance at the form. I looked at God above and asked him to decide my love-life. I filled up the form:

Location Preference:

- 1. Chennai or Delhi (equal preference)***
- 2. -***
- 3. -***

I sealed the form and dropped it off at the bank branch. In my bed I opened Ananya's letter from last week. I read it every night before going to bed.

Hello my Punjabi hunk,

Miss me? I do. I miss our cuddles, I miss our walks in campus, I miss studying together and then going for midnight chai, I miss running to my dorm every morning to brush my teeth, I miss eating pao-bhaji on the char rasta with you, I miss playing footsie in the library, I miss the glances we stole in the class, I miss my bad grades and the tears afterwards that you wiped, I miss how you used to watch me put eye-liner, I miss.....oh, you get the drift, I miss you like hell.

Meanwhile, I am fine in Chennai. My mother is at her neurotic best, my father is quiet as usual and my brother always has a book that says Physics, Chemistry or Maths on the cover. In other words, things are normal. I mentioned you again to my mother. She called a priest home who gave me a pendant to make me forget you. Wow, I never thought they'd react to you like this. Well, it is going to take more than a pendant to forget you, but for good measure I tossed it into the Bay of Bengal on Marina Beach. I haven't mentioned you since, because I know you will come to Chennai and charm them yourself - just as you charmed me.

Bye, my Love,

Ananya

PS: Oh did I mention, I miss the sex too.

I read the letter ten times. I read the last sentence a hundred times. I wanted to be with her right that moment. I realised I could have written 'Chennai' in the form but I had played roulette with my love-life due to some vague sense of responsibility and guilt towards home. I wondered if Citi would need more people in Delhi as this is where all the money is. After all, a Punjabi is far more likely to

want foreign bank accounts than a Tamilian. And I am a Punjabi, so they would give me Delhi. Something yelped inside me. I read the letter again and again until I fell asleep.

One week later, I received a call at home. Mother picked it up and said it was from a guy who sounded like a girl.

‘Hello?’ I said.

‘Hi Krish, it’s Devesh from Citi HR.’

‘Oh, hi Devesh. How are you?’

‘Good, I just wanted to give you your joining date and location.’

My heart started to beat fast. ‘Yes,’ I said, excited and nervous.

‘So you start on June 1.’

‘OK.’

‘And we are placing you in Chennai.’

Imaginary fireworks exploded all over the Delhi sky. I felt real love for Devesh, the HR department and Citibank for the first time in my life.

ACT 4:

Delhi Reloaded

42

'Let go of my elbow,' I said.

'Why?' Ananya said.

'I see my mother.'

Mother waited at the arrival area. She stood among ten thousand drivers holding placards with every Punjabi name possible. There were no more Venkats and Ramaswamis, only Aroras and Khannas.

When people land at Chennai airport, they exchange smiles and proceed gently to the car park. At Delhi, there is a traffic jam of people trying to hug each other to death. My mother hugged me tight, and even though it was over the top, I liked it. No one had hugged me like that in Chennai for the last six months (apart from Ananya, of course, but that's a different category of affection). We walked towards the auto stand. Ananya greeted my mother but it went unnoticed.

'You are?' my mother asked me the most important question.

I nodded.

'What did they serve?' I noticed she was ignoring Ananya completely.

'Paneer masala and rice,' I said. 'Mom, you've met Ananya, remember?'

My mother gave Ananya a fake smile and turned back to me. 'No rotis?'

'Mom, Ananya has a one-week stint in her Delhi office.'

'Where will she stay?' my mother said, her voice concerned.

'At the company Guest-house,' Ananya said.

'Yes, but she only joins them day after, on Monday. I thought it will be a good idea if she came home for the weekend.'

'Whose home?' my mother asked, aghast.

'Our home,' I said. I removed my bags from the trolley at the auto stand.

My mother turned silent. I paid the money at the pre-paid stand.

We fit ourselves and our bags into the auto. I sat in the middle, with Ananya on my right and my mother on the left.

‘All set for Minti’s wedding?’ I said.

‘What a boy Minti is going to marry!’ my mother said.

‘Really? Is he good?’ I said.

‘Oh yes, so good-looking. White as milk,’ my mother said, ‘and guess the budget of the wedding?’

I shrugged.

‘Rajji mama is spending five lakh on the parties alone. Plus they have a big surprise gift for the boy for the sagan.’

‘What’s the boy’s name?’ I said.

Ananya didn’t participate in the conversation. She turned her face to the scenery outside. Her hair blew in the breeze and a few strands caressed my face.

‘I forget his real name, but everybody calls him Duke.’

‘Duke? Like British royalty duke?’ I said.

‘Yes, he is an engineer from a donation college. Now he works in Escorts Software. And his parents are so nice,’ my mother said. ‘Every occasion they have met your mama-ji, they bring something for me. They’ve already given me three saris.’

‘Amazing,’ I said.

‘You should see how they give respect. The boy touches my feet every time he meets me.’

I nodded. I wanted to end the topic. But my mother was in full form. ‘I asked Rajji mama why he is spending so much. You know what he said?’

‘What?’

‘He said “didi, where do you get good boys these days?” So, I said, if Duke is getting this, what will Krish get?’

I kept quiet. My mother continued anyway. ‘He said if Duke’s budget is five lakhs, yours should be ten lakhs, gifts separate.’

'Thanks for pricing me,' I said.

'I am just saying....' My mother said.

We remained silent for the next five minutes. My mother shifted in her seat due to lack of space.

'You could have booked a car. I would have paid,' I said.

'I didn't know you'll bring extra luggage from Chennai,' my mother said.

I showed Ananya the guest-room. She kept quiet as she took out fresh clothes to take into the bathroom.

'Hey, I'm sorry about my mother. She's all talk. Good at heart.'

'Even murderers are good at heart. I thought you had told her about my coming.'

'I wanted to give her a surprise,' I said.

'Fuck off,' Ananya said as she pushed me out of the room.

My father had gone for a business meeting. Ever since he left the army, he had tried different ventures. These included a property dealership, a security agency and a freight forwarding agency. None of them worked. According to him, unscrupulous partners or corrupt officials had led to their failure. According to me, it was his short temper and inability to come out of his army officer mode. When you are used to a hundred people saluting you every day, it is difficult to suck up to uneducated builders to allow you to sell their house. However, my father kept jumping from one disaster to the next, which kept him out of the house most of the times. Some even said he had a mistress somewhere, though I doubt another woman could survive him.

Ananya hadn't left her room ever since she came. My mother went for her evening stroll at 6 p.m.

'What are you doing inside? Come out, mom's gone for a walk.'

She opened the door, her face still upset.

‘Should we make love?’ I winked at her.

‘Don’t test your luck, Mr Malhotra, I shall turn violent.’ She pushed me aside and came to the living room. She switched on the TV.

‘What’s with this attitude, Ananya? You are supposed to win my folks over,’ I said.

‘You can win over normal people. Not rude, insensitive people who insult guests,’ she said.

‘So you will stay inside that room and sulk?’ I switched the TV off.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ she said.

‘If you listen to me, you will be able to navigate her.’

‘I am all ears,’ she said dryly.

‘Dinner,’ I said.

‘Dinner what? Do you guys talk anything but food? What was that? She asked what they served us on the plane? Like the first thing when you landed.’

I opened the fridge and took out two Frootis. I gave her one.

‘She is going to come back from her walk and prepare dinner. Offer to help her, it is a good start.’

‘Help her?’ She poked a straw into the Frooti with more force than necessary.

‘You know, make a dish or two. Or if you want to bowl her over, make the dinner tonight.’

‘What? Are you crazy, I’ve never made full dinner.’

‘Really?’ I slurped noisily at my drink.

‘Don’t “really” me. Did you ever learn to cook?’

‘No, but I studied all the time.’

‘I went to IIMA, too.’

‘Yeah but,’ I said and paused.

‘Yeah but, what? I am a girl, so tough luck, baby. There’s the kitchen,’ she said and tossed the Frooti carton on the table.

‘Ananya, I am suggesting ways to win over my mother. You said you will do whatever it takes.’

‘Fine, can I have another Frooti? I am famished.’

I gave Ananya another tetrapack. The doorbell rang. Ananya stood up too go to her room.

‘Stay,’ I said as I opened the door.

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My mother came back with two plastic bags full of vegetables. I helped her carry them into the kitchen. She opened the fridge to keep the vegetables inside.

‘Who had the Frootis?’ my mother said.

‘I had one. And Ananya also.’

‘Three Frootis are missing. She had two?’ she said.

I kept quiet.

We came to the living room. My mother brought a giant cauliflower, a plate and a knife with her. She started cutting little florets with the knife, using her thumb as a base.

‘Aunty, can I help?’ Ananya said.

‘With?’ my mother said.

‘With dinner,’ Ananya said.

‘Yeah, mom, why don’t you let Ananya make dinner today?’ I suggested with a heavy smile.

Ananya glared at me. To help is one thing, to prepare a whole meal another. Still, if Ananya had to make an impression, she had to more than wash the vegetables.

My mother looked at Ananya.

‘Sure, aunty, why not? It will be fun,’ Ananya said.

Mom shrugged and passed the plate to Ananya. ‘Krish likes gobi aloo. I thought we will also make black daal, bhindi, raita and salad. Nothing much, simple dinner.

‘Mom,’ I said, to stop her from increasing the menu.

‘The dry atta is in the drum below the gas stove. Knead some for the rotis,’ my mother said. ‘Yes, Krish?’

‘Nothing. You want to cook together so it is faster?’ I said.

'She can make it if she wants to. I am not that hungry. Let it take time,' my mother said and switched on the TV.

Ananya cradled the cauliflower in her lap like a newborn child. She couldn't cut it like a pro, with the knife and thumb action. She cut florets one at a time, using the knife like a saw.

My mother sniggered. I gave her a dirty look. 'I have a headache. I'll rest in my room. Call me when dinner is ready,' my mother said and left.

'Ananya, you want help?' I said.

'Leave me alone,' Ananya said, her gaze deep into the cauliflower.

'Use your thumb, like this,' I said and mocked the action with my hand.

Ananya tried. Two florets later, she cut herself. 'Ouch!' she screamed.

'What happened?'

'Nothing,' she sniffed. 'Nothing, go rest with your mother.'

'Is that blood?' I said. 'You are hurt!'

'It's OK. I said I will do what it takes. What's a little blood?'

'This cut is not my mother's fault,' I said.

'Shut up and get me a band-aid. And bring the bhindi from the fridge,' she said.

An hour later we had cut the gobi, bhindi, onions, garlic, ginger, tomatoes, cucumber and green chillies required for the various dishes. Until you do it yourself, you don't realise the effort your mother puts into every meal.

We went to the kitchen. I took out the atta in a bowl.

'I have no clue how to knead this,' she said.

'It's OK, I've seen my mother do it. Let me try,' I said and poured water into the bowl.

'And you fry the onions in ...this?' Ananya pulled out a kadhai from the utensil shelf.

'Yes, please,' I said and switched on the gas. I opened the box of spices. She didn't know how to use them.

‘Remember the five constant spices in every Punjabi dish – salt, turmeric, red chillies, coriander powder and garam masala,’ I said.

Ananya cooked the vegetables while I worked the atta. I had to refill the atta twice due to too much stickiness. A pungent smoke rose in the kitchen. Both of us had a coughing fit.

‘What did you do?’ I said.

‘I ... don’t ... know.’ Ananya coughed uncontrollably.

My mother came into the kitchen. ‘What are you doing?’ she ran to the stove and lowered the flame. ‘Who cooks on such a high flame? See, the spices have burnt.’

Ananya backed off from the stove.

‘And you? What are you doing here?’ my mother said.

‘I ... I came here because of the burning smell,’ I said.

‘And you hands fell into the atta?’ she said, pointing to my dough-smeared palms and fingers.

I kept quiet.

‘See, this is how she will use you after marriage. She can’t even make rotis.’

Ananya exited the kitchen. I wanted to go after her, but with mom present, it didn’t seem like a good idea. I threw up my atta-filled hands in despair.

‘She is South Indian, mom, how can you expect her to....’

‘You said she wants to make dinner. PK, tell her to make dosas if she wants. Can she make dosas?’

‘Yeah, I am sure. But you need a grinder....’

Ananya came back into the kitchen. ‘No, aunty, I can’t make dosas,’ Ananya said. ‘And I can’t make a roti either. In fact, I am terrible at cooking anything.’

‘Apart from cooking schemes to trap my boy,’ my mother said.

They exchanged battlefield looks, Ananya left the kitchen in disgust.

‘Mom!’ I said in frustration.

‘What? What else is this?’ my mother said. ‘You are under her spell. You bring her home. You knead atta for her. You give her two Frootis I had brought for guests. You are so worried about her. What about me?’

‘What about you, mom?’

‘What is she doing here?’

‘Mom, she can hear you.’

‘See, you only care about her. Go, be with her.’

My mother rearranged the plates in the kitchen. She threw the old spice mixture and made a new one as I left.

‘Get me to the guest-house. I want to leave,’ Ananya said, her face wet with tears.

‘No,’ I said and wiped her tears. ‘No, you can’t.’

‘I can’t do this,’ she said. ‘I thought convincing my parents would be enough. You said your mother is sweet. Sweet? If your mom is sweet, then Hitler is a cuddly toy.’

‘Take a shower, Ananya,’ I said. ‘Let’s all eat dinner together.’

We sat down for dinner. My mother served me. Ananya took the food herself.

I chose the topic. ‘What are the important ceremonies for Minti’s wedding?’

‘I have to go every day,’ my mother said, chewing her food. ‘There is a puja, then a sangeet. Of course, the important ones are the sagan and the marriage, next Friday and Sunday. You’ll come, no?’

‘Sagan and marriage, of course. I’ll bring Ananya, too.’

My mother gave me a dirty look. She didn’t want to talk about it with Ananya present.

‘Don’t avoid the topic, mom. I’ve brought Ananya here so you and the family get to know her.’

‘I already know she can’t cook dinner,’ my mother said.

‘I’m sorry, aunty,’ Ananya said. I didn’t expect it but felt relieved that Ananya apologised.

'It's fine, you modern girls are like this. That is why I want Krish to marry....'

'Mom, I want to marry Ananya,' I said, 'in case it is not clear.'

My mother placed the piece of roti back on her plate and pushed the chair back to get up.

'Mom, please wait. I want to talk,' I said.

'Why should I talk? You will do whatever you want anyway. Go to the temple right now and get married.'

'Aunty, we want you to be happy about it,' Ananya said.

'Well, I am not. You can't force me to be happy. Everyone is praising Minti's mother for her choice. I've suffered for years to bring my son up. Why can't I have the same happiness? I want a lavish wedding, I want the girl's parents to respect me, I want the girl to be approved of by my brothers and sisters.'

'They will like Ananya! She is intelligent, educated....'

'She is South Indian,' my mother said, cutting me.

'So what? Let's see what your brothers and sisters say about Ananya. This wedding is a perfect excuse.'

'And who will I say she is?' my mother asked grimly.

'Say she is Krish's classmate who's never seen a Punjabi marriage ceremony and wanted to come,' I said.

My mother kept quiet. She picked up her roti and began to eat again.

'Aunty, I am sorry I came unannounced. I thought Krish had told you.'

'He never tells me anything. He is so careless,' my mother said.

'I agree, he doesn't communicate well,' Ananya said.

'See,' my mother said to me.

Even though they were ganging up against me, I let it pass. I wanted them to bond in any way possible.

'The daal is excellent, aunty, you must teach me how to make it,' Ananya said.

'Then why are you eating like a squirrel? Take a proper helping,' my mother said.

'I'll speak to Minti,' I put in. 'I'm sure she will have no problem if I bring a friend.'

'Only as a friend,' my mother said.

'Thanks, mom,' I said and hugged her.

'Your dad never gave me anything. You don't deprive me of what I deserve,' my mother said.

'Where's uncle?' Ananya said.

'Who knows?' my mother said. 'He'll be back late. You'll see him in the morning. You are sleeping in the guest-room and Krish in his room, right?'

'Of course, mom,' I said, 'how else?'

My mother finished dinner. Ananya offered to do the dishes. My mother said the maid would arrive in the morning but Ananya insisted. My mother went to her room.

'OK, Miss Brand Manager, you sure you don't need help?' I said as I leaned against the kitchen wall.

Ananya applied Vim on the dishes with a wire mesh. 'No, I don't want to be accused of trapping the Prince of Punjab again,' Ananya said and mercilessly scrubbed a kadhai.

'Let me dry the dishes,' I offered.

'Go away, I beg you,' she said as she pushed me out of the kitchen.

44

‘Good morning , uncle,’ Ananya said as she came into the living room in her night-suit. It was seven-thirty in the morning. My father, bound to his army habit, had showered and changed. He looked up from his newspaper. He didn’t respond.

‘I’m Ananya, Krish’s friend.’

‘Good,’ my father said and went back to his newspaper. He kept calm. I knew he’d blow his lid when Ananya left. I came to the living room and ignored him.

‘Ananya, get ready. We should leave before the peak-hour traffic.’

‘Where are you going?’ my father said.

I didn’t answer. My father stood up and went to the kitchen.

‘Is this the way to behave?’ I heard him scream at my mother.

‘What happened?’ my mother said as I kept one ear to the kitchen.

‘I asked him where is he going, he didn’t answer. And who is that girl?’

‘He is going to drop Ananya to her guest-house and go to office. Why?’ my mother said.

‘Why can’t he say it? And why didn’t you tell me we will have a visitor in the house.’

‘I didn’t know,’ my mother said.

‘You are lying again,’ my father screamed.

Ananya looked terrified.

‘Welcome to my world,’ I said, ‘now let’s get the hell out of here.’

I came home from work and found deadly silence in the house. Obviously, my father was home. He sat at the dining table with my mother.

'Krish, your father wants to talk to you,' my mother said.

'Tell him, I don't want to,' I said.

'He said he won't come for Minti's wedding if you don't speak to him,' my mother said. Weddings on my mother's side of the family were when we needed my father the most. My mother wanted to portray a sense of normalcy. If my father showed his face, it prevented tongues wagging for weeks. I had no choice. I went and sat opposite him.

'So, now that you have resorted to blackmail, what do you want to talk about?' I said.

'It's not blackmail. When my family doesn't talk to me, why should I....' he said.

'Whatever. What is it?' I said.

'Who is that girl?'

'Ananya Swaminathan,'

'How do you know her?'

'She is a classmate from college and my girlfriend.'

'See Kavita,' my father said, 'and you said she is only a friend.'

'You talk to me, why do you have to take it out on her,' I said.

'What is the purpose of her visit here?' my father said.

'She came on a work assignment. Minti invited her to the wedding. Do you have a problem?'

'You will not choose a girl for marriage. I will choose for you,' my father said.

'You want to sell me. And while you are out there negotiating me, what's my going rate?'

'Kavita, this boy....'

'This boy is right here. Talk to me.'

'I am not coming for Minti's wedding,' my father announced.

'Please, don't do that. Krish, talk properly,' my mother pleaded.

'No mom, we won't take him. We'll tell them he is sick, mentally.'

'Watch your mouth,' my father said and raised his hand.

'I dare you,' I said and stood up. I went to my room but could hear them.

'I won't come for the wedding, Kavita,' my father said. The sound of a clattering plate, presumably shoved away on the dining table.

'Do whatever you want, all of you,' my mother said.

I lay in bed, I wondered why we even stayed together as a family. I never thought I would, but I missed Chennai. Sure, people there didn't really connect with me, but at least nobody could jab my insides. I thought of calling Ananya but I didn't want to dump my mood on her. Questions darted in my mind. ***Am I even doing the right thing by bringing Ananya into this family? What impression will she have of me?*** Will she change her mind about me? Watching my mind's stupid daily pre-sleep thought dance, I tossed and turned in bed all night.

45

Minti's wedding ceremony took place at the Taj Palace Hotel in Dhaula Kuan. Frankly, it was a big deal for our clan. We had seen some over the top weddings, but never before did an engagement ceremony happen at a top end five-star hotel. Rajji mama had taken his one-upmanship among the relatives right to the top by booking the Taj.

The banquet hall entrance had a sign.

The Talrejas welcome you

To SAGAN ceremony of their:

Most lovely daughter

Manorama (Minti)

With

Dashing Gentleman

Dharamveer (Duke), B. Tech

'Don't laugh,' I said to Ananya, suppressing my own smile.

'I can't help it,' she grinned. She adjusted the drape of her bottle green and gold sari for the fifth time.

'Welcome-ji, welcome,' Rajji mama gave my mother and me hugs in quick succession.

We came inside the banquet hall, which held two hundred people. The main stage had two ornate chairs stolen from a king's palace. Alongside, there were seventy-five boxes of sweets and five giant baskets of fruits.

Most of the women stood at the chaat and juice counter. All the men stood at the bar. I helped my female cousins access vodka by giving them my glass, which they poured into their juice.

'So, there is Rajji mama, Lappa mama, Shipra masi and your mother – in that order, right?' Ananya said.

'Yes, and since my mother is the youngest, she needs validation from all of them to do anything in life,' I said.

'Fine, let me understand first. Minti and Rohan are Rajji mama's children,' Ananya said and took out a notepad. 'And who is the girl you gave the vodka to?'

'That's Tinki, and she has a younger sister Nikki, both in college. They are Lappa mama's children. And Shipra masi has a son and a daughter, Bittu and Kittu. That's it, my mom only has me.'

'OK, OK,' Ananya said as she finished taking notes.

'Krish, come here,' my mother screamed. She stood next to the stage.

'Let's go,' I said and pulled Ananya's hand.

Ananya hesitated at first, but came along. My mother sat with an eighty-year-old lady who wore a gold necklace. It had a pendant bigger than the Olympic gold medal.

'She is Swaran aunty, my masi,' my mother said.

My grandmother had died a couple of years ago. Swaran aunty was the senior-most family member who was brought out at weddings and other auspicious occasions to bless everyone.

I bent forward to touch her feet. I signaled and Ananya followed.

'Kavita, teri noo hai?' Swaran aunty said in Punjabi, asking if Ananya was my mother's daughter-in-law.

My mother explained she was a friend.

'What is friend?' Swaran aunty asked me.

'Aunty, you need chaat?' I countered.

'Yes, nobody is getting me anything,' she complained.

I returned with a plate of chaat. Ananya sat next to Swaran aunty and my mother.

'She is Madrasi?' Swaran aunty said in a voice loud enough to belie her age.

'Tamilian,' Ananya said.

‘But she is fair complexioned?’ Swaran aunty said, genuinely confused. For her years, her eyesight wasn’t bad at all.

Shipra masi passed by, looking expensive. Everything she wore – clothes, jewellery, handbag and shoes – contained real gold of varying proportions.

‘Shipra, see this, a gori Madrasin,’ Swaran aunty screamed.

‘Hello Kavita, how are you Krish?’

‘Fine aunty, meet my friend, Ananya,’

‘Oh, we all know what kind of friend. Yes, she is fair.’

Shipra masi called for Rajji mama and Lappa mama’s wives, Kamla and Rajni, respectively.

‘Come, see Krish’s friend. The Madrasin Kavita told us about,’ Shipra masi shrieked.

Rajni aunty and Kamla aunty came over. We exchanged polite greetings. My mother explained how my father had viral fever so he couldn’t come. Everyone knew the truth but nodded in total support. Shipra masi even suggested some medicines.

‘Ananya Swaminathan, aunty,’ Ananya repeated her name to Kamla mami as she hadn’t caught it the first time.

‘You are so fair. Are you hundred percent South Indian?’ Kamla mami asked.

She is also an IIMA pass out and a brand manager at HLL, I wanted to say. But those are things you discuss in Chennai, not at the Taj Palace, Delhi, during the Talreja’s sagan ceremony.

‘By South Indian standards, she is quite pretty,’ Shipra masi added insight.

‘I know, otherwise how black and ugly they are,’ Kamla mami said.

Everyone laughed, apart from Ananya. She had braved a smile all along, but it disappeared. I moved next to her and gently patted her back.

I didn’t want her to react. Smile like a ditz and your chances of being accepted will improve. Sometimes, love is tested in strange ways.

‘The boy’s side has come!’ Kittu, my youngest cousin, came running inside like Amitabh Bachchan had lost his way and rung the doorbell.

'Let's go, let's go,' Kamla mami hauled up all the ladies. The ladies deposited their gold sequined bags with Swaran aunty. Her immobility made her an ideal cloakroom.

'So, what is the surprise gift?' my mother egged on Kamla aunty.

'You will see it soon-ji. But the expense has broken our back. Minti's daddy had to take a loan.'

'It's OK, you have only one daughter,' Shipra masi said as all of them walked out.

Ananya let out a huge sigh after the Punjabi aunty gang left.

'You OK?' I said. 'No, let me guess. You are not OK.'

'I need a drink, let's go to the bar,' Ananya said.

'But stay a few steps away. I'll order the drink,' I said.

We reached the bar. Tinki and Nikki came running to me, their lehngas lifted up to their ankles with their hands.

'Krish bhaiya, get a full glass of neat vodka. My friends from college have come.'

'Why can't the girls take drinks themselves?' Ananya asked.

Tinki and Nikki turned to Ananya, puzzled. At nineteen and seventeen, they looked overdressed in their designer clothes.

'Tinki, Nikki, this is Ananya,' I said.

'Oh, you are the one,' Tinki exclaimed.

'The one who?' I said.

'She is your girlfriend, no, Krish bhaiya?' Nikki said.

I didn't respond.

'You are blushing,' Tinki said, and turned to Ananya. 'I love your earrings. Where did you get them from?'

'Coimbatore,' Ananya said.

'Where is that?' Tinki said.

'Tamil Nadu, that is where I come from,' Ananya said.

'Stupid, didn't you read it in geography?' Nikki scolded her sister and turned to me, 'Your girlfriend is so pretty. And her sari is also so beautiful.'

'Thanks,' Ananya said. 'Both of you look great. I want a lehnga like that.'

I took a full glass of vodka from the bar and poured it into three glasses. I topped the drinks with Sprite and brought it for the girls.

'I don't drink. It's only for the DJ later,' Tinki clarified. 'Anyway I am eighteen now.'

'You went to IIMA, no? You must be so intelligent. Can girls get into IIM? Nikki said.

'Of course, why not? What's it got to do with being a girl,' Ananya said.

I stepped away from them. The girls talked for the next ten minutes. If nothing else, Ananya had bonded with the younger set of my family. Why was it so much harder to win over the older generation?

'Where are you?' my mother's angry voice cut into my musings. 'The ceremony is about to start.'

I collected the girls and we went to the stage. Minti sat on the floor of the stage with Duke in front of her. A priest sat alongside.

As my aunts would say, Duke was on the healthier side.

'He is fat,' Ananya said flatly.

'Shut up, someone will hear you,' I said.

'Oh, people really are careful about what they say around here,' Ananya said, sarcasm shimmering in her words like the sequins in her blouse.

'C'mon Ananya, they are not even aware they are being offensive. You will like them once you know them.'

'Please, I like your cousins, let me be with them,' Ananya said, her voice defiant from the vodka.

'We like her,' Nikki and Tinki certified as they gave Ananya a hug. Just like men, women too become friendlier after alcohol.

Duke was indeed fair as milk. The chubby cheeks and fair complexion made him look like a solely Cerelac-fed adult. He wore a shiny maroon kurta, of probably the same fabric as one of Ananya's mom's saris. Damn, I was remembering Ananya's mother here. *Focus*, I said to myself.

Minti wore an orange lehnga studded with Swarovski crystals and other precious stones. According to my mother, it cost twenty thousand rupees, while the wedding sari had cost thirty thousand. Ten percent of the wedding budget is bridal costumes, my brain made a useless calculation.

The priest chanted mantras. Minti gestured at her cousins to ask if she looked fine.

Nikki put her right thumb tip and index finger tip together to signify she looked fab. Nikki also put her right middle finger on her forehead to show Minti she needed to adjust her bindi. Minti followed the instructions and fixed her bindi with the left hand even as the priest tied a thread on her right. I learnt three facts about women: a) they never lose track of how they look; b) they help each other out by giving instructions in any way possible; and c) they can multi-task. Of course, my mind couldn't focus on the ceremony. I thought of ways to make my family like Ananya.

Duke pulled out an engagement ring from his kurta pocket. He displayed it for the cameras. A collective sigh ran across the women as they realised it was a solitaire.

'One-and-a-half-carats at least,' Shipra masi curated it immediately.

Duke put the ring on Minti's finger and everyone clapped. Minti gave a shy smile as she brought out a ring, a simple gold band for Duke. She put the ring on him.

'She looks so sweet,' Tinki said and the two sisters gave each other hugs, their eyes wet. Women have surplus emotions and they don't need a big trigger to spill them out.

Duke's family waited after the ring ceremony in anticipation. Rajji mama took out a little box from his shirt pocket. He passed it on to Duke. Duke refused three times. Rajji mama insisted until Duke accepted it. Duke opened the black box. It had a key with the Hyundai Motors sign on it.

This time the women and men gave out a collective sigh. Yes, Rajji mama had outdone the solitaire.

‘They’ve given a car,’ Shipra masi said, to make it clear in case somebody hadn’t got it.

Grown-ups from both sides opened their respective sweet boxes and force-fed the other family. All of us went on stage one by one and congratulated the couple.

Minti’s parents gave gifts to all of Duke’s uncles and aunts. Duke’s parents returned the favour. My mother and Shipra masi received a sari each.

‘Show me yours,’ Shipra masi said to my mother. Fortunately, they found them similar. Duke’s parents could not be accused of aunt favouritism.

Rajji mama gloated after everyone complimented him on the masterstroke gift.

‘Uncle, start the DJ,’ Nikki said to Rajji mama.

Rajji mama nodded towards the dance floor. DJ pussycats from Rajouri Garden comprised of two fat surds who had waited hours for that signal. They started with dhol beats. All the younger cousins hit the dance floor. The uncles needed a few more pegs and the aunties needed a few more elbow pulls from the younger kids to come and groove.

‘They gave a car?’ Ananya said in shocked voice even as Nikki dragged her towards the dance floor.

‘Yeah, a silver Santro,’ Nikki said, ‘come no, didi.’

Ananya went with the girls. Her years of Bharatnatyam training made her the best performer on the floor. She picked up the Punjabi steps fast and even taught my cousins a few improvised moves. She looked beautiful in her dark green Kanjeevaram . Like an idiot, I fell in love with her all over again.

‘Have you eaten dinner?’ my mother came up next to me.

‘Er ...no,’ I said, peeling my eyes away from the floor.

‘Then eat fast, we won’t get an auto home,’ my mother said.

‘We will buy a car soon,’ I said.

‘Like your father will let us have one. Anyway, why should we take? Kamla said we shouldn’t buy anything major until you get married. We don’t want duplicate items.’

‘Mom,’ I protested.

'Go fast, the paneer will get over. And tell your friend to eat.'

I waved at Ananya to come eat with me. She panted as she walked with me to the buffet. I put black daal, shahi paneer and rotis on my plate. Ananya took yellow daal and rice.

'That's it?'

'That's all I like,' she said.

There was a commotion at the bar. Duke and his friends were fighting with the bartender.

'What happened?' I asked.

'They are not making the pegs large enough. Duke's friends are upset,' an onlooker said.

Rajji mama intervened. The hotel staff had foreseen that the whisky may run out and so had started doling out smaller quantities. There were no extra bottles of that brand even in the hotel. Rajji mama took out a wad of notes and gave it to the hotel staff. A waiter was sent to the Delhi border to fetch the whisky. Like always, money soothed nerves and everyone became cheerful again.

'This is a wedding?' Ananya said.

'Of course, that's how all weddings are. Why, your side has it different?' I said.

'You bet,' Ananya said.

We bade goodbyes to Rajji mama and Kamla aunty. As I walked out with my mother and Ananya, Shipra masi called me.

'Yes, aunty,' I said.

'Listen, you are our family's pride. Don't do anything stupid. These Madrasis have laid a trap for you.'

'Good night, aunty,' I said.

'See, I am saying it for your benefit. Your mother has suffered, make her happy. You can get girls who will fill your house with gifts.'

I bent down. If all else fails with kin, touch feet.

'What did Shipra masi say?' Ananya asked me.

'She said to make sure Ananya is dropped home safe,' I said as I stopped an auto.

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I met Ananya at Punjabi by Nature in Vasant Vihar. I should have thought of a better-named venue, given her current mental state. However, the location was convenient and the food excellent.

‘What is the point of me attending these family events, I feel so awkward,’ Ananya began.

‘It’s one more ceremony – the actual wedding. Don’t worry, tomorrow my aunts will be more used to you. Once my mother sees them accepting you, she is more likely to say yes.’

‘I think she wants a set of car keys more than anyone’s approval,’ Ananya said.

‘No, my mother is not like that. She doesn’t want the car, but she wants her siblings to appreciate she managed a car. Get it?’

‘Not really,’ Ananya shook her head.

The waiter came to take the order. We ordered one paranthas, which came with enough butter to stop your heart instantly. We ate dinner as we contemplated our next move.

‘Sir, would you like to try our golgappas with vodka?’ the waiter said.

‘What?’ Ananya said.

‘No thanks,’ I told the waiter and turned to Ananya. ‘It is a gimmick. Trust me, Punjabis don’t do that on a regular basis.’

‘I am going back to Chennai in two days,’ Ananya said.

‘I know. But I will speak to mom, maybe even my uncles, after the wedding. I want to lock this in,’ I said.

‘What about your dad?’ Ananya said.

‘He won’t agree. We’ll have the wedding without him. Aren’t mom’s side relatives enough?’

‘They are more than enough. Each talks more than ten of my relatives. Still.’

‘Ananya, you can’t get everything in life. Your parents, my mom, relatives – we have enough blessings. My father is not required.’

‘You should talk to him though. He’s your father,’ Ananya said.

‘Isn’t the food great?’ I said as I rubbed butter on my paranthas.

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Minti's final wedding ceremony gave new meaning to the expression over the top. Real elephants and ice sculpture fairies greeted us at the entrance. The boy's side had not yet arrived. Patient ushers waited with trays of flower petals. We shuffled through landscaped gardens with two dozen dolphin-shaped fountains to reach the main party area. The caterer had chosen a world theme. Food stalls served eight cuisines – Punjabi, Chinese, home-style Indian, Thai, Italian, Mexican, Goan and Lebanese – with at least five items in each genre. Apart from these, there were two chaat stalls – one for regular eaters and other for health-conscious guests. The regular counter served samosas and tikkis, while the health counter had sprouts-stuffed golgappas. My aunts took both, one for the taste another for health.

There were two bars. The first bar had a giant Johnny Walker Black Label magnum cask. All uncles congregated here and waiters kept bringing in a regular supply of paneer tikkas and hara bhara kababs. The second bar was the mocktail bar, nicknamed the ladies bar. It had a large display shelf with two dozen glasses of different shapes and filled with psychedelic fruit drinks.

'Beautiful, Rajji, you have held the family name high,' my mother said, admiring the flower arrangements on the bridal stage.

'These orchids have come from Thailand. Just landed two hours ago from Bangkok,' Rajji mama said.

'Fifty thousand is just the flowers bill' Shipra masi said. We raised our eyebrows to express suitable awe.

My cousin Rohan came running in to tell us that the baraat had arrived. We went outside and stood next to the elephants to receive them. Rohan gave me a pink turban, something all brothers and close male relatives wore to receive the groom.

'You look cute,' Ananya grinned.

All turbaned men posed for pictures with their equivalent counterparts from Duke's side. I had a picture clicked with Prince, Duke's cousin. Minti's father grinned as he hugged Duke's father for a picture. Duke's father frowned.

'Why is the boy's father so serious?' Ananya said.

'Maybe he is hungry,' I said. We soon found out I was wrong. Duke's family did come inside and sat on the sofas. However, they refused to touch anything to eat.

‘One cold drink-ji,’ Kamla mami begged Duke’s mother, who shook her head.

“We are not hungry,’ Duke’s father said. Duke, his parents and a dozen close relatives sat on the sofas next to the stage. Half a dozen waiters stood by with trays but the boy’s side ate nothing.

‘The snacks are not hot, go get fresh ones,’ Minti’s father screamed at the waiters. His anger was misplaced. The boy’s family had not refused food because of its temperature.

‘Ask what’s the matter. Something is wrong,’ Shipra masi said.

‘Who will ask?’ Rajji mama said. ‘They are not saying anything.’

Kamla aunty wore a worried expression. Ten minutes passed.

‘What’s going on?’ Ananya said.

I shrugged. Shipra masi told the younger cousins to move back. She folded her hands and went to Duke’s father. He looked the other way.

Ananya and I stepped back a few metres. We could see the elders but not hear them.

My mother and her two brothers folded their hands in front of Duke’s parents. Like a landless farmer, they waited for the feudal lords to respond. A few minutes later, one of Duke’s aunts spoke to my mother.

My mother nodded as she listened carefully. After Duke’s aunt finished, my mother came back to huddle with her siblings.

‘This is too much drama. I have to know what’s going on,’ Ananya said.

I pulled my mother aside.

‘It’s the Santro,’ my mother said.

‘What? It doesn’t start?’

‘Be serious, Krish.’

‘Sorry, what happened?’

‘Some misunderstanding has occurred. When Rajji gave the Hyundai keys, Duke’s parents thought it was Hyundai Accent. But it was a Hyundai Santro. Accent costs five lakh, Santro only three lakh.’

'I thought it was a gift,' Ananya said.

If my mother found Ananya's entry into the family conversation odd, she was too preoccupied to dwell on it.

'Yeah, wasn't it a surprise?' I said.

'What do you think this is Krish? A birthday party? Everyone knows the surprise. Duke's parents had already announced the Accent to their family. They are feeling insulted and cheated.'

It is amazing how people can feel insulted even after being welcomed by elephants.

'Now what?' I said.

'Nothing, they are saying no wedding until Rajji changes the car.'

'Can he?' I said.

'He is already broke doing this wedding. But what choice does he have? He has promised them he will.'

'Then why are they sitting there with sullen faces?' I said.

'They want a guarantee. Duke's father wants the difference in cash right now.'

'Now?' I said.

Ananya's eyebrows went up and stayed there as she didn't know how to react. Shipra masi called my mother again and the elders held animated discussions.

'Is this for real? I am so pissed off,' Ananya said.

'I am as stunned by it as you,' I said.

We went to the ladies bar. I ordered two mocktail daiquiris.

'What are they discussing? Why don't they call the police?' Ananya said.

'Ananya,' I said, 'are you stupid?' I handed her a glass.

'No, I want to send some criminals to jai. Is that stupid?'

'Yeah, if you care about Minti's reputation. Plus, what about all they've spent?' I pointed to the various stalls.

'Oh, and nothing about the little fact that your sister is going to marry into a family of total jerks.'

'This kind of stuff happens. The elders will resolve it,' I said.

'We should be with the family at this time,' Ananya said as she kept her glass down.

We moved back to Drama Venue. Rajji mama had placed his pink turban at Duke's parents' feet. They ignored him. He offered a cheque, Duke's parents refused it. Rajji mama called his friends for cash. No one could come up with such a large amount at such a short notice. Meanwhile, new guests were arriving at the party. With them, Rajji mama his his stress and smiled and hugged all of them. Meanwhile, the ladies came up with a bizarre plan.

'Quick, Kavita, take your jewellery off,' Shipra masi said and removed her own necklace. My mother struggled to remove her bangles. Kamla and Rajni mami took off their jewellery sets as well.

Shipra masi put all the ornaments in a plastic bag and gave it to Rajji mama. 'Give this to them. Tell them to keep it until the car is replaced,' she said.

Rajji mama fell on Shipra masi's feet.

'Are you mad? You are my little brother. Minti is our daughter,' Shipra masi said. All her siblings broke into tears. Duke's father, still sofa-bound kept looking at us from the corner of his eye.

'Now go,' Shipra masi said.

'I'll check with them first,' Rajji mama said. He went up to Duke's father.

'I can't believe this,' Ananya said.

'Shsh, everything will be normal soon,' I said.

Rajji mama returned after meeting Duke's parents.

'Shipra didi, they've agreed to keep the extra jewellery as security,' Rajji mama said.

Rajji mama collected the bag from Shipra masi.

'Uncle, wait,' Ananya said.

All eyes turned to her. This isn't your business, I wanted to tell Ananya.

‘May I suggest something,’ Ananya said, ‘before you give it to them, Rajji mama.’

‘What?’ my mother said to Ananya, surprised.

‘Aunty, you elders have had so many meetings to resolve this. Can the younger cousins talk to Duke?’ Ananya said.

“Ananya, this matter concerns grown-ups,’ I said.

‘It’s Duke’s marriage. We should have a word with him,’ Ananya said.

‘When the jewellery is ready, then why?’ Kamla mami said.

‘Please uncle, Shipra masi, please. What’s the harm?’ Ananya said.

Shipra masi sighed her consent.

Tinki, Nikki, Rohan, Kittu, Bittu and us sat in a separate group of chairs ten metres away from the grown-ups. Ananya walked up to Duke’s side of the family and identified a twenty-year-old boy. ‘Are you Duke’s cousin?’

‘Yes, myself Pranjal,’ he said.

‘Good, can you collect all Duke’s cousins and bring them to Minti’s cousins over there,’ Ananya said, pointing to our group.

‘What’s going on?’ Duke’s father said.

‘Uncle, the younger people want to have a meeting. C’mon, Pranjal, round them up fast,’ Ananya said.

‘Who is this girl?’ Duke’s mother said.

‘I’m their family friend,’ Ananya said and turned to the groom, ‘Duke, can you join us?’

Duke gave Ananya a puzzled look. Ananya continued to stare at Duke until he became uncomfortable and stood up. She asked him to follow her.

‘Krish, call Minti here,’ Ananya said.

‘Minti?’ I squeaked.

‘I’ll get her,’ Tinki said and ran inside.

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We made a circle of a dozen younger cousins along with Minti and Duke. The elders gave us a suspicious looks from far, keen to know what was going on but Ananya made sure all younger cousins had their backs to the elders.

‘We shouldn’t have allowed this,’ Duke’s mother said.

‘Of courseji, two minutesji,’ Rajji mama said, agreeing to everything Duke’s parents said.

‘Hello everyone,’ Ananya stood up to address the cousins. I sat next to her.

Everyone returned a meek ‘hi’ in response.

‘Do you think what is happening here is right?’ Ananya said.

Duke and his cousins looked down, avoiding eye contact. My cousins huddled next to Minti, trying to keep her calm.

Rajji mama and Kamla mami gave helpless looks to Dike’s parents as all of them wanted to peek into Ananya’s conference. Shipra masi walked over to the younger set.

‘What are you doing?’ Shipra masi said to Ananya, ‘Minti’s life will be ruined if they leave.’

‘I think her life would be ruined if they stay. Aunty, please give us some privacy. You make sure Duke’s parents stay put,’ Ananya said.

As Shipra masi left, Ananya turned to Duke, ‘Yes, you. Stand up if you can.’

Duke stood up. He was six inches taller than Ananya and twice her weight. Of course, these anatomical facts didn’t register with my mad girlfriend.

‘What do you do, Duke?’ Ananya asked.

‘I am a software engineer,’ he said.

‘How much do you make?’ Ananya said.

Duke kept quiet.

‘Tell me,’ Ananya said in a loud voice.

'Ten thousand a month,' he said, in a heavy Punjabi accent.

'Great, I make twenty-five thousand. Still, can you tell me what have you done to deserve a wedding like this? What have you done to deserve a car to be gifted to you?'

'I, I am the b ... boy's side,' Duke stammered.

'So? Have you seen Minti?' Ananya said.

Duke nodded.

'You are having an arranged marriage. That is why you are getting a girl like her. If you had to woo her, can you even in your dreams have a girlfriend like her?'

Duke kept quiet as he shifted his largeness from one leg to the other.

'What?' Ananya said.

'This is too much,' Duke said.

'I am too much,' Ananya agreed and gave Duke a Bharatnatyam-style glare. She spoke again.

'Do you know what Minti's parents had to go through to do this wedding for you? That car cost two and half years of your salary, Mr Duke! These two parties have thrown him into debt. Now you want an Accent? It won't be your Accent, it will be what you managed to wrench out of a helpless father, who didn't want a drama at his daughter's wedding to turn into a scandal.'

It was too many words for Duke to process at one go. He was stunned, like the rest of the cousins, more by Ananya's confidence and fluent English than what she was saying.

'Sit down,' Ananya said. Duke complied instantly. Ananya turned to everyone. 'Listen, all brothers and sisters of Duke, there isn't going to be any Accent. The elders have shown their true colours, now it is down to Duke and all of you. If he wants to take Minti with respect, he should say so. If he doesn't, then he is just a schmuck and we don't want the wedding.'

'Ananya beta....' Rajji mama came to us as the youngsters' meeting had gone for too long.

'Almost done, uncle,' Ananya said. 'Five minutes, Duke. Make up your mind.'

Everyone fell silent as Ananya Swaminathan, brand manager HLL, MBA, rated best girl by popular vote at IIMA and rated best girlfriend by my own vote, forced the younger generation in Duke's family to think.

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The cousins fell silent as seconds ticked past. Duke wanted to say something, but he noticed his parents' sour faces from far and kept quiet. He huddled with his own cousins as they exchanged whispers with each other. He stood up again and spoke to Ananya after four minutes.

'Excuse me, madam,' Duke said.

'I'm Ananya. What?'

'Can we go to the grown-ups? I want to talk to my mother.'

'About what?' Ananya said and blocked him.

'Why are you so dominating? Let me go.'

'Let's all go,' Ananya said.

All the cousins stood up from their chairs. We walked up to the grown-ups. Duke went to his mother.

'Mummy, I want to marry Minti.'

Duke's mother gave her son a shocked look.

'But they have betrayed us, beta,' Duke's father said.

Rajji mama dived towards their feet again. Ananya stopped him.

'Daddy, I have kept quiet for so long, no? everything you have decided. Now whatever it is, don't spoil my marriage.'

'Beta, but hey promised us,' Duke's mother said.

'Mummy, enough! And why this drama of keeping their jewellery? What do you think? I can't buy my own car?'

'Five minutes are over,' Ananya said, 'should we pack up or....'

'What kind of a girl are you? You are not even giving me time to convince,' Duke said to Ananya.

One of Duke's uncles stood up. 'Let's start-ji. We can't spoil our children's happy day. We are already late for the jaimala ceremony.'

‘Are they OK?’ Rajji mama said, looking at Duke’s parents.

‘Don’t worry, misunderstandings happen. We don’t have to spoil a lifelong relationship,’ Duke’s uncle said as he signaled for all others to stand up.

‘Everyone , please enjoy the snacks,’ Duke said. It was enough cue for his relatives to jump at the waiters. It is cruel to keep Punjabis away from their food at a wedding, especially when most of them had no stake in the car anyway.

Our side of the family hugged Duke’s parents. They didn’t hug back, but at least they didn’t push us away. Rajji mama brought a box of mithai and fed Duke’s parents a piece each in their mouths. The sugar rush improved their expression. The DJ started the music. The wedding was back on.

One girl stood back until everyone vacated their sofas and went to the stage. It was the South Indian girl who had come with me all the way from Chennai.

‘What did she say to him?’ Shipra masi asked me. She took her bag back and redistributed the ornaments. I shrugged my shoulders.

‘Very wise girl,’ Kamla aunty gave Ananya a hug. ‘Thank you, beta. You kept our izzat.’

‘But tell me one thing, you earn twenty-five thousand?’ Rajni aunty asked the question everyone wanted to ask.

My mother came and gave Ananya a smiling nod. Even though my mother didn’t say anything, I knew it meant a lot.

‘She’s not that bad,’ Shipra masi told my mother during jaimala.

‘You’ve scored girl, you know you have,’ I said to Ananya as we tossed flower petals on Duke and Minti.

‘So, mom,’ I said, ‘as I was saying.’ We were in the kitchen.

‘You’ve said that four times. Do you actually have something to say!’ my mother said. She removed boiling tea from the stove.

‘Ananya leaves tomorrow,’ I said.

‘OK,’ she said. She passed me a cup of tea.

‘I called her home to meet us before she left.’

‘And,’ my mother said.

‘We’d like to know your decision,’ I said.

‘It’s your decision,’ she said.

‘OK, your opinion, which is important for me and to make my decision.’

‘Uff, you and your MBA terms,’ my mother said.

Ananya came home in the afternoon. My mother cut a melon as we sat at the dining table.

‘So mom, the unthinkable happened. Your relatives like Ananya. Now, do I have your permission to marry her?’

‘You don’t need my permission,’ my mother said, passing me melon slices.

‘Not permission, approval. Do we have your approval?’ I said.

She gave a few slices of fruit to Ananya.

‘Is that a yes?’ I said.

‘Kamla aunty and Rajji mama are quite fond of her,’ my mother said.

‘Do *you* like me, aunty? Tell me if you are not convinced,’ Ananya said.

‘Of course, I do, beta,’ my mother said, her hand on Ananya’s head. ‘But there are other people too, your side of the family.’

‘My family likes Krish a lot!’

‘Yes, but what about the families liking each other? You two may be happy, but we adults have to get along with the adults from your side. You remember Sabarmati Ashram?’

‘Be patient, mom. Over time, the families will get close,’ I said.

Ananya brought up the topic of my father one last time before she left. ‘Krish’s dad won’t agree?’ Ananya said.

My mother gave a wry smile. ‘He won’t let us watch TV, forget Krish Choosing his bride. It’s fine, my siblings are enough. Otherwise, it will never happen,’ my mother said.

Ananya nodded. My mother went to her room and returned with two gold bangles.

‘No aunty,’ Ananya said, even as my mother shoved it down her wrists and kissed her head.

Happiness floated like rose petals in the air and I imagined fist pumping my hand three times



‘So what’s the next step? The wedding date?’

Ananya and I were on our long-distance call from our respective offices.

‘You know your mother is right, there is a gap here,’ Ananya said.

‘What gap?’ I said.

‘My parents like you. Your mother likes me. What about them liking each other? Remember the Ahmedabad disaster?’ Ananya said.

‘Yeah but,’ I said. ‘Oh man, I thought we were done.’

‘No, the two families have to unite. Trust me, it will be worth is. We should make them meet,’ I said.

‘Where? I’ll come to Chennai with my mother?’ I said.

‘No, let’s go to a neutral venue without relatives.’

‘Good point. Let me organise something,’ I ended the call.

I went back to work. I didn’t have a fixed division or boss in Citibank Delhi yet. I floated between departments, pretending to be useful. I had a temporary stint in the credit cards division. I had to come up with a credit card promotion plan, something I had no interest or expertise in. I opened the existing brochure of offers for our credit card customers. We had a special deal on a package to Goa.

I picked up the phone and called Ananya again. ‘Goa,’ I said. ‘Let’s all go to Goa. Nothing like the sea, sun and sand to make the two families bond. Plus, it will be fun for us, too. What say, next month?’

‘It won’t be cheap,’ she said.

‘Isn’t love the best investment?’ I said and fumbled through my cards to call the travel agent.