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‘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 from 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.