

Nim Gholkar

Diary *of an* Immigrant Bride

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JAICO PUBLISHING HOUSE

Ahmedabad Bangalore Bhopal Bhubaneswar Chennai
Delhi Hyderabad Kolkata Lucknow Mumbai

Published by Jaico Publishing House
A-2 Jash Chambers, 7-A Sir Phirozshah Mehta Road
Fort, Mumbai - 400 001
jaicopub@jaicobooks.com
www.jaicobooks.com

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DIARY OF AN IMMIGRANT BRIDE
ISBN 978-81-8495-719-8

First Jaico Impression: 2015

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In loving memory of my grandmother
Durga (Ambi) Vishwanath Dhume

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SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

10th January, 1998

I looked around. The crowds were thinning and the airport lounge was nearly empty. I felt frightened by the heavy silence. Everything smelled and sounded foreign. Just a few hours ago, I was in India, surrounded by the bustle and clamour of Mumbai. And now, I had arrived on a different continent. It was scary and magical at the same time. I wondered where Ravi was. I had scribbled his home phone number on a piece of paper and stuffed it into my purse. But I thought perhaps I should wait another few minutes before calling him.

An elderly couple shuffled past me, slowly pushing their trolley, which made loud, creaking sounds. Two large, battered looking suitcases were placed off-centre on the trolley, making their progress towards the exit prolonged and laborious.

I opened my handbag and quickly scanned its contents to make sure my passport and wallet were still in there. Yes, nothing was missing. If only Ravi would arrive. Where could he be? I walked up and down, my eyes scanning the now deserted lounge, but there was no sign of him.

I rubbed my sweaty palms together and took a long, deep breath. I couldn't wait to see him. Although we had been married for six months, Ravi and I hadn't spent much time together. He had flown back to Sydney barely a week after our wedding. I had waited anxiously each day for news of my spouse visa, but it was six months before I heard from the Australian High Commission. My bags had been packed for weeks and as soon as I got the good news that my visa had been granted, I booked the next available flight.

Now I was finally here. The moment would have been perfect if only

Ravi had been waiting to welcome me. I began feeling uneasy. He couldn't possibly have got the dates mixed up. Surely not? We had spoken a day before I left Mumbai and he had asked for my flight details. Could there have been an accident maybe? Cold beads of perspiration formed on my forehead. I frowned as a disturbing thought crept into my head. Recently, the newspapers had mentioned a few cases of brides who had been abandoned by their husbands after arriving on foreign shores. Did a similar fate await me?

'Calm down, Anjali', I said to myself as mild panic rushed through my veins. He couldn't possibly not come. I leaned against the trolley and waited.



I was seventeen when I made the decision.

I would only ever marry for true love. Nothing less.

Around the time I was growing up in the late-1980s in an unpretentious suburb of Mumbai, an 'arranged marriage' was the ultimate goal for any middle-class girl over the age of twenty. The scenario was standard and fairly predictable. A nervous suitor and his smiling parents would arrive at the home of the potential bride. They would be greeted and gushed over by the girl's family who would then proceed to praise their daughter's innumerable skills. These skills included expertise in sewing, knitting, embroidery, painting, cooking, singing, home-making, flower-arranging, reciting passages from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, quoting Wordsworth and Shakespeare, just to name a few. (It didn't matter if the bride in question couldn't sew a button or hum a tune or tell the difference between a sonnet and a limerick. Why let facts stand in the way of a good story?). As soon as the groom's family was convinced that a goddess was about to descend upon them, the bride was beckoned into the room. Inevitably, she would be led in, held firmly at the elbow by a female member of the household, as though she was in peril of collapsing if allowed to walk alone. She would arrive, head bowed, eyes lowered, *saree*-clad, carrying the signature tray of tea cups that trembled

in her hands.

I didn't want any of that.

My desires were straightforward and uncomplicated:

- A. A man who would woo me with flowers (preferably long-stemmed roses), chocolates (individual pieces wrapped in multi-coloured crinkly paper) and soppy love-notes.
- B. A whirlwind romance, complete with secret trysts, eye-signals and snatched embraces.
- C. And finally, a loud and lavish wedding that would be the talk of the town for years to come.

It didn't seem like a lot to ask for. At least, not at first. But as the years rolled by, and I entered my twenties – when every self-respecting girl should be married or be forever doomed, I became worried. My knight in shining armour had obviously lost his way.

The only remaining option that would spare my parents the embarrassment of an 'old maid' daughter was the dreaded arranged marriage.

At the ripe old age of twenty-six, feeling desperate and knowing I was now officially 'over the hill', I finally succumbed to mounting pressure and fulfilled the dream of every middle class Indian parent. I married a Non-Resident Indian or NRI as they are popularly known. I did what every immigrant bride does: packed my neatly labelled suitcases, bid adieu to every familiar sight, sound and smell, embraced my family and friends, and entered two new, uncharted territories: life on foreign shores and marriage to a man I barely knew.



On the day of my departure to Australia, a dozen neighbours and friends came to see me off at the airport and I felt like a mini-celebrity. Being

the first one from my family to go abroad had raised me a notch in everyone's eyes, and my parents had beamed proudly when the flight to Sydney was announced.

'Call us as soon as you reach Australia. Make sure you don't lose your passport. And remember, don't talk to strangers on the plane', Aai said, hugging me. She quickly smudged her forefinger with some kohl from her eye and rubbed it against the side of my head to protect me from The Evil Eye. Baba smiled at me but I could sense his sadness. I bent to touch his feet and get his blessings, and he placed his hand on my head. '*Sukhi raha* (be happy)', he said. He has never been one of those fathers who hugged or kissed. I turned to look at Ravi's parents. 'Bye, Mumma, Papa.' They both smiled and gave their blessings. 'Make sure Ravi looks after you. And call me if he doesn't', said Papa.

The flight was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. Tall, smartly dressed air hostesses, with skin like peaches and cream, glided up and down the aisle, carrying trays and pushing trolleys. There were only a handful of Indian passengers on the plane. I had never seen so many foreigners in my life and tried not to stare.

Next to me, sat a plump, middle-aged man with sandy brown hair and freckled skin. He asked me a question, which I didn't understand. It sounded like '*fustahmstrayuh*'.

'Pardon me?' I asked.

This time he spoke slowly. 'First time to Australia?'

I nodded, smiled and pulled out a magazine from my bag. I wasn't ready to speak to strangers yet.

About an hour into the flight, the blonde goddesses in uniform handed out silver-foil containers of food. I sniffed the chicken and vegetables, and felt faintly nauseous. Mr Australia next to me was tucking into his meal with gusto. I emptied the sachets of pepper and salt over the food, cut the chicken and vegetables into bite-sized portions and spooned them into my mouth, one tiny piece at a time. The only thing I really enjoyed

was the soft, warm bread roll, which I smothered with butter and wolfed down.

I spent the rest of the flight either dozing or reading my magazine, which was filled with juicy stories about film stars.



Sydney Airport is more beautiful than anything I could have ever imagined. Glossy. Clean. Pristine. But it was so quiet. The silence around me was deafening. I had no idea where the baggage carousel was and I walked carefully behind those who had been on my flight. Suddenly, two uniformed men came striding towards us. One held a dog by a leash and walked up to each passenger, letting the dog sniff. My heart jumped into my throat. I am terrified of dogs.

I knew what was happening, though. Lots of people back in India had told me colourful stories about Australian quarantine. Sniffer dogs, trained to detect explosives and drugs, were apparently a common sight at Aussie airports. As the dog approached me, I stood stiff, held my breath and squeezed my eyes shut. I began silently chanting the *Gayatri Mantra* at break-neck speed. Please God, don't let him bite me. Or worse, lick me. I knew I would scream if he did. After a few seconds, I opened one eye, and then the other. The dog had moved on, but the young man leading him turned to give me a strange look. I smiled weakly.

I balanced my two suitcases onto a trolley and moved towards customs. The official read the form I had filled and asked me to open my bags. 'What kind of food are you carrying?' he asked, as I leaned forward, hanging onto his every word.

'Oh, it's all just dry food', I mumbled, trying not to feel like a criminal. I had done my homework. Our neighbour, Vinay *kaka*, who had travelled to Australia three years ago to visit his sons, had coached everyone in our neighbourhood on the dos and don'ts. I kept quiet about the container of *rava laddoos* (round sweets made of sugar and flour) tucked away in

one corner of my suitcase. *Aaji*, my grandma, had prepared them especially for me, knowing how much I adored them. But nothing missed the official's eagle eye. He picked up the container, sniffed and studied it carefully and asked, 'what are the ingredients? Any dairy?'

I nodded reluctantly.

He gave me a rueful smile. 'Sorry, ma'am. I cannot allow these.'

He tossed the container into a huge bin behind him, and I felt tears sting my eyelids. Poor *Aaji*. She would be heartbroken if she found out. Oh, why had I bothered taking the risk? I should have listened to Vinay *kaka* and not carried any dairy products. It was too late now.

'You may go out through that door', he said, pointing at a glass door that slid open and shut as each passenger walked out. On the other side was everything I had been waiting for. My husband. My new adventure. My future.



Ravi Jathar. Just saying his name sent a thrill up my spine. Over the past few months, I had practised different versions of my new signature. Should it simply be 'Anjali Jathar'? Or did 'Anjali Ravi Jathar' have a nicer ring to it? 'A.R. Jathar' sounded terrible. 'What's there to think? A wife should always have her husband's name between her own name and surname. It should be "Anjali Ravi Jathar"', had been Aai's firm view when she saw me doodling on a notepad. I agreed. And that was the name on my passport when I entered Australia.

As I walked out of customs, smoothing down my hair and straightening the creases out of my crumpled cotton *kurti*, there was no sign of Ravi. People around me hugged and kissed their loved ones, delighted to be reunited. I craned my neck and peered eagerly over their heads to see if he was perhaps waiting at a distance. But he was nowhere.

Suddenly I heard hurried footsteps behind me. Someone was running. I

turned around and literally felt time come to a standstill. Everything else around me faded away. Our eyes met and it was as though I was seeing him for the first time. For the rest of my life, I will never forget that moment. All those years spent waiting for 'The One' to arrive and sweep me off my feet had boiled down to this one isolated moment. We looked at each other ... husband and wife ... and my heart turned over.

Ravi's first words startled me. I had been expecting an embrace ... a kiss ... an apology for arriving late ... an affectionate 'I missed you.' Instead—

'Quick, Anjali. We have to hurry. I have parked in a tow-away zone. C'mon.'

He grasped the trolley and began hurrying towards the exit. For a few seconds I stood watching him, too stunned to move. And then, suddenly galvanised into action, I began running after him, my heavy purse flapping against my side, my sandals squeaking noisily as I tried to keep pace.

The automatic sliding door marked Exit opened silently and I ran headlong into Australian sunshine.

The cloudless blue sky will remain my earliest memory of Sydney. As we sprinted towards a smart red car parked a few feet away, I looked up to see a wide, unending expanse of the most vivid blue. No thick, stifling blanket of smog. No dust particles floating around. I gulped down a lungful of the clean, sweet, pure air. Oh, this is bliss!

Ravi was already putting my two suitcases into the red car by the time I reached him. There was no time to look around and savour my first moments in Australia.

'Quick. Hop in', he said.

I got a whiff of lemon and musk as Ravi got in beside me, and leaned over my knee to grab his sunglasses from the glove-box. My skin tingled and I suddenly felt shy. We hadn't been this close in six months. I immediately wished I had carried perfume in my purse and rubbed it

behind my ears just before seeing him. What if he kissed me? I felt scruffy and dishevelled after my long flight. It would be a bit awkward to embrace in such a cramped space. Maybe he would simply squeeze my hand and leave the hugs for later, when we got home. Maybe...

'Sorry I was late. Just as I was leaving, I got a call from work.' His words interrupted my thoughts.

'Oh, that's okay. No problem at all.'

'And the traffic didn't help either. I would've been here much earlier, but there was a broken-down truck and I had to take a detour.'

I smiled at him, thinking how attractive he looked in his yellow and white striped t-shirt and dark blue jeans. His hair was a little longer than I remembered, and curled at the nape of his neck.

'Now, put on your seat belt. It's the law here. Okay, let's go.' I did as told and relaxed against the seat as Ravi checked the rear view mirror and pulled out onto the road. The hugs could wait until later.

Nothing could have prepared me for Ravi's driving. He was like a mad man, weaving in and out of traffic, switching on the radio and air conditioner with one hand while using the indicator with the other.

I had never sat next to someone who drove so recklessly. Right through my childhood, we were driven everywhere by Baba who was against speeding. He was always overtaken by cyclists and *rickshawallahs* but he would remain unfazed, staring straight ahead when younger drivers raced past, hooting and waving and whistling. Ravi didn't press the horn even once. Come to think of it, no one else did either. What an amazing city! How on earth does everyone get by without honking?

I soon began to relax and enjoy the thrill of the ride. What fun to zoom past everyone, instead of the other way around! I spent the entire journey with my nose pressed against the window, drinking in the amazing and unfamiliar sights. The traffic signals were a powerhouse of discipline. Instead of crossing whenever and wherever there was a gap in traffic,

people waited patiently near the set of lights until the green man appeared.

I was stunned by what I saw at one of the crossings. A couple kissing! Right there in the middle of a crowded street. What was even more amazing was that no one paid any attention to them.

'Anju, don't stare, please. It's very common here.'

I jumped on hearing Ravi's voice. Was I staring? I hadn't realised.

One amazing sight after another. I saw a girl walking down the footpath, cigarette in one hand and a thick novel in the other. She was actually reading while walking. I cannot imagine how she dodged other pedestrians, but she sure did. My only horrified thought was *what if she steps on something?* But that's what's amazing about this place. No one takes naps or sells knick-knacks on the streets. Oh, what a beautiful country! So much cleanliness. So much discipline. For a fleeting moment, I missed the madness and mayhem of Mumbai. I have always thrived on chaos. Will I survive in its complete absence?



'C'mon, I'll show you around', Ravi said as soon as we walked into his apartment. He had placed my bags neatly in a corner. He was about to move away when I stopped him.

'Ravi,' I said, touching his arm. He turned to look at me.

Months of pent-up longing bubbled up inside me. Had he missed me as much as I had missed him? I took a step towards him, my fingers still curled around his wrist. His eyes softened briefly and he pulled me into an embrace. As I rested my head on his chest and heard his heartbeat drum gently against my ear, I felt a sense of peace descend upon me.

'It's been so long', I murmured, looking up at him. We kissed. It was a long, sweet kiss and his stubble grazed against my chin.

'I'm glad you're here', he said, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear. We cuddled for a few more minutes. 'Come, I'll show you where everything is.'

We began a tour of the apartment. The kitchen might as well have been plucked straight out of the glossy pages of an interior design magazine. Gleaming appliances, a pristine white fridge with double doors, a huge square wooden chopping board which seemed attached to the bench top and a tall, expensive looking machine that stood in a corner.

'What's that?' I asked, pointing to the gleaming giant.

'My coffee maker.'

That thing made coffee?

Ravi began opening different cabinets. 'It will take you a few days before you remember where everything is kept. But let me show you the basics. Here's the tea and stuff.' He pointed at three cream-coloured glass jars with ebony black lids, marked 'Tea', 'Coffee' and 'Sugar'.

'Here, in this cupboard are all the utensils.' I peered into a dark cavernous shelf and saw one *tava*, one large steel bowl, a couple of saucepans, some serving spoons arranged neatly in a gigantic ceramic mug and a few dinner plates and glasses tucked away in a corner. Was that it?

I must have frowned because Ravi added quickly, 'I didn't need much when I lived by myself. We can buy you some new kitchen stuff soon.' I smiled at him but remained silent. Wouldn't do for a new bride to appear too greedy.

Fifteen minutes later, I knew how the washing machine operated ('Woollens must always be washed on the right setting or they will lose their shape'), which days the rubbish bins were collected ('the red bins are general rubbish and the yellow bins are recycled goods. Don't ever mix the two'), how to use the vacuum cleaner ('You need to empty the bag every few days or the suction won't work'), how to always cook with the exhaust fan on ('I hate it when the entire house smells of curry') and

where to hang washed clothes ('There are a few clothes lines downstairs near the garage' and 'Please don't hang anything on the balcony. It's not the done thing here').

Ravi obviously runs his home like an army barracks – everything in the right place. No mess. No chaos. Even the cushions on the sofa are placed at perfect angles.

He urged me to unpack my bags straightaway, despite my feeble protests that they could wait until tomorrow morning. 'Let's talk, Ravi. I will unpack tomorrow. I can't believe we are finally together. I missed you so much.'

'I missed you too. C'mon, I'll help you put your things away. You know what they say: don't leave for tomorrow what can be done today', he grinned. My husband is an attractive man. Couple of crooked front teeth that overlap ever so slightly, a lopsided smile, wisps of wavy hair that tumble over his forehead.

It took me ten minutes to put everything away. I hadn't brought along too many clothes. A week before my flight, Aai had taken me on a carefully planned shopping trip. All my life, I had worn *salwaar khameezes* (which became increasingly modern over the years as I kept pace with the times). Baba had always frowned upon western attire, which was why my sister and I had never worn jeans, let alone skirts. But now that I had married an NRI, Aai made concessions to my wardrobe without letting Baba in onto our little secret. We bought a few tops, a couple of pairs of jeans (one pale blue and the other black), a long A-line navy blue skirt and three frilly nightgowns. 'These should make your husband proud of you', laughed Aai and I felt tears choke my throat. I knew how rarely we could afford such extravagance. Seeing her childlike delight reminded me of how much she had gone without to make sure we never lacked anything.

I remembered Aai's flushed face as I put away my clothes. Ravi had emptied out one half of the cupboard for me, and looked concerned when he saw how little I had brought. 'Is that all? I was worried you would need twice as much space. Why didn't you bring more?'

'I don't have more clothes. I mean, not western clothes. Do Indian women here wear *salwaar kameez* at all?'

Ravi spluttered and coughed, 'Heavens, no! Oh well, some do. But please, I hope you are not considering it?'

'I wasn't sure.'

'Look, it's okay. We can work out your wardrobe one of these days.'

The rest of the evening went by in a blur. We called both our parents to let them know I had arrived safe and sound, and then went for a walk around the block. Ravi pointed out the supermarket, the fruit and vegetables shop and the train station. 'Everything within walking distance', he said. 'There's a library further up the road and a post office on the other side of the station. You can discover everything for yourself tomorrow when I'm at work.'

I frowned. Tomorrow is Sunday.

He ruffled my hair and smiled. 'I'll be gone only a few hours. There's an urgent project I'm working on. But I'll be back by lunchtime. Promise.'

We made love as soon as we got home. I wasn't sure what to expect since we had done it only once before while still in India. All day, my mind had been filled with delicious anticipation and I had been looking forward to this one moment. I was frightened and excited at the same time. Would he still find me attractive? Should I tell him how much I had been longing to be held and caressed by him, or would that be considered too forward? Would he undress me or should I do it myself? My mind was a jumble of questions. When it did happen, it was a bit rushed and awkward and over within a few minutes. I clung to him for a long time afterwards, breathing in his raw, musky scent, nuzzling my nose against his chin. He fell asleep in my arms, and I spent a long time gazing at his face, noticing every tiny detail ... how his mouth pouted a little as he slept ... how his eyelids flickered every now and then ... and savoured the joy of being together with him at last.

12th January

I have dreamt of going abroad some day for so long that now that I'm finally here in Sydney, I still can't believe it. Before coming to Australia, I had never been to a foreign country. Childhood holidays were mainly to Goa, to visit various temples or to Pune, where most of our cousins live. Occasionally, as a special treat, we were taken to a hill-station, either Matheran or Lonavla, where we enjoyed touristy things like pony rides, merry-go-rounds, and nature walks.

I am the eldest of three – I have one sister and a brother – and we were raised in a tiny one bedroom flat in Mumbai. Baba works in a bank, where he has been employed since the last twenty years. He earned just enough to send us all to an English medium school and later to college. Education, to him, mattered far more than wealth and he wanted each of us to have a degree. Aai has always been a housewife. She spends most of her days in the kitchen toiling over the stove, preparing mouth-watering meals. We always had something delicious to eat as soon as we came home. Other than Gangubai, who comes each morning for an hour to sweep the floor and wash the dishes, we have no servants.

My parents aren't materialistic. If something broke, they tried fixing it, rather than throwing it away. We had the same sofa-set in the house, from before I was born until the day I graduated from college. Occasionally, it tore in places and fluffs of cotton fell out. Aai would diligently squeeze the cotton back in and try to stitch-up the tear.

We were bought a new outfit twice a year: on our birthdays and around the time of Diwali, the festival of lights. We rarely ate out at restaurants. Baba looked astonished if any of us suggested going out for *masala dosa* or mutton *biryani*. 'Why do you want to eat out and waste money when your mother cooks the same dishes better?' he would ask. Aai wouldn't bother giving her opinion on this. I think she secretly agreed with Baba.

In the early 1990s, during my college years, my day-to-day routine seldom varied. I attended lectures during the day, occasionally skipping the boring ones, and socialised with other girls my age from our neighbourhood in the evening. The boys in our housing colony played

cricket or football every evening. Each time someone got out or scored a goal, they would try to get our attention by yelling loudly. My friends and I would giggle and dart shy glances at them. I waited for romance to blossom, hopeful that it was just around the corner. But other than a mild, short-lived flirtation with a young, science graduate called Nikhil, who lived two floors above us, nothing exciting happened.

Unlike my friends who never wanted to leave Mumbai – and there were many of them – I was eager to see other countries and learn about new cultures. In addition to Hindi films, I watched lots of Hollywood movies too, and they only increased my hunger to live abroad. I wanted to escape from the cramped space at home and the 'ordinariness' of my life. I asked Baba if I could apply for a scholarship to a foreign university, but that idea was shot down before it could properly take flight.

'I am not sending any daughter of mine abroad, alone', he'd said. It was a different matter if we ended up marrying men who lived on foreign shores. He would not mind that at all.



I spent this morning lazing around and not doing much. Ravi had left for work around 7.30 am. I made myself a cup of tea and wandered around the apartment, admiring all the artefacts that Ravi had arranged neatly in each room. He seems to have a penchant for brass figurines and oil paintings in particular.

Ravi lives in a small, trendy apartment in a well-to-do suburb of Sydney called Artarmon. The living room is sparsely furnished: there are two rose-coloured leather sofas at right angles to each other, a wooden coffee table in the centre between them (with a hardcover book about Australia placed at a jaunty angle on it) and a massive music system, complete with two mikes and a stack of CDs placed neatly in a cabinet. I know Ravi loves singing, especially sad, soulful Indian songs from the '70s and '80s. It's one of the few things we have in common.

It feels good to finally be here in Sydney with Ravi. Just the two of us.

After the wedding, his house had been filled with cousins, aunts and uncles who'd set up camp and showed no signs of returning to their homes. Ravi's one bedroom flat in Mumbai is the size of a matchbox, crammed with old furniture and knick-knacks that looked like they had been there for generations. Huge boxes, filled with old, broken appliances, were kept on top of Godrej cupboards. Mumma (Ravi's mother) still manages to keep everything surprisingly clean and dust-free in spite of Papa's penchant for hoarding.

There had been no concept of a 'honeymoon suite' in Ravi's house. All the women had slept in the bedroom, with mattresses lined side by side like sardines in a tin, and the menfolk occupied the living room, playing cards and listening to *ghazals* into the wee hours of the morning. I fantasised Ravi would come looking for me in the middle of the night, whisper into my ear as I slept next to his aunts and cousins and urge me to sneak out for a quick embrace. But it was only the night before Ravi flew back to Sydney, when the relatives finally left and we were given the bedroom to ourselves, that we managed to consummate our marriage.

We never had a proper honeymoon. 'Lots of time to spend together once you come to Australia', Ravi had said when I broached the topic of going away for a couple of days. I had been hurt that he preferred, instead, to spend time with his parents, aunts and uncles.

It was only when Aai had put things into perspective that I reluctantly put aside my resentment. 'Think of it from his point of view, Anju. He is visiting India after several years and is here only for a month. Of course, he wants to spend time with his parents. You can have a long honeymoon when you are together in your new home.'

Now, here in Australia, with no family around, I'm feeling a bit lost. Ravi, although familiar, is still a stranger in so many ways. But I'm looking forward to getting to know him better.

16th January

As soon as Ravi arrived home from work today, he told me the 'gang' would be dropping in soon. Gang? Ravi smiled on seeing my perplexed frown. 'My friends. They are all eager to meet you. In fact, they even wanted to come to the airport the other day, with balloons and streamers, to welcome you. But I told them nothing doing. Too embarrassing.'

I was glad his friends hadn't turned up at the airport. I had wanted Ravi all to myself on my first day in Australia.

'Oh, that's nice,' I smiled, 'I can't wait to meet them. Will Naina and Vibha be coming too?' Over the months, Ravi had briefly mentioned names of friends that belonged to his musical group, 'Sargam'. They met up every now and then and sang Hindi film songs for a couple of hours. Someone played the keyboard, another the *tabla* (small hand drums) and a third, the guitar. Ravi, Naina and Vibha were the singers. After the music session, they would have a potluck dinner where everyone brought a dish. It all sounded most exciting and I couldn't wait to be part of the fun.

'Yes, I think so', he said.

About half an hour later, the doorbell pealed. 'Okay, Anjali. Hope you're ready for this lot. They are not for the faint hearted', said Ravi, rolling his eyes. He opened the main door with a flourish. A group of people stood outside. They were holding balloons and flowers and a loud cheer went up as soon as they saw us. I smiled happily, half hidden behind Ravi, feeling a little shy in front of this noisy bunch of strangers.

'Where is she? Where is she?' someone yelled.

'Why are you hiding behind him? C'mon out. Is he bullying you already?' a soft voice laughed merrily.

'He wouldn't let us come to the airport. Meanie!' a deep voice roared from the back of the group.

I felt excitement bubble within me at the thought of meeting Ravi's friends.

'Now now ... don't frighten her', Ravi said in a mock stern voice.

'Oh, I'm okay. Hello everybody. I'm Anjali', I said, peeping from behind Ravi's shoulder.

'We are so excited to finally meet you', said a tall, slim, young woman, dressed in a sleeveless pink top and black pants, as she stepped forward and hugged me. I got a whiff of expensive perfume. 'Can you guess who I am? He must have told you our names, no?' She had black hair that fell in ringlets around her shoulders. Glossy highlights shimmered through them giving her an oddly wicked air, almost like a yesteryear Hindi film vamp. Everything about her spelled poise and glamour.

'Are you Naina?' Ravi had told me their names, but little about their personalities.

'Heaven forbid, my darling. There can only be one Naina in this universe. That's her there. I'm Vibha.' She grinned and pointed at a reed-thin, yet surprisingly buxom girl who was holding a bunch of long-stemmed yellow roses.

'Such a kind introduction', Naina smiled and I could tell straightaway she was one of the singers in the group. Her voice had a soft lilting edge that made you want to listen to her. 'These are for you. I hope you like flowers?' She held out the roses, which I accepted, breathing in their sweet scent. I sensed instantly (as girls tend to) that we would become close friends. 'This is my husband, Ashok.'

A tall, solemn man, with a thin moustache and dimpled smile held out his hand in greeting. 'Hello, Anjali. Welcome to Australia. I hope you don't mind us just turning up on your doorstep?'

'Oh no, not at all. I am so excited to finally meet you all. Thank you so much for coming.'

'Wild horses wouldn't keep us away. Hi Anjali, my name is Tushar. I play the *tabla* and that's how I came to be part of this group. And this is my wife Sonali.' Tushar was short and plump with kind eyes and a

hearty voice. His wife, on the other hand, looked stiff and uncomfortable and offered me a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. 'Hello. Welcome to Sydney', she said, in a dull monotone. I was determined to forge my friendships right from day one. It was too early to make judgements. So, I smiled back.

'We have one person missing. Rishi, our guitarist. He's still at his office. But you will meet him one of these days, anyway', said Ravi.

Everyone stayed for another two hours. I watched Ravi interact with his friends. He was quiet most of the time, while everyone else guffawed and rolled around laughing. I knew he was a man of few words. I had gathered that in the first week of our marriage. 'Please, Anjali, come to the crux of the matter', he'd said on several occasions. I'd realised then that he wasn't going to be one of those husbands who hung on every word their wives uttered.

Vibha, Naina and Sonali had brought with them an assortment of heavy snacks including homemade *dhokla*, *pohe* and *upma*, which we devoured in no time. The clock hand crawled towards 10 pm, and I stifled a yawn. It had been a fun evening, but I wished everyone would go home soon. My eyelids grew heavy and I felt an irresistible longing to curl up and sleep. Thankfully, Ashok noticed my predicament. Just as everyone began suggesting a game of cards, he raised his hand and silenced the group. 'Hey, have a heart, guys. Anjali is probably still jet-lagged. She has flown half way across the world. Maybe we should call it quits now and leave the two lovebirds alone.'

Everyone laughed loudly. 'Yes, yes. Romantic lovebirds. No wonder Ravi looks ready to murder us. He obviously wants to spend time with his new bride. *Chalo, chalo* ... let's go', said Tushar.

In the end, it was 11 pm by the time everyone said one last goodbye (we stood chatting at the main door for at least twenty minutes) and left. I've definitely enjoyed meeting Ravi's friends. I know it won't be too long before they are all my friends too.

21st January

I've been longing to discuss a certain topic with Ravi ever since we got married. I had tried broaching it in Mumbai once but he had shrugged it off and told me he didn't want to talk about it. I had told myself then that perhaps it wasn't the right time to discuss something so sensitive. It was too early in our relationship. Aai had warned me against bringing it up.

'Sometimes it's best to let sleeping dogs lie', she'd said. 'He has already told us about it.'

'Not enough', I'd replied.

Aai had sighed. 'Enough to know he is honest and kind. You know how difficult things were becoming for us. In the end, we were left with little choice.'

'But I want to know more', I had insisted.

As soon as Ravi left for work this morning, I snooped around in his wardrobe. A little, persistent voice in my head urged me to stop, but the temptation was too much. I couldn't believe how easily I found the photos and almost wished, as soon as I opened the envelope, that Ravi had taken the trouble to hide them.

Anne's photo was a huge shock to me. She was prettier than I had expected.

I narrowed my eyes and peered closely. She was dressed in jeans and a sleeveless top. Wind swept, blonde curls. Heart-shaped face. It didn't look as if she had any make-up on. And yet, her face was glowing. Although my first instinct was to hate her, I could not help noticing how kind her eyes were. They radiated warmth and laughter, making it difficult to dislike her. I had no doubt whatsoever it was Anne in the photo. She had an arm around Ravi's shoulder and they were laughing into the camera. How happy and carefree they looked. In a way, I wished I hadn't found the photo. There was an ache in my chest I couldn't get rid of. It wasn't just that she was a beautiful girl. What stabbed at my heart

was how beautiful they looked together.

I slid the photos back into the envelope and returned them to Ravi's wardrobe. For a long time afterwards, I stood at my bedroom window, gazing out but not really seeing anything ... thinking ... remembering ...



I had been twenty, when my mother had finally told me the truth about my stars. Unlike the average Indian girl, I wasn't eligible for just any arranged marriage. I was born under an unlucky star called '*Mangal*', which meant unless I found a partner born under a similar star, I would bring doom and gloom to all concerned.

Aai had begun the search for a suitable groom for me ever since I turned eighteen. 'We need to at least start looking', she'd said when I protested. 'Good boys are being snapped up every second. We can't take any chances.' She spread the word through our community. Luckily, she has a vast social circle, which could be depended upon to suggest prospective candidates and so, she didn't insist on placing an advertisement in the newspapers. That would have been too embarrassing. My friends giggled when I told them about Aai's match-making mission. They often designed sample matrimonial ads just to annoy me: *"Mumbai-based, smart, intelligent (don't depend on it) 18 yr. old female, 5'5", of wheatish complexion, with wavy, shoulder-length, black hair, dimple in left cheek, is looking for a 22-26 yr. old handsome, super-rich (ideally earning in dollars) Maharashtrian male. He should come from a cultured family and should be fond of eating out (often!). Interference from in-laws will not be tolerated."*

I couldn't whip up enough courage to tell my mother that I didn't believe in arranged marriages. I was going to have a thrilling love affair before being swept off my feet headlong into blissful matrimony.

Oblivious to my reluctance about finding a groom, Aai continued her tireless search for 'a suitable boy'. But nothing worked out. Ultimately, as I celebrated my twenty-sixth birthday and bleakly considered life as a

spinster (a fate worse than death according to Aai), a proposal finally came along that brightened our dull horizons. The groom didn't tick all the boxes, but 'we are hardly in a position to kick up a fuss', said Aai.

In the end, tired of the constant questions about marriage from my aunts and uncles and heavy hints (as subtle as a sledgehammer) about the biological dock ticking, I gave up the struggle and shrugged when my mother showed me a photo of 'the suitable boy'. It was hard to say if he was really suitable since I didn't know him. But we did share the same unlucky star, which meant luck would eventually be on our side.

And so I did the unthinkable. Something I hadn't ever imagined for myself in all my dreams. I married a man who had been married before.



I'm not sure how long I stood at the window, daydreaming. Must have been over an hour. I looked around and groaned. I hadn't done any housework all morning. The bed was unmade, and I had forgotten about the breakfast dishes in the sink. This is hardly the glamorous life abroad everyone back in India talks about. What difference, after all, is there between *Gangubai* and me?

I wasn't in the mood for housework. It could wait. I quickly changed into my new pair of jeans and a black and white long sleeve top. After making sure I had switched on the answering machine, I locked the main door and sprinted down the stairs and out into the golden sunshine.

I decided to stop by the local supermarket, which is a ten-minute walk from home. On reaching, I grabbed a basket from near the entrance and made my way to the deli section. Australian supermarkets have to be seen to be believed. They are huge and brightly lit, with endless aisles filled with the most amazing things. I had never before seen so many varieties of breakfast cereals and cookies and chocolates and cheese. Occasionally, a small counter is set up in a corner, where a person in uniform, chef's hat and apron, hands out samples of marinated cooked chicken pieces or cheese and crackers or some new brand of juice.

Ravi had promised to be home early tonight and I wanted to cook something special. The varieties of chicken were mind-boggling. Mince. Sausages. Drumsticks. Whole chicken. Breast. Thigh. Organic. Corn-fed. I peered at the price and felt dizzy converting it to rupees. Ravi had given me a \$100 note this morning and told me to buy 'whatever grabs your fancy'. If the price of chicken was anything to go by, the \$100 wouldn't last long. I knew chicken curry was his favourite dish, so the price would simply have to be ignored. After careful comparison, I finally selected a 500 g packet of drumsticks.

The rest of the shopping was easy. I felt like a child let loose in a candy store. Once the boring bits like milk, bread and eggs were done, I moved towards the cosmetics section. During our college years, my sister Dipali and I had never been allowed to use make-up. Aai had always frowned upon cosmetics, insisting they would ruin our complexion. Her idea of beauty therapy was rubbing orange peels against our cheeks. The vitamins in the peels were enough to make any young woman's skin glow, was Aai's firm belief. But now, I want to experiment. Ravi had been astonished when I told him I had never worn make-up. 'You're in Australia now. Everyone wears make-up', he'd said, 'Well, almost everyone.'

I selected two lipsticks (one pale pink, one brown), a compact (natural beige) and one black eyeliner. That will do for the time being.

By the time I got home, vacuumed, dusted and cooked the chicken curry, it was nearly 6 pm. The curry had taken over an hour to prepare. I flipped through the three cookbooks I had brought with me from India until I found a recipe that looked simple. It had only six steps. But I hadn't reckoned with the complexity of each step: Grind the cashews to a fine paste. Puree the onions and tomatoes. Finely chop five cloves of garlic.

I sprinkled coriander leaves over the curry and left it to simmer on the stove. My kitchen looked like it had been hit by a hurricane. I glanced at the clock. Only another hour to go before Ravi came home. He had promised to be home no later than 7 pm. There was no time to do the dishes.

After a quick shower, I got ready and sprayed perfume all over, dabbing some behind my ears and on my wrists. Running out into the lounge room, I quickly picked up my novel and some videos I had left lying around, and stuffed them under the coffee table. I straightened the cushions on the sofa, drew the curtains and switched on the table lamp, which gave the room a warm, romantic glow. It was 7 o'clock. I raced around, setting the table. I even lit a tiny candle that I discovered in a kitchen drawer and placed it on the centre of the dining table.

Finally, exhausted, I settled down on the sofa, switched on the TV and waited for Ravi. After half an hour, I curled up and lay my head on the cushion. I was starving, but didn't want to begin eating without him. I began nodding off. By the time the doorbell pealed at 9.30, the candle had burnt out completely and the food had gone cold.

He was apologetic and full of remorse. 'I'm so sorry, Anjali. My meeting went on until late, and then, something else came up and I just couldn't get away. I hope you've eaten.'

I shook my head and rubbed my eyes. 'No, I haven't. Why didn't you call?'

'I forgot. It was mad busy, and there wasn't a moment to think. I did grab a sandwich, so I'm not very hungry. I'll eat a bit later.'

My lower lip trembled and I felt tears well up. 'Ravi, I cooked chicken curry today because it's your favourite. And I laid the table over two hours ago.'

It was then that he noticed the burnt out candle and the table setting. He leaned forward and pulled me close. I lay my head against his shoulder. 'Oh, Anju. Don't cry. I'm sorry. Why did you go to so much trouble? Look, give me a little curry and rice in a bowl. Just a little.'

By the time I returned from the kitchen carrying a bowl, Ravi was going through the day's mail.

'Let's chat, Ravi. You can check the mail later.'

He gave a tired sigh. 'Anjali, I'm listening. You can talk. But I have to go through this. I'm expecting something from the bank. Oh, here it is. Hold on ...' he exclaimed, staring at the paper he had just pulled out of the envelope. 'What the — ?' He swore and shook his head. 'I thought I'd cleared my credit card bill ... damn! Now all this interest I'll have to pay. Anju, can you please get me that yellow file from our room? The one marked "bank papers".'

I couldn't believe my ears. I have been in Australia only a few days and instead of wanting to spend time with me, getting to know me better, he's more interested in the mail.

I found the file, and plonked it on the table before him. He didn't look up.

By then I had lost my appetite. I poured the leftover curry and rice into plastic containers and placed them in the fridge. 'Good night, Ravi.'

'Hmmm?' he looked up, a frown creasing his forehead. I knew he hadn't heard a word I'd said. I stared at him for a couple of seconds and was about to say something, but then thought better of it. I didn't want an argument so late at night. And so I let it go.

I'm now in our bedroom and have snuggled into bed with my diary. It's nearly 11 pm as I write this and I don't think I can stay up much longer waiting for Ravi.

24th January

Naina invited me over to her place for lunch today. 'Let's meet up for a girly afternoon', she said over the phone. 'I would have invited Vibha, but she's working. And Sonali ... well ... anyways, it will be just the two of us.'

I wondered again why Sonali always has this kind of unspoken 'handle with care' tag attached to her. Does she have some problem with me? Or with the world at large? I wasn't in the mood to analyse emotionally

fragile people.

Naina and Ashok live on a street called Rohini, which at first startled me. It sounds Indian. But apparently, lots of roads in Australia have Aboriginal names that resemble Indian words. I wonder if this is one of them. The warm rays of the sun washed over me as I strolled down the street. So many wonderful sights. A young woman hurrying to the station, dressed in a tailored suit, holding a takeaway cup of coffee in one hand and a folded newspaper in the other. Mothers pushing baby carriages and jogging at the same time. Old couples walking hand in hand.

I walked past the discount store, which Ravi told me once was very popular with Indian tourists. You can get everything under the sun there, from stationery to clothes to pet food and several items are priced as low as one dollar.

I finally arrived at Naina's place. A postage stamp-sized front yard with lush green grass led up to the main door, which had a bronze sign stating 'KAPURS' in tall lettering. Naina and Ashok live in a tiny town-house that looks like a gingerbread house from a fairy tale. I rang the brass bell and heard its loud chime boom through the entire house. There were hurried footsteps and then a loud squeal as Naina bumped into something. Finally the door opened and she stood beaming at me.

'Hi! How are you?' she said breathlessly.

'Are you okay?' I asked, as she winced and rubbed her knee.

'Yes. Yes. Accident prone as always. Come in, come in. Welcome.'

I held out a box of chocolates I had picked up from the supermarket.

'Oh, there was no need. Why so much formality? Does this mean every time I come to your house, I need to bring something?'

I shrugged and smiled. Aai had drilled it into our heads since childhood that we should never go anywhere empty-handed.

A familiar fragrance wafted through the air. I sniffed appreciatively and looked around.

'I've made *pav bhaaji*. You guessed it, didn't you?' Naina grinned. My mouth watered.

Naina has furnished their house like a professional designer and I envy her taste and eye for colour. An oversized picture of the Taj Mahal adorned an entire wall. There were colourful cushions and floral curtains everywhere, lending the place a quaint, old-world charm.

'Shall we have *chai* first? I will make it the Indian way. None of this dip-dip rubbish.'

She boiled water, tossed in some tea-leaves, sugar and cardamom and poured the dark golden liquid into two huge mugs. We sat around her three-legged, round dining table and munched on biscuits dipped in tea.

'So, tell me about yourself', she said, smiling. For the next couple of hours we chatted like long-lost sisters. I didn't know if Sargam was formed after Ravi had divorced Anne or earlier. Naina didn't bat an eyelid when I haltingly told her about Ravi having been married before. 'Oh yes, we know. It was before our time though. We have only known Ravi for about a year. Well, except Vibha. She has known him for much longer. Ashok and I met him through mutual friends and then we all came together through our love for music. He is such an amazing singer. He told us you sing too?'

I remembered that my parents had urged me to sing a few lines the first time Ravi and I met. It was one of the many reasons I hated the concept of an arranged marriage. Why did a girl have to put up a 'performance' before the groom's family? How did it increase or decrease her ability to be a good wife?

I lightly brushed off Naina's question. 'Oh, not really. Just a bathroom singer.'

'That's what they all say. I bet you sing amazingly. We will find out

soon, anyway. Vibha and I are going to plan our next jam session.'

'Oh.'

'Normally, Ravi sings duets with either Vibha or me. But this time, we will get you two to sing together. Okay?'

'Oh, I don't know. I really don't think I'm any good. But okay. We'll see. Does Sonali sing too?'

'Oh, God no. She listens well though, which is a boon. We need a good audience. But her husband Tushar ... you met him the other day ... he plays amazing *tabla*.'

We talked about loads of things – her childhood, spent half in Nainital where she went to boarding school and half in Delhi, how and where she first met Ashok, her all- encompassing love for Australia.

'It's the best country in the world. I love it here. Don't miss India a bit.'

That surprised me. I am homesick already. I miss the food, the warmth, the people, and the noise. It seems impossible that other Indians here don't feel the same. I stayed at Naina's for over four hours. Our chat had cheered me up immensely. I walked back home around 5 pm, humming under my breath. It feels good to finally have a friend in Australia.

9th February

I'm feeling a bit lost. Ravi left for a 3-week work visit to Hong Kong this morning. He had warned me before we got married that his job as a Senior Technical Consultant meant he travelled for long periods. What he had missed telling me was that even when he was in Sydney, his job ate up all his time. He usually leaves home about 7.30 each morning and returns no sooner than 8 pm.

So far, I've been spending my days dusting and vacuuming each morning, followed by a walk around the block, then a couple of hours

watching Hindi film videos or reading novels and lastly, preparing dinner. The biggest challenge is not having anyone to chat with all day. Ravi is not a 'talker'. Once he gets home, he prefers to unwind by watching the news. He gives me a quizzical look when I say 'let's chat'.

'I don't understand what you mean by "let's chat". If there's something you want to tell me, go ahead', he'd said to me the other day.

The physical side of things has been okay, I guess. We've made love a few times, but each time, it finishes just as I'm beginning to enjoy myself. I'm not sure what to think. My knowledge of sex is sketchy and limited, mainly whatever I've learned from novels. I *do* know, though, that there's more to it than the missionary. I guess, I'd like a bit of romance before we get right into it. A little touching and caressing. I did think of telling him that maybe we should try setting the mood first and slowly explore each other's bodies before getting to the main act. But I chickened out at the last minute. I've been thinking about a movie I had watched many years ago. The husband and wife always showered together and it seems like such a playful thing to do. I'm too shy to mention this to Ravi just yet. I don't want him thinking I'm too bold.

So far, we hadn't got into any arguments. But last night I messed things up a bit by bringing up the topic of Ravi's ex-wife. We had been lying in bed. Ravi had propped a couple of pillows under his head and was reading from a file. I turned towards him and tickled his foot with my toe. He reached out and tousled my head, but continued reading. I did wonder briefly if my question would annoy him. But I could never have anticipated the effect it did have. His face turned white with anger and then flushed a dull, dark red.

'Why do you need to know who she was, where we met, why we separated? What's it got to do with you?'

I was taken aback. 'Is it such a wrong thing to want to know?'

'Yes it is!' he blurted. 'It's all over. Part of my past. Why bring it up now?'

'But Ravi, we need to start our relationship on a foundation of truth. What's the big deal about telling me?'

He had pursed up his lips and taken a deep breath. 'Anjali, we do have a foundation of truth. You know I was married before. You know her name. I have kept no secrets and told you no lies. But if you start asking me for details, then I'm sorry. That was never part of the bargain.'

I was silent for a moment, wondering how to say what I wanted to say without sounding like a shrew. 'I guess ... I guess ... it will help me understand you better, understand our marriage better if I knew why your other relationship didn't work out.'

'No, Anjali, I'm sorry. You are not my shrink. You don't need to know. Maybe you *want* to know. But that's entirely different. Please don't broach this topic again. I have told you everything you should know.' Ravi had slammed the file shut, tossed it to the floor, and turned on his side, facing the wall.

This morning, he woke up at the crack of dawn, had a shower, said his prayers, and made himself a cup of tea. I stayed in bed, my eyes firmly shut, too scared to approach him. Why, oh why, had I mentioned his previous wife? I should have listened to Aai's advice and simply let sleeping dogs lie. I waited in bed, hoping he would come in and drop a kiss on my head. At least say 'bye'.

I heard the main door close and then silence! Jumping out of bed, I ran into the lounge room. But he had left. I hurried to the balcony and saw him get into a waiting taxi. 'Ravi!' I called out, but he had already shut the door. I watched until the taxi disappeared out of sight. I felt my body go limp. A deep, heavy loneliness engulfed me. Slowly, I made my way to the kitchen. The sight of Ravi's favourite blue tea mug, which he had washed and placed upside down in the dish rack, brought tears to my eyes.

It's going to be another three weeks before I see him!

12th February

I've had to deal with door-knocking salesmen on two occasions so far, and I've developed a mortal fear of them. They walk up to people's doors in their bright ties and tailored trousers and smoothly talk unsuspecting souls into buying things they don't need. Just the other day, Naina had complained about having been lured into buying yet another washing detergent.

My main fear is conversing with the Aussies. Their accent still confounds me.

'Listen to the news every day', Ravi suggested once when I told him about not being able to understand the locals. 'It's the best way to master a new accent.'

This morning, there was a loud knock on the door. Peeping through the keyhole, I saw a young man in a black suit, carrying a bulky brown bag. I tiptoed back to the bedroom and waited. Why did these people turn up only when Ravi wasn't around? Perhaps if I waited long enough, he would admit defeat and go away. Will I spend the rest of my life ducking out of sight every time a salesman knocks? Suddenly I remembered something our Chinese neighbour Shirley had told me the other day. We had both been downstairs near the garage, hanging out the laundry. Her real name is Sang-Hwa, but she prefers being called the Australian version. She told me between giggles that whenever she gets into a difficult conversation, she throws up her hands and says 'no speak English'. No one bothers her after that.

As I cowered in my room, I remembered Shirley's trick and decided to try it out for myself. If it worked for her, surely it would work for me? I opened the door. He stood there, sweating profusely and wiping his forehead with a polka-dot hanky. On seeing me, he beamed and said something I could not understand. All I heard was the customary 'G'day'.

He selected a cleaning detergent from his bag and held it up. I trembled, half hidden by the door, and listened, horrified, as he launched into a long, incomprehensible sales pitch. I was trapped. Finally, when he

paused for air, I squeaked out my response.

'Sorry?' he asked, taken aback.

'No speak English', I croaked like an old, dying woman.

He didn't turn tail and disappear as most people did when they heard Shirley's high-pitched voice making the same claim. Instead, he renewed his efforts, now using sign language. My eyes widened. He pretended spraying with the can and then whipped out an imaginary cloth. This was ludicrous.

I straightened my shoulders and cleared my throat. As soon as he paused, I spoke:

'I don't want to buy it.'

He looked startled. The silence was deafening. He then found his tongue and said in scathing tones, 'I thought you didn't speak English?'

'I do now. Thank you.'

I moved to close the door. His nostrils flared and his face flushed a deep, dull red. Muttering under his breath, he grabbed his battered old bag and stormed down the stairs. 'These migrants!' was his parting remark. I giggled after shutting the door and felt a sense of victory. I had managed to stand my ground and not get sucked into buying something I didn't need. Hurrah! I don't need to cower in my room next time a salesman comes knocking. I now know how to nicely say 'thanks, but no thanks'.

15th February

Ravi has called twice since he left. Each time, I rack my brains to tell him interesting snippets about what I've been doing in his absence although there isn't really that much to tell.

He laughed when I told him about the salesman episode. 'Ha! I can

visualise it perfectly. But I'm glad you decided to let him know that you speak English. Don't worry about what Shirley does. You're perfectly capable of carrying on a conversation without resorting to sign language.' He sounded delighted that I'm not moping around feeling sorry for myself while he's away.

Ravi and his parents had been upfront with my family about his travelling from the start. 'Our son travels a lot through work. Will your daughter be okay with such an arrangement?' Those had been Mumma's words precisely. My mother-in-law never minces words. Sometimes I had wished she would, especially when one of her statements sliced through your heart, leaving you emotionally, mentally and physically deflated.

Neither my parents nor I had given Ravi's high-pressure job much thought. Once we came to terms with him being a divorcee, everything else was a plus. I would be marrying a well-to-do NRI who earned in dollars and lived in Australia, which was fast becoming a 'must see' destination for Indians. But most importantly, I would escape eternal spinsterhood. Ravi and his family seemed little short of a miracle to us. Also, Ravi did not believe in taking a dowry, which annoyed his mother and endeared him to my parents. I think it remained a sore point with Mumma for several months. Her only son was being married off and no one was giving it the status it deserved.

I keep reminding myself now of how very lucky I am to be living in Australia, away from the stifling predictability of my old life. As much as possible, I try and look on the bright side of life. I'm in a beautiful new country, I've made my first friend already and I have the luxury of being a woman of leisure. Yes, it would've been ideal if Ravi hadn't been so caught up in his work. But I guess you win some, you lose some. Of course, things would have been different if we were settled in Mumbai. Ravi's travelling wouldn't have troubled me as much. Family and friends would have kept me company. But here – one lonely day melts into another and sometimes I don't even realise when dawn turns to dusk. Yesterday was Valentine's Day. I would have loved to celebrate it in style had Ravi been in town. Candle light dinner ... romantic music ... red

roses ... the works! But I wonder if Ravi would have agreed. 'I don't like all this "Mother's Day", "Father's Day", "Valentine's Day" stuff. Why does there have to be one specific day to remind people you care about them?' he had asked me, a few days after I arrived in Sydney. He had been reading a long article in a magazine about Valentine's Day celebrations. 'Not my cup of tea', he'd added, rolling his eyes.

Earlier this morning, I walked to the local library down the road and took up membership. The head librarian, a sweet old lady with snow-white hair, patiently explained that I could borrow up to fifteen books at a time and keep them for three weeks. I returned home with half a dozen Danielle Steel novels and began reading one straightaway. Later in the afternoon, I watched *The Bold and the Beautiful*, to which I'm now addicted. Immersing myself in the lives of Ridge and Brooke keeps my mind off my loneliness.

I also did something rather brave today. Well, not brave exactly, but certainly outside my comfort zone. Feeling desperate for company, I knocked on the door of our next-door neighbour. I had occasionally seen a little, grey-haired lady, always beautifully groomed and wearing pastel-coloured dresses, go in and out of the apartment. Probably in her early fifties, she dresses unlike any 50-year-old back in India. She would be Aai's age, I guess. And yet, my mother always wears tired-looking *sarees* and old *chappals* that should have been tossed away years ago. Her only accessory is a single wilted frangipani flower tucked into her plait.

On a couple of occasions, my prim and proper neighbour had smiled at me when we crossed paths and had once even said a brief 'Hello'. But beyond that, there had been no interaction.

Driven to desperation and bored out of my wits, I decided to get acquainted with her. Ravi has been encouraging me to make Aussie friends, after all. I knocked on the door and waited. And waited. Just as I was about to turn and head back home, I heard the latch rattling, and the familiar round face peeped out through the partially opened door. 'Oh', she said.

'Hello.'

There was a moment's hesitation after which she pulled back the chain and opened the door. She was wearing a fluffy bathrobe, belted loosely in the middle, and furry slippers and had curlers in her hair. She stared at me with widened eyes and a raised eyebrow.

'I ... I ... hello ... I'm Anjali.'

She smiled back faintly. 'Hello. I'm Jane Wilson.'

I hoped she would invite me in. As the silence stretched, I began to feel uncomfortable.

'Umm ... I was all alone, so I thought I would come over and say hello.' I was beginning to stammer, which I hated. I should never have bothered. Stupid, stupid me. Why hadn't I just stayed in my flat and died of boredom?

'Oh. Well. That's lovely of you, An-jee-lee.' Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. 'But I'm getting dressed to go out. Perhaps we could catch up another day?' I strained my ears and leaned forward to make sure I understood her properly.

'No problem, aunty. I'm sorry I disturbed you.'

She looked bewildered and I could have kicked myself. Ravi had told me that unlike India, seniors here were never addressed as aunty and uncle. Most people prefer being called by their first names.

'Oh, please, call me Jane. Look, thanks for dropping by. If you are free next Saturday, why don't you and your lovely husband drop by for afternoon tea?'

There is this whole morning tea and afternoon tea business here in Australia. At first I had no clue what they were. Was morning tea supposed to mean tea drunk in the morning? I later read an article about it. It's a mid-morning snack, had at about 10.30 am, and usually more

sweet than savoury. It consists of cakes, biscuits or muffins and tea or coffee. Afternoon tea is similar, except it's had around 3 pm.

I had no intention of visiting Jane Wilson for morning, afternoon or night tea.

'Thank you. I will let you know', I smiled, took two steps back, gave a tiny wave and fled.

I wanted to die. What a horrible lady! Are all neighbours in Australia as ghastly as her? I don't want to go to her house on Saturday. I don't want to go to her house ever. I returned home, switched on the TV and stared at the screen without really watching. So much for attempting to make an Aussie friend.

2nd March

Ravi will be home tonight. Hopefully, he has forgotten the argument we had before he left.

I haven't vacuumed or dusted while he's been away. In fact, my clothes had been lying all over the place until this morning, when I started tidying up. I haven't cooked much either, mainly having cheese and tomato sandwiches for lunch and omelettes or frozen *parathas* from the Indian shop for dinner.

I'm trying to figure out what exactly I feel for Ravi. I don't understand his driven need to keep proving himself at work. He told me shortly after we got married that other than the month away in India for our wedding, he hadn't taken a single day off work in the past two years. I find that even on weekends, he is glued to the computer or preparing presentations for the week ahead.

I've asked him a few times if we can visit the cinema or go out to dinner. And while he hasn't exactly refused ('good idea, Anju. Maybe next week'), he hasn't done anything about it either. Getting his undivided attention is proving impossible. He comes home from work with a

bulging briefcase, crammed with official documents, which he reads carefully after dinner (and sometimes during!). The other day he got a work-related call just as I had served him his meal and the call lasted for over half an hour. I had covered the food and waited at the table, only to have to re-heat it once he returned. I'm hoping he eventually realises how boring it gets for me when he's so pre-occupied and busy.



Naina arrived this morning without warning, which cheered me up immensely. I had been staring out of the window, wondering how to fill up the hours until Ravi arrived, when the doorbell rang.

'Ta-dah! It's me. Are you happy to see me?' She stood outside, wearing a short, tight black skirt and a loose burgundy top.

'Naina! What a surprise. How come you're not at work?'

Naina works part-time as a customer service officer at a nearby bank. She flicked back her hair and let out a low, wicked laugh. 'Sickie. Couldn't be bothered going to work today. Thought we could have some fun together.'

I laughed at her blatant devil-may-care attitude. Trust Naina to hoodwink her bosses.

'God, I'm dying for some tea. Anju, be a good girl and make me some hot *chai, na*', she said in her typical bossy manner. I didn't mind. I was so grateful for her company that I would have cheerfully done cartwheels in my tiny living room if she had asked.

As I began lining up the cups on a tray, and switched on the kettle, she followed me into the kitchen, talking all the while and complaining about an annoying colleague at work whom she would 'happily throttle someday very soon.'

'I'm sick of my job. Internal politics and favouritism and unfair promotions', she muttered, rubbing her wedding ring and sliding it up

and down her finger.

I turned around in surprise. 'But Naina, didn't you tell me the other day that you have only been in this job a year? Sick of it already?' I can't entirely work out Naina. We have chatted a few times over the phone and she's always complaining. Last time I visited her, she moaned and carried on about Ashok forgetting to hang out the laundry despite 'constant reminders'. Her husband works hard and takes her out every second evening to dinner or a movie or for a simple stroll, and she's complaining about the laundry? What would she say if she had to put up with a husband whose job ate into every waking hour of each day?

Naina shrugged. 'Uff ... you only live once, darling. If something doesn't work, then ...' She clicked her fingers and said, 'next'. She let out a piercing giggle and whispered coyly, 'the same applies to marriage. If something doesn't work, there's no point trying to fix it.'

I dipped the tea bags a few times until the water turned a satisfactorily dark brown shade. Both Naina and I like our tea extra strong and very sweet. I thought carefully about what she had just said. It didn't make sense. Naina and Ashok have been married for about four years and seem outwardly happy. Then again, I have seen them together only once.

'I don't understand', I said, turning to hand her the tea.

'Boredom, darling. It's the biggest killer in a marriage. The day I get bored with Ashok, I'm out.'

I was so startled that I coughed and a few drops of the hot tea splashed out of my mug and onto my shirt. I quickly dabbed it with a handful of tissues.

'You're leaving Ashok?' I squeaked.

'Calm down, *meri jaan*. You take every little thing so seriously. It's only light banter. But it's true. Don't you agree? Why put up with boredom?'

God! I'm bored every day since I arrived in Australia. 'So what you're

saying is that boredom is enough reason to break a marriage?' I wasn't enjoying this conversation any more. It was heading in a dangerous direction.

'Yes. Boredom can kill. Oh, unless the sex is great.'

Had I heard her right? Did she just mention the three-letter word? 'You mean .?'

'Well, good sex is the great leveller, isn't it? If the sex is okay, the marriage is okay', she giggled again and finished off her tea in one huge gulp.

I thought about this conversation for a long time after Naina left. Her views on marriage and fidelity surprise me. It's becoming increasingly obvious that whenever I'm with Naina, there is seldom a dull moment.

3rd March

Ravi arrived last night bearing gifts for me. A box of chocolates, a selection of eye-shadows and a couple of moisturising creams. I squealed loudly and threw my arms around his neck. 'Ravi! Thank you. That's so sweet. Fancy you getting time to go out shopping for me.'

He gave a sheepish grin. 'Actually, it worked out well. My colleague Wendy loves shopping. I gave her some money and told her to pick up a few things. The trouble is, Wendy only shops when things are half-priced. None of that for my wife, I told her. I made sure she only got the best brands.'

He didn't notice my smile fade. Somehow, a gift chosen by someone else didn't have quite the same meaning. I shrugged, collected the presents and kept them on the coffee table.

I looked around. The whole apartment was sparkling. After Naina had left, I spent all my time making the place look presentable. I know how much Ravi appreciates a clean and neat home, and so I made a special

effort. I had bought a bunch of assorted flowers from the supermarket and arranged them in a tall, V-shaped vase, which I placed on the side cabinet. The bed sheets, pillowcases and quilt covers were removed and fresh ones laid. I had even organised the shoe stand, which had been looking untidy mainly due to my sandals being thrown around haphazardly. I stacked Ravi's shoes on the bottom shelf, careful to arrange them exactly the way he likes: office shoes – with tissue paper stuffed in them to retain their shape – in one corner and sneakers and slippers next to them.

Ravi unpacked his bag straight away, tossing used underwear and clothes into the laundry basket and placing his toothbrush back in the bathroom. He removed his passport and foreign currency and returned them to the large cardboard box in which he stores everything he needs for international travel.

He had eaten on the flight and didn't want dinner. 'That smells yummy, though', he said, sniffing appreciatively. 'What have you prepared?'

'Fish curry and rice.'

'Yummy! I will have it tomorrow for lunch.'

I cleared up the kitchen while he had a shower. By the time I switched off all the lights and went to our room, Ravi was in bed, flicking through different TV channels. I cuddled up to him and he put an arm around me, drawing me close. He switched off the bedside lamp, but I leaned across him and switched it back on again. 'No, Ravi, I want to see your face', I said. Making love in the dark is no fun. I enjoy looking into his eyes, and seeing the different emotions flitting through them. I've been longing for him to cry out my name during our lovemaking or to say how attractive he finds me. Anything to show me that I'm special to him or that he feels emotionally connected to me. But so far, it has always been the same. Rough and rushed, with very little tenderness. He doesn't talk much while we're doing it and although I've tried to prolong our kissing, he seems almost eager to get quickly to the end. It reminded me of a dialogue I had heard in a movie once – 'wham, bam, thank you ma'am'. As soon as it was over, he turned on his side and was snoring within

seconds.

I've decided that this is how most marriages must be. Perhaps the problem lies with me. Maybe, my expectations from my marriage are unrealistic and inflated. Yes, it's true that so far I haven't really had an orgasm. Not a proper one anyway. But I guess, like anything else, this too takes time. Maybe with a little more practice, Ravi and I will get better at satisfying each other.



This morning, Ravi was up at the usual time. I snuggled deeper under the quilt and squinted as he opened the blinds.

'C'mon, sleepy head. It's 7 am. What about breakfast?'

I sat up. Was he leaving for work already?

'Ravi, you only got home last night. What's the rush?'

'No rest for the wicked', he grinned. 'Just because you can swan around all day and watch movies, doesn't mean us less fortunate folks can do the same. Someone's got to earn the money.'

'Very funny', I stuck out my tongue and jumped out of bed.

As I began preparing *upma*, I heard Ravi humming in the shower: '*Pyaar deewana hota hai, mastana hota hai*'. He has such a beautiful voice – deep, melodious, slightly nasal. I switched off the droning exhaust fan so that I could hear him better. It felt good to have him in the house. I couldn't wait to hear about his trip and to tell him about what I had been doing during his absence.

By the time, I finished cooking and brought the steaming *upma* to the table, Ravi had papers spread all over, and was busy signing and filling in forms. For the first time since coming to Australia, I felt really annoyed. I had been looking forward to talking to him, telling him about Jane Wilson and acting out the funny incident with the salesman. And

here he was, after having been away for three weeks, once again drowning in paperwork.

'Oh, c'mon Ravi. Whenever you're home, it's work, work and more work.' I banged the plate of *upma* in front of him.

He looked surprised and tiny frown lines formed on his forehead. 'What's the matter? You were okay just a few minutes ago.'

'Ravi, you haven't stopped working since the time I've arrived in Sydney. Where's the honeymoon you promised? We haven't even gone for a movie, let alone gone out for dinner. Sonali called the other day and told me she and Tushar went off to a caravan park for the weekend, just the two of them. They've been married forever. We're newlyweds and I barely get to see you. When are we going to start doing things together?'

'I don't have time to gallivant around in caravan parks. Tushar is not pulling a six-figure salary. I am.'

'I'd rather you earned less but spent more time with me.'

'Anjali, you're being unreasonable and selfish. You're having a wonderful life here. You lack nothing. I can't understand what you're carrying on about.'

'Yes, I love being here in Australia. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it's a bad life. But I barely get to see you. Bringing gifts and having sex now and then is not really enough. Surely you can see that?'

He glared at me for a few seconds and then turned his attention back to the forms. 'I don't have time for empty talk. I have a meeting in an hour, and need to complete a few things before that. Can you make me some tea? Or is that too much to ask?'

He is impossible. I turned around and walked to the kitchen. As I switched on the kettle, I tried taking deep breaths, but I was too agitated.

Enough of this boredom. I need to get out and do something. A job. Or a

course. I will wait until both Ravi and I are in a better mood and then ask him how to go about it.

21st March

'Anjali, you've worn that same blue top so many times. Don't you have anything else?'

Ravi frowned at me as I walked out of our bedroom, all excited at the thought of seeing the Opera House and Harbour Bridge for the first time. Luckily, he had no 'urgent' meetings scheduled for this weekend. I couldn't believe it when he told me we were spending the day in the City.

I smiled. Nothing could dampen my mood. The sun was shining. I had my husband all to myself for the entire day. All was well. I moved close to him, raised my arm and smoothed the frown creases from his forehead.

'My handsome, angry young man. Always frowning. What's the matter this time? Be sweet to me, *na*', I wound my arms around his neck and looked up at him.

He dropped a quick kiss on my lips. 'I am being sweet to you. I want to know why you have worn that top again. And it is a bit old fashioned. Change into something trendier and be quick. We are going to miss our train at this rate.'

I felt flustered. 'Ravi, I don't really have anything more suitable. The white and pink top is in the laundry, and the olive green one has a tear in it that I only noticed last night.'

Ravi gives a lot of thought to clothes – his own and mine. Each night, he spends at least ten minutes working out which shirt to wear the next day and which tie matches it best. He then opens the ironing board, and meticulously irons every tiny crease out of the shirt. 'Ironing is an art', he told me one day. 'See here, always the collar first, then the collarbone

bit, then the sleeves and so on. It all has to be done in the right order.'

'It doesn't really matter, does it?' I argued, a bit pained by the regimental approach to something as basic as ironing. 'I mean, whichever order you do it in, what matters is how the shirt looks at the end.'

'It does matter. I like order. And precision. This is the only way to iron a shirt.'

He now glared at me as though finding a tear in my shirt was the biggest crime in the universe. 'Anjali, you don't look after your things at all. The day I came back from Hong Kong, I noticed your jeans had fallen at the back of the bed. And you hadn't even noticed.'

I wriggled into his arms, hoping to change his mood. 'Okay *raja*, I'm sorry. I will try harder. Now at least, will you smile and hug me?'

He put his arms around me impatiently and gave a quick hug.



The railway station is a seven-minute walk from our house. I love commuting by train in Sydney. The carriages are so clean and empty compared to the trains in Mumbai. The guard announces each stop as it approaches and then rattles off the names of the rest of the stations en route.

I don't think I will ever forget my first sight of the Opera House. It was awe-inspiring and I stared at it silently, amazed at its architectural complexity. Set against the breath-taking backdrop of Sydney Harbour, this world icon needs to be seen to be believed. Growing up in India, I had come across countless photos of it, but seeing it in all its dazzling reality was a surreal experience. It looked like a huge collection of big, concrete shells and is prettier than anything I have ever seen. Well, with the possible exception of the Taj Mahal.

A bunch of Japanese tourists poured out of a coach and ran up the steps, clicking their cameras non-stop. They kneeled and crouched and craned

their necks, trying to take pictures from every possible angle. Ravi snapped a few photos of me standing on the steps that led up to the main entrance.

'No, no ... don't pose. Try to look natural', he yelled and I squirmed wondering how it was possible to face a camera and not pose.

Several posh restaurants lined the path leading up to the Opera House. Live music. Fine dining. I looked, open-mouthed, at the beautifully dressed men and women sipping cocktails from tall glasses. We had lunch at one of these trendy cafés.

'Let's have coffee and dessert a bit later. First we have to go and shop', said Ravi, once we finished lunch.

Being in the city was a completely different experience compared to being in the suburbs. There was a buzz in the air, everyone walked faster, the delicious aroma of coffee and croissants and pies seeped out of the quaint coffee shops that lined the streets. Young men and women wearing smart black aprons walked around in the cafés, balancing plates filled with exotic gourmet food. Proximity to the ocean brought a freshness to the air – you could almost breathe in the saltiness of the ocean.

I had to run to keep up with Ravi's long, purposeful strides. He didn't linger and stare at each shop window the way I did.

'C'mon, Anjali. Can you walk a bit faster? The shops will close in two hours. We can't waste time.'

Two hours? Surely it wouldn't take me that long to find a few tops? But I didn't know Ravi well enough. Shopping with my husband, as it turned out, was an unforgettable experience. Over the next couple of hours, we visited several expensive stores. I felt daunted even before I entered, staring wide-eyed at the smartly dressed attendants.

'Hello, how are you doing?' one of them piped up in a bright cheery voice when we walked in. I smiled uncertainly.

'I'm fine', I said at last. Ravi leaned towards me and whispered in my ear, 'ask her "how are you" in return.'

Confused, I turned around to do as he said, but she had gone back to filing her nails.

I stood close to Ravi as he painstakingly checked out every single outfit on every single rack.

'Here, take these and try them on in the fitting room', he said, thrusting half a dozen assorted items into my arms. 'Come out and show me each one. Go.'

The first one was a black woollen top, which looked awfully plain until I wore it and saw its unusual and stylish cut. It was short at the front and long at the back. I stepped out of the fitting room. Ravi was nearby, still sorting through the racks. He turned when I called his name. For a few seconds, he stared at me, looking me up and down.

I smiled hopefully.

'Hmmm ... a bit tight at the waist. You will have to start doing some stretches every morning. I did tell you to join a gym the other day. Have you done anything about it?'

I stared dumbstruck. 'What?'

'Nothing. Never mind. Let's leave this one aside for the moment. Try out the other things.'

Next, I tried on a short red dress that skimmed just above my knees. I had never worn anything like that in my life. It had a row of sequins around the collar and a deep cut at the back. From the front, it looked all prim and proper. But from the back, the dress looked practically wicked. I was worried what Ravi would say.

But he let out a low whistle when I stepped out of the trial room. 'That looks fabulous. Suits you perfectly.' I beamed at him and felt twenty feet

tall.

'Isn't it a bit short?' I asked, pulling it slightly.

'No. That's the style. You are in Australia now. Get used to short dresses.'

By the end of the afternoon, I had collected a \$500 new wardrobe.

'What?' I squealed, when he mentioned how much we had spent, feeling faint as I worked out what that meant in Indian rupees. We were having *chai* lattes and cake at a small, crowded coffee shop, our purchases lying at our feet in smart, paper bags. 'Isn't that a bit too much?'

I cannot work out Ravi. Here, he had just spent a mini fortune on my clothes. The other day, he had asked his colleague to buy me 'only the best brands'. And yet, whenever I come home from the supermarket, he checks the receipt with a fine-tooth comb. 'You paid this for bananas?' he yells. 'Why did you not just go to the Chinese fruit-and-veg store down the road? You get bananas there for half the price'. Or 'Didn't I tell you to only get this bread when it was on a special? Never full price.'

He now shook his head. 'There are certain things on which one should never scrimp. It's crazy to buy toothpaste or vegetables or toilet paper without first checking out what else is on offer. You never know when you'll get a good deal. But clothes ... ah! That's different. Clothes make a person. Clothes are your personal statement to the rest of the world. If you dress dowdy, no one takes you seriously. If you dress well, people will always listen to what you have to say.'

I thought about it. He had a point.

'Now, when we get home, don't just stuff these clothes into the cupboard. I want you to take good care of them. Make sure you wash them on the right setting. I don't want that mistake with my sweaters happening again.'

I wondered if he would remind me about the sweaters for the rest of my

life. The very first time I had operated the washing machine, I had forgotten to change the setting to 'Wool'. End result? Ravi's two most expensive, cashmere sweaters came out forty-five minutes later, shrunk to less than half their original size. He had been livid!

'Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Three bags full, sir', I said with a smart salute.

He tried at first not to laugh (Oh no. Mr Jathar *never* smiles. Why smile when you can scowl?). In the end though, I managed to coax an amused grin out of him.

2nd April

'So, when do you think you will start working?' asked Ravi.

I looked up from the letter I was writing to Aai and put aside my pen. 'I've been thinking about it. I guess it's time I started looking for a job. I'm a bit nervous, though.'

I had a brief vision of me sitting petrified at my office desk and saying 'Pardon?' or 'Sorry, what did you say?' or 'Can you please repeat?' all day long. The Aussies can't understand my English, and I certainly can't understand theirs. I've been watching the news and listening to the radio quite often these days, concentrating on how certain words are pronounced here. But I still don't feel confident enough to interact with the locals.

'Nothing to be nervous about. You're smart and educated. You'll be fine. In fact, getting a job will be good for you. I travel so often. And for so long. You'll be happier if you stay busy. Look, don't worry. I'll help you apply. Oh, and by the way, you know Suraj? Suraj Mehta? My colleague?'

I remembered him mentioning Suraj on a couple of occasions. Four years older than Ravi, Suraj is someone Ravi idolises. They share the same drive and passion to succeed, to become self-made millionaires and to travel the world. Suraj believes sleep to be a waste of time and often

sleeps only five hours a night. 'Plenty of time to sleep once you're dead' – that is his tag line.

'Yes,' I said, 'Your workaholic friend.'

'That's the one. His wife recently joined the work force. The point is that she studied in a non-English medium school and speaks only basic English. If she can manage to find and hold down a job, you can too.'

I silently mulled over this.

'The *Sydney Morning Herald* is your best bet. Every weekend, there is a section exclusively for jobs. Just circle the ones you think are interesting and send off your résumé.'

'What jobs do you think I should apply for?'

'There are enough telemarketing jobs around. You'll be able to land one of them.'

Telemarketing??? I cannot imagine a worse fate. Does Ravi truly believe I can do telemarketing? Was this why I had studied for two hard earned degrees in English Literature and History? I decided not to argue. There's no pressing need to find a job straightaway. I will take my time and check out all options. Something suitable will surely come along.

17th April

I woke up a little after 6 am this morning, with not the foggiest idea how the day would turn out. As soon as I opened my eyes, I remembered it was the big day. Ravi's 5-year university reunion. As I lay in bed, my head still buried in the soft duck feather pillow, I felt a burst of happiness. Yay! A break from cooking, cleaning and dusting!

'What shall I wear today?' I asked, walking into the lounge room where Ravi sat reading the paper. It was pointless wearing something without first getting his opinion. On several occasions, we had been late only

because he refused to leave the house until I had changed into something more 'suitable'. 'Dress for the occasion', he always tells me.

Ravi put aside the newspaper and looked at me. 'A *saree*?'

'What?'

'No?'

I couldn't tell from Ravi's solemn expression if he was joking or not. 'Ravi, this is your university reunion. I will meet your friends for the first time. Do you want me attending in a *saree*?'

After a moment's thought, his face creased into a tiny smile. 'You're right. Maybe a *saree* might not be the smartest idea. Wear the green top we bought the other day and the black skirt.'

As soon as he left for work, I invited Naina over. It was her day off and I was hoping she could advise me on what jewellery and shoes to wear with my outfit. Naina has a shrewd eye for fashion. She isn't quite as stylish as Vibha is. But Vibha works full time and never has time to drop in at my place. Naina knocked on my front door at exactly 12 noon. She had promised to arrive no later than 10.30 am.

'Sorry, *jaan* ...' she said, breezing through, carrying a plate of homemade cookies. Naina is brilliant at baking and often prepares cakes and muffins for her office parties. If only I had some useful skill like that. Even Sonali, with her gloomy, woebegone expression is a whiz at sewing. She has apparently sewn all the curtains and cushion covers in her house. Other than being able to read a 300-page novel through a single night, I have no other talent.

'Wear the outfit for me. And then I can work out what accessories will go with it. Here, I even brought along some of my own stuff. I wasn't sure if you had enough of a collection.' She pulled out a heavy fabric jewellery bag from her huge purse.

I quickly changed but just as I was finishing doing up the top button,

Naina stopped me. 'No, no, no. Don't you know the golden rule? *Never* do up the top two buttons. Let me show you.' She leaned forward and briskly undid two buttons, leaving my cleavage exposed. 'There,' she said with a satisfied grin, like a craftsman eyeing his creation. 'That is so much better. You will have all Ravi's male friends drooling all over you. What fun!'

I quickly did up the buttons. 'I have never heard of this golden rule', I said, trying to look stern and failing.

'Oh really? I must have made it up then.'

'Yes, you probably have. And why would I want Ravi's friends drooling over me?' My own husband has no time to drool over me. The last thing I want is his friends to do so.

'Because you are married, but not dead. You know what they say. Just because you are full, doesn't mean you can't read the menu.'

'Eeeee ... Yuck! You have a dirty mind, Naina!' I squealed.

She amazes me with her flirtatious talk. Whenever I meet Naina, she always has a story to tell about some man who is making moves on her. It is either the middle-aged and married Indian man she bumps into three mornings a week at the bus stop on her way to work, or her dentist who concentrates more on flirting than fixing her teeth, or the young, brash team leader at her office. Every man Naina meets, at work or at social events, has (according to her) a special interest in her. I haven't ever met a girl who craves so much male attention. I feel sorry for Ashok. Poor guy.

In the end, I settled for a pair of silver earrings that belonged to Naina and a thin silver necklace and bracelet that Aai had given me from her own collection.

Once we had decided on my outfit and accessories, I invited Naina to stay for lunch.

'I'll warm up some frozen *parathas*. We can have them with pickle. How does that sound?'

Naina gave a thumbs-up.

As we sat at the dining table, tucking into the cauliflower and potato *parathas*, we chatted about different things. The topic finally came to Ravi's workaholic nature.

'Don't you get sick of Ravi working so much?' she asked.

I licked pickle off my finger. It was tangy and spicy. 'Very. It's quite annoying.'

'You're such a patient wife. Almost saintly. I wouldn't have been able to bear it if my husband was constantly working. '

'I can't bear it either. He's hardly ever at home. Even though I try to keep busy, there are times when I'm so bored. There are only so many books I can read.'

'I knew a girl once who was in the same boat as you. Husband was a dictator. Constantly criticising everything she did. His way or the highway, you know, a bit like Ravi. He travelled a fair bit too. In the end, it all got too much for her. She began popping pills. Anti-depressants. Until one day, she came to her senses and had an affair.'

Naina took a dainty bite of her *paratha* and smiled at me.

I wished I hadn't confided in Naina over the phone the other day about Ravi's bossiness. But I had been in a bad mood. Ravi and I had quarrelled after I accidentally burnt a hole in his business shirt. When Naina had called later in the day, I was hopping mad and ranted about Ravi for half an hour.

'Did she really have an affair?' I asked now.

'Of course. Can you blame her? I would have done the same.'

There it was again. Yet another hint at overstepping the boundaries of marriage. What makes Naina so restless? 'I couldn't do that to Ravi. Not in a million years.'

'Why not?'

'Because it's ... I don't know ... it's just wrong.'

'Oh, darling Anju. Wives are so naïve. We never want to even think about other men. And what about our husbands? Do you think they never fantasise about other women?'

I listened wide-eyed. This was all new territory.

'Look, don't get me wrong. I'm just suggesting some healthy fun on the side. What's so wrong in that? And Ravi doesn't even have to know. What he can't see can't hurt him, right?'

I laughed. She was mad. 'You're mad', I said. 'You are Ravi's friend first. Then mine. Did you forget?'

'I like you more', she smiled

We chatted some more about lighter topics and Naina left around 4 pm. I put our conversation about affairs out of my mind. But throughout the day, the memory of our conversation flitted gently in and out of my head.



We arrived at the reunion (held in a pub in the City) on the stroke of 6.30 pm. The invitation said dinner would be served at seven. What a silly time to eat!

As we entered the crowded room, I felt my heart begin to pound. There were so many people. And I didn't know a single person. I looked up at Ravi. His eyes were sparkling and I could see that he was excited about meeting his old university mates. Suddenly, he whistled softly and swore

in Marathi. 'It's Aakash! I'm sure it is. But God, he is six times the size he was.' He left my side and strode towards a plump Indian man standing near the drinks counter. Friendly punches ... a warm embrace ... then Ravi put an arm around his friend's shoulder and they both disappeared into the crowd.

The music was loud and not to my taste. I moved to a nearby corner wondering when Ravi would return. The room was filling up by the minute. I looked around. Everyone was so different from the kind of people I was used to. There was lots of hugging and kissing. Suddenly I noticed Ravi in the distance. A group of smartly dressed young Australian girls, wearing tiny dresses that left nothing to the imagination, were showering him with bear hugs. He had been transformed. In place of my grumpy, solemn husband there was now a laughing young man with dancing eyes. I knew, then, that he had forgotten all about me. Almost as though he had heard my thoughts, I saw him give a sudden start and peer into the darkness. Before he could do anything, he was once again buried in a sea of arms and loud exclamations. 'Oh, Raveee. You look great' and 'It's been soooo long ...'

Fed up with waiting, I moved towards a long table covered with a white tablecloth that had tiny red wine stains on it. A young man with a freckled face and a mop of unruly blonde curls was pouring drinks for the guests.

'Yes, Ma'am, what can I get you?'

'Do you have lemonade?'

'Sure!'

He removed a frosted can from a cooler box and poured the drink neatly into a tall glass. I turned around and my eyes rested on a tall, willowy girl, a little older than me, wearing a flowing red strapless dress. The stilettos gave her a regal air and she swallowed her wine in tiny gulps, smiling at everyone who stopped to talk to her.

I want to look like her someday. The thought hit me out of nowhere. I

have still not learned to dress well. In spite of the expensive new clothes Ravi had bought me recently, I still often feel dowdy and plain. Having never worn western clothes in India, I'm stiff and awkward in them. This girl in the red dress obviously didn't know the meaning of awkward. She was gorgeous. Flawless make up. Bright red lipstick that matched her dress perfectly. Blonde tresses that tumbled onto her bare shoulders. Her glittery golden eye shadow made her resemble a mysterious nymph. I studied her mannerisms. Little wonder she seemed so popular.

Suddenly Ravi appeared in my line of vision. He and the girl in red exchanged smiles and then he leaned forward to give her a quick, awkward peck on the cheek.

Just then, a plump red-head with tiny pink freckles on her nose, appeared at my side. She held a glass of wine, and looked pale and flushed. When she spoke, I could smell the alcohol on her breath.

'Hi there!' The words came out in a slur. I wondered if she was drunk. 'I'm Cindy.'

'Hello. My name is Anjali.' I didn't really want to talk to her, but was glad for the company.

She looked puzzled. 'Batch of '93?' she asked. 'Don't remember you, honey.'

'Oh ... oh, no, no ... my husband ... He would have been in your batch.'

'Who's he then?'

'Ravi. Ravi Jathar. Do you know him?'

'Oooh. The handsome Indian boy. Aren't you the lucky thing?' she giggled. We both heard Ravi's laugh at the same time, and I turned around to see the pretty young woman in the strapless dress whisper in his ear.

Cindy pointed a finger at Ravi and wriggled it for effect. 'There he is ...

your handsome husband ... and ... oh my God!' She stopped mid-sentence and stared at Ravi and the girl. 'They seem very buddy-buddy still. Who would have thought! Anyway, I guess he's yours now.' She let out a loud guffaw as though she had said something funny.

I felt a thin sliver of fear slice through my heart. 'What do you mean?' I asked.

Cindy went one shade paler. 'Oh, I'm so sorry ... but you ... I mean ... you don't know?'

It was a surreal moment. All of a sudden, it was as though it was just Cindy and me in the entire world. No one else. No other sounds. Just our tortured voices.

I looked at her in silence.

She coughed, rubbed her palms over her eyes, much as a tired child might and spoke in a resigned voice, 'you didn't know, did you? That they were married once?'

I could think of nothing to say. Slowly, I turned around to look once again at the beautiful girl, this time very carefully.

I hadn't recognised her. How could I? She had been transformed into someone completely different from the person she had been in the photos I had found. I wouldn't have recognised her in a million years. Gone were the wind-swept curls and the no make-up look. Instead, she looked glossy and glamorous.

'You mean that girl is ...?'

'Yes,' said Cindy, 'that is Annalise Gallagher. Ravi Jathar's ex-wife.'

It was a classic *filmi* moment. Something I had seen in countless, corny Hindi films. The perfect triangle. I stood watching them. Current wife ... ex-wife ...

Strange how I discovered so much information about Ravi's ex-wife in a

single evening, without Ravi realising it. I found out her full name, and that she and my husband had been classmates at university. She was pretty and poised and polished. And I knew Ravi and she were still on amicable terms, judging by the friendly hug they had shared before.

At that point I knew that I was going to have to hate Annalise Gallagher.



The rest of the evening was a bit of a blur. Ravi eventually waved goodbye to Annalise and came looking for me. 'Anjali, where were you? I've been looking for you.'

'I haven't moved since you walked away', I said, sullenly. 'You're the one who disappeared.'

He later introduced me to several classmates who all were openly curious about his 'new' Indian bride. I saw Annalise several times during the night, laughing and talking and tossing back her hair. After their initial greeting, she was never in the same part of the room as Ravi. I wasn't sure if that was a coincidence or if she deliberately stayed away. I kept hoping he would introduce us. But it didn't happen.

On the drive back home, Ravi was lost in thought and quiet. He switched on some old Rafi and Mukesh songs and the mood turned sad and sombre. In the warm intimacy of the car, away from all other distractions, I was sorely tempted to tell him that I now knew who his ex-wife was. But I couldn't find the right moment, and before I knew it, we were back home.

As soon as we walked in, Ravi logged onto the computer. 'I need to check a few work emails. You go off to bed.'

'Ravi, it's late. Forget your work for once, *na*. Come, let's go to bed. Please.'

'Anjali, I will come soon. It's just that I'm expecting important emails. I can't ignore them.'

I was about to say something, but thought better of it.

It was nearly 1 am when I heard him scrape back the chair and switch off the light in the spare bedroom where his work desk was. I heard him pottering in the kitchen. Probably making sure the windows were shut and the blinds drawn.

'What, you're still awake?' he asked, getting into bed and switching on the TV.

I kept my novel aside and inched closer to him, resting my head against his shoulder.

'What a day', he groaned. 'Switch on the alarm for seven tomorrow, Anju. I've got to be at work by 8 am.'

'Are you again going to be working on the weekend? Ravi, what is this? You work all the time. Not only at the office, but also when you're here at home. Can't you ask your boss to ... to ... oh, I don't know ... not give you so much work all the time? I hardly see you.'

He sighed and lowered the TV volume. 'Anjali, be fair. My travelling was one of the first things I told you when we met. My job is a demanding one. You always knew what was in store once you got here. If it was going to be such a huge problem, maybe you should have thought a bit more before agreeing to marry me.'

'Ravi, you don't understand how boring it gets for me. I hardly know anyone here. It's so lonely. And all the shops here close by five. Not a soul on the streets in the evening. The silence gets to me.'

'Well, I think, Anjali, you will just have to grin and bear it. Make new friends. You've already met the Sargam girls. Get to know them better. I've also been telling you to join a course or the gym. Even yoga. But you haven't done anything about it yet.'

I remained silent for a few moments and then decided to change the

topic. I reached out my arm and caressed the hair on his chest, 'It was a nice evening, *na*?'

'Hmmm', he said, his eyes glued to the TV.

'You must be very happy to have met all your old friends.' 'Yes, I was. Now Anju, can this wait until tomorrow? I really need to sleep. I've got a long day at work.' He gave a big yawn and switched off the TV. I waited for him to mention Anne, but he didn't.

'Ravi ...'

He began snoring.

I can't understand how he can just fall asleep like that. I'm feeling hurt and confused. Two things baffle me: 1) why didn't Ravi introduce me to his ex-wife? Was he afraid I would turn into a jealous lunatic? and 2) how come Ravi and Anne didn't hate the sight of each other? I don't know any divorced couples personally, but I would think there would be some animosity between two people who had agreed to lead separate lives. Yet, Annalise had looked genuinely happy to see Ravi. Is that the way of the West? It's obvious that ex-couples can still be friends.

My head is spinning with all kinds of thoughts. More than anything else, I so would have loved it if Ravi had held me in his arms and said a few loving words instead of snoring next to me as he is now. So far, he hasn't said 'I love you' to me even once. When we had first met, he had told me that he wasn't a romantic and that candlelight dinners and Valentine's Day celebrations were not his thing. But ... just the occasional 'I love you' would be so lovely.

I guess it's too early for such declarations of love. We are still getting to know each other. I know what my clever, rational college friend, Shehnaaz, would say: 'How can you profess love for someone you didn't even know existed up until a few months ago?' But I'm in no mood to be rational right now. It's been a long day with some difficult moments. I'm beginning to see already that Ravi is not into 'heart-to-heart' talks. It's something I will just have to get used to.

24th April

It was my turn to play hostess today. Ravi's group 'Sargam' had been due for a catch up and Ravi and I decided to have the potluck dinner and music session at our place.

I had decided on the menu yesterday before going shopping. *Matar paneer*, chicken curry and *boondi raita*. Vibha was bringing *biryani* and Sonali and Naina would make the starters. Naina had insisted she would bring dessert too.

The kitchen sparkled after last night's marathon cleaning. Ravi had got home at 8 pm, and after having a quick meal, we had gone grocery shopping for tonight's dinner. We had picked up assorted cheeses, crackers and dips, a box of soft drink cans, a big tub of yoghurt and a few different vegetables and fruits.

By the time we got home, it was nearly 9.30 pm. Ravi had told me to do the dishes, which were soaking in the sink, while he organised the shopping and stacked the items in the fridge.

Barely five minutes after he started emptying the bags, he let out a loud exclamation. 'Anju, what is all this? This fridge is a pig-sty!'

Out came tiny *katoris* filled with leftover food that had frozen into a gooey thick mess after having been in the fridge for over a week.

'My goodness! When was the last time you cleaned the fridge?'

I couldn't remember. Damn, I had been postponing cleaning the fridge. There had always been something better to do instead. I mentally kicked myself.

'This is ridiculous!' he said. 'Come here. Let's do this together.'

I kneeled next to him as he bent deep into the refrigerator and began pulling out soggy fruit, an empty yoghurt container (with about one teaspoon of yoghurt frozen at its base), shrivelled and blackened coriander leaves, half eaten chocolate that tumbled out of its hastily torn

cover.

Ravi threw up his hands. 'Is it so difficult to keep the fridge clean? You have all the time in the world during the day.'

Resentment bubbled inside me. Who did he think he was? He was hardly ever at home. He worked 12-hour days and went to the office even on weekends. Even when he was home, he never switched off mentally from work – always punching numbers into the computer, or flipping through files or slaving over presentations or on the phone for hours. I was bored with all the cleaning, dusting, vacuuming. I had no one to talk to other than Naina whenever she could spare some time. The television was my only companion. Even phone calls to India were rationed to 'once a week'.

'Please lower your voice, Ravi. The neighbours will hear', I said, desperately.

'Anjali, why can't you get your act together? That basket of laundry has been sitting there, in that same spot, for one week. This morning I couldn't even find fresh underwear. Each time I have to dig it out of the basket. What kind of a wife are you?'

I had slumped against the kitchen cabinet. 'I don't know, Ravi,' I said. 'If I am such a lousy wife ... if I am not as good as your ex-wife, then just leave me. I will go back to India.'

His face had gone white, and then almost purple.

'How dare you?' he had said. His voice had been deadly calm and I had shivered. 'You are not to talk about my other marriage. Do you hear me? I will not tolerate it. I work from morning to night, slaving round the clock just so I can build a secure future for us. I pay the mortgage, look after the bills and keep everything ticking along. I don't expect much from you other than keeping this place neat. Yes, you dust and vacuum and cook. But there's more to running a home.' Tears had filled up my eyes. Unfortunately, I'm not the greatest of housewives. Aai had never allowed us near the kitchen as young girls. She spent a huge chunk of

her life slaving over the stove and had been determined that things would be different for her daughters. She encouraged us to get a college degree. Cooking and sewing were skills that could be picked up later.

I recalled this conversation as I opened the fridge this morning. I noticed the icebox was empty, and quickly filled it with water.

'What's the menu for tonight?' asked Ravi, walking into the kitchen and switching on the kettle.

'*Matar paneer* and chicken curry.'

'We had *matar paneer* the other day. Make *rajma* instead. We haven't had that in a while.'

'But I haven't soaked the *rajma*, I groaned.

'Pfff ... soak them now. By the time you prepare them in the evening, they should be moist enough.'

I hate *rajma*, but I decided not to argue.



The group began trickling in around 7 pm. Vibha arrived first, carrying an oval Pyrex dish filled to the brim with vegetable *biryani*. It smelled divine. Ravi had warned me that Vibha's dishes were either hits or misses. Unlike Naina, she was not a consistent cook. Vibha's cooking depended a lot on her moods. If she was cranky, the dish suffered. Judging by the aroma wafting from the *biryani*, it was safe to assume that today was a 'good mood day'.

Tushar and Sonali arrived next, looking hot and flustered. It was obvious they had had a fight and wanted to stay as far away from each other as possible. 'I was going to fry *pakor*as, but I ran out of time. So I just got some spinach and ricotta pastries. Sorry.' Sonali didn't really sound sorry, but I accepted her dish with a smile. The third to arrive was Rishi, the guitarist, whom I was meeting for the first time. Rishi is of medium

height, and walks with a slight limp. He handed me a box of chocolates as a 'Welcome to Australia' gift and laughed apologetically when Ravi reminded him that I've been in Australia nearly four months already.

'I'm so sorry, Anjali. I've been meaning to drop in to say hello, but things have been really hectic,' he said. I waved away his apology with a smile.

Naina arrived, breathless and beautiful, well past 8 pm, carrying chicken *kebabs* and homemade *gulab jamuns*. Ashok followed her, balancing a carton of beer in one hand and a wine bottle in the other.

Within fifteen minutes all the instruments were set up. Ashok assembled his keyboard, Rishi got out his guitar and Tushar fiddled around with the *tabla*. Ravi poured chilled white wine for Vibha and Naina and Fanta for Sonali and myself.

'You don't drink?' Vibha asked, raising an eyebrow.

I have never tasted alcohol in my life. 'No', I smiled.

'What is this, Ravi?' Naina said in a lightly sneering voice. 'Haven't you taught your bride anything? Or have you forbidden her?'

Ravi turned to look at us and shrugged. 'It's her decision. I haven't stopped her.'

'You haven't encouraged her either', giggled Vibha.

For the next two hours, we sang one song after another. Ravi's voice was smooth like velvet. When he sang '*Badi sooni sooni hai, zindagi ye zindagi*', that heart-wrenching, soulful number from the movie *Mili*, my eyes filled up. The song and its sadness touched my heart.

Vibha squeezed my hand and smiled. 'That husband of yours ... can he sing or what? Amazing voice!'

Everyone burst into loud applause as soon as Ravi finished. He grinned and gave a mock bow. 'Thank you. Thank you. But I must sing a duet with my wife now. You all probably don't know this, but Anjali is a

fantastic singer.'

I glared at him, trying to signal that I didn't want to sing, but it didn't work. Holding out his hand, he beckoned me to come closer. 'Anjali, c'mon, be a sport. You know more songs than I do. Come.'

I stood next to him, feeling suddenly shy and overwhelmed. I had never sung before a group of people in my life. Ravi handed me the mike and a sheet of paper with the lyrics.

We chose '*Tere mere milan ki ye raina*', the emotional duet from *Abhimaan*. At first, my voice barely emerged and my hand, holding the page, trembled. It was only when Ravi laid an arm lightly around my shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze that I finally found the courage to sing. We sang together and our voices soared, blended and became one. Our friends sat enthralled, the wine glasses suspended at their lips. As we finished, there was a moment's silence. And then everyone clapped loudly.

'Mr and Mrs Jathar. That was brilliant. Bravo!' said Ashok.

'What an amazing performance!' laughed Vibha.

'Made for each other', said Tushar, giving Ravi a friendly punch.

The evening was a huge success. At one point, I sat next to Ashok and we chatted for a long time. It turned out he loved watching Hindi movies as much as I did. We quizzed each other on famous dialogues from old movies and laughed about stereotypical scenes. Every time Naina walked past, his eyes would light up. 'My princess, come and sit with us' or 'Darling, do you want me to get you a drink?' he called out to her. It was lovely to see how devoted he was to his wife, and I felt a pang in my chest. Ravi rarely uses endearments when talking to me.

Everyone left well past midnight. I stacked the dishes in the sink and rinsed the wine glasses. On the whole, I am pleased with my first effort at playing hostess. I gave myself an imaginary pat on the shoulder, switched off the lights and left the kitchen.

1st May

'It's either the gym or yoga', Ravi said to me as we sat together having breakfast. It was one of those rare mornings when he wasn't rushing off to work before I had properly woken up. His first meeting was at ten, which meant there was time for a leisurely breakfast. I prepared omelettes in honour of him spending a little time with me. 'So which will it be?'

'Ravi, I don't understand your obsession with me joining the gym. It's not as if I'm fat.'

'Not being fat and not being fit are two separate things. There's a gym on the other side of the station, next to the medical centre. Check out their packages and get enrolled. Also, the community centre down the road runs yoga classes every week.'

'Okay.'

'What are your plans for the day?' he asked, applying butter to his toast.

'Well. It's Naina's day off. We might go to Parramatta today. She told me there's a huge shopping centre there called Westfield.'

Ravi grimaced. 'How is your job hunting coming along?'

'I'm trying. I sent out ten résumés over the past 2 weeks.'

'And?'

'And? I got several rejections in the post. They all say the same thing. I lack 'local experience'. But Ravi, if no one will give me local experience, how will I ever get it?'

He shook his head. 'Your résumé is pretty poor. Not structured correctly. I've been meaning to do something about it, but I've been busy. I will try and tidy it up at work today and you can start sending the new version from tomorrow.'

And then he told me his news. His company was sending him to Singapore for two months. He would be leaving in a fortnight. Suraj Mehta, his friend and mentor, would be joining him there.

'Oh my God. Two months, Ravi?' I was shattered. It's hard to feel married when my husband is hardly ever by my side. 'What kind of job is this? So much travelling all the time.'

He put his mug on the table and some of the tea splashed out creating a tiny brown puddle. He ignored it.

'There we go again', he said. 'Who, after all, am I doing all this for? For us. You and me. And for our future child.'

'Yes I know. But ... but ...'

'We spoke about this the other day. The trick is to keep busy.'

'Maybe we should try for a baby. That will give me something to do', I said, hesitantly. For a moment, he looked startled. Then annoyed.

'Listen to yourself. Is that a reason to have a baby? Because you are bored?'

'I didn't mean it that way. I just meant ... oh, don't worry. Forget I said anything.' I settled back in my chair, my tea now gone cold.

'We will have a child someday. Maybe in have years' time. Now is the time for me to work hard and make a name for myself. I want us to have everything I didn't as a child.'

Ravi had told me that his childhood had been an ordinary one. An unambitious father who was content to bring home a meagre pay packet every month without ever striving for greater heights. His mother had been an ambitious but uneducated woman who became bitter with each passing year as she watched her husband being passed over for most promotions at the office. They were always the last family in their vast housing colony to get things – a television or a phone or a fridge.

'I promised myself a long time ago that I would be a self-made millionaire by the time I am thirty-five.'

That is still five years away. But the goal is never far away from his thoughts. Everything he does is aimed, directly or indirectly, at his ultimate dream of becoming a very rich man. He often cites the example of his friend Suraj, who is making giant strides towards making his first million.

'Don't you want us to be rich too, Anju? Imagine travelling around the world, dining in the finest restaurants, shopping only at boutique stores ... the best brands ... the best hotels ... Wouldn't you like that?'

He has often asked me this. And the question always cornered me. How could I honestly say that no, I would not want that.

'I'd love to be rich, Ravi,' I said carefully, 'I would love us to have a fine big house in Mosman, like you always say, and expensive holidays. But I don't believe money can buy happiness. Love can. Money can't.'

He looked disgusted. 'What's love got to do with it?' he scoffed. 'Anju, you need to remove those rose-coloured glasses and get a good look at what life is really about. Money can buy everything. And yes, happiness too.'

His words reminded me of our conversation a few nights ago after we had watched the Hollywood blockbuster, *Indecent Proposal*. I had been troubled by the 'love versus money' theme. When the movie had finished, I had looked at Ravi thoughtfully. Had the movie moved him as much as it had me? But Ravi had switched off the video and promptly opened a magazine.

'Ravi, what did you think of the movie?' I had asked.

He looked up, 'Amazing acting.'

'Yes, but what about the actual movie? Did you like it?'

'Of course I did. The story had a real punch to it. Why do you ask?'

'I don't really know how to explain. Tell me, if you had been in the husband's place, what would you have done?'

He tut-tutted impatiently. 'This is so typical. You always drag us into every scenario. Why can't you leave it at an impersonal level? Why bring our personal life into it at all? It's only a movie.'

'Yes, yes, but ... humour me. What would you have done?'

'What? If someone rich promised me a lot of money in exchange for spending a night with my wife?'

'With me, yes. What would you have done? Let's pretend the boss promised you that big, prestigious promotion you've been wanting for years.' This was hitting below the belt and I knew it. Ravi has been hankering for a particular promotion since before we got married. I could guess what his response would be. But I was in for a terrible shock.

'I would probably do what the poor guy in the movie did', he'd said, after thinking for a few moments.

'You would what?' I exclaimed. 'You would let me sleep with your boss in exchange for a promotion?'

'Anju, calm down. You put too much importance on sex. All this obsession with monogamy. I mean, look at the animal kingdom. Creatures of the wild. Do they believe in having just one partner?'

Had Ravi lost his mind? Or was I hearing things?

'We are not creatures of the wild, Ravi. What are you saying? You would be happy to have multiple partners?'

Ravi gave a huge sigh as though all the world's miseries had just fallen onto him.

'See? See what I mean? The movie was good. We enjoyed it. That

should have been the end of the matter. But no! You want to drag us into the discussion. I thought this was all hypothetical talk. And now you're getting your knickers in a twist about nothing.'

'Ravi, that's not fair. You just said you believe in polygamy and—'

'No, Anjali. That's not what I said. What I did say was that monogamy has become a huge obsession for many people. Just a general observation.'

I stayed silent. His words had hurt me more than he would understand.

I realise now that Ravi and I are fundamentally different. We have different priorities in life. I'm ready for motherhood and can't wait to have a little nuclear family of my own. I've never been overly ambitious. Yes, it would be great to get a job and meet new people. But I'm not too fussed about it. Ravi, on the other hand, is obsessed with things that don't really matter to me. Wealth. Career. Travelling. He is obviously determined to put his job before every other priority in life, including fatherhood. But why should I sit around complaining about something I can't change? It's just as well that I've started job hunting but it's not enough. I need to do more. I'm not too keen on either Yoga or the gym but maybe taking up some kind of sport or physical exercise might not be such a bad idea after all. It will help calm my restless mind.

17th May

Ravi left for Singapore yesterday afternoon and I had cried as he'd packed. 'Now, Anjali, stop crying and get me my shaving kit. I've left it in the bathroom. It's not like I'm going away on war or something. It's only two months', he had said. I hadn't wanted to argue once again about his precious job. After one last sniffle, I had wiped my eyes, and tried to make myself useful. He had hugged me just before he left and his last words had been: 'Don't forget to let me know what you want from Singapore.' I had stood, forlorn, in the balcony, waving until his taxi was out of sight.

I woke up this morning with a vague fear clutching at my chest. I lay on my back, both arms under my head, as my eyes swept over the entire length and breadth of the room. I was in that state of half-wakefulness when the mind has yet to decide if it is happy or sad, calm or worried, at peace or frightened. I thought about everything that had happened the day before. And then it hit me. My period. It was late by more than a week. My period was never late. Since my late teens, I could predict its arrival. Twenty-five days on the dot. Oh my God. Was I pregnant?

I had to speak to someone. Naina! She would know what to do.

I got out of bed slowly and rubbed my palm over my tummy. Excitement bubbled inside me. Motherhood! It would be so lovely to hold a baby in my arms. Our baby. Mine and Ravi's. I hurried to the phone to call Naina.



'Okay, honey. What's the matter? You sounded worried over the phone. Tell Naina aunty all your problems', said Naina, bustling in, looking breezy and cheerful.

'I missed my period.'

'Oh! Is that good news?' she asked, one eyebrow raised.

'For me, yes. But Ravi won't be pleased.'

'Why? Doesn't he want kids?'

'Oh, he does. But not just yet.'

There was a pause while Naina hummed and tapped her nose with her long, manicured nail. 'Well, first things first, we need to be sure that you are pregnant. You get home pregnancy tests in the supermarket. We can go there now.'

At the supermarket? What an amazing country this was.

As we walked down the stairs of my building, Naina said to me, 'if it does turn out you're pregnant, just be careful how you break the news to Sonali. Okay?'

Huh? Sonali? What did she have to do with this?

'You know how she comes across kind of stiff and strange? Doesn't laugh much or get any of our jokes? She wasn't always like that. It's just that she has had a rough couple of years. Two failed pregnancies. And her in-laws have been on her case ever since. They want a grandson. Poor Sonali. She even went through a patch of depression. But don't ever tell her I told you this. Promise me.'

I promised. Poor Sonali, indeed. I now understood why she was so uncommunicative and surly.

The supermarket was packed with lunchtime shoppers. Mothers walked around with babies in prams, old couples held hands and peered at their shopping lists, office goers whizzed in and out.

Naina led me to a section in the furthest aisle. I hoped no one was watching us. This was all so embarrassing.

'Here we are', she said briskly and stopped in front of a row of shelves stacked neatly with boxes marked 'pregnancy tests'. Dismayed, I looked at the huge range. Goodness, which one should I pick? I looked at Naina for guidance.

'Take that blue box', she said and I wondered at her confidence. I did as was told and we moved to the checkout. The girl serving us scanned the box without even glancing at it.

We almost ran back to my place. 'Go on, I will wait here for you', Naina said, settling herself on the sofa, sitting cross-legged and grabbing the dog-eared magazine I had purchased for my flight to Australia.

I hurried into the bathroom, tore open the packet and quickly scanned the instructions, which were noted on a tightly folded piece of paper. Not

rocket science. Seemed simple enough. One line meant negative. Two lines meant positive.

The wait was endless. I was terrified that there would be two lines and just as terrified that there would be only one. Slowly, the moist section of the tube changed colour, and one faint line began to emerge. My heart sank. I should have known. I felt sudden and fierce rage towards Ravi. I would never fall pregnant, not even accidentally, as long as he was so determined not to have a baby. No man should be so busy, so obsessed with his career that he put everything else on the back burner.

I rinsed the tube, wrapped it in toilet paper and tucked it at the bottom of the waste bin. Tears filled my eyes and my lower lip wobbled. I buried my face in the hand towel that hung on the slim steel railing against the wall. No baby. I was alone all over again.

Naina took one look at my face and knew at once. She held out her arms and we hugged for a long time.



Naina and I sat chatting over cups of tea. She was confused and bewildered by my sense of loss.

'Anju, I can see you are disappointed. But look at the positive side. Why would you want to be encumbered by a child so soon? You are still so young – your whole life is ahead of you. Why spoil the fun?'

'I don't want to have fun. I am twenty-six. My mother had three kids by the time she was my age.'

'Our parents belong to a different generation. Everyone had kids early back then. But now, women are concentrating on other things. Careers. Travelling. They are living their lives. Look at you. A new life in Australia. So much to explore and learn. Why be saddled with raising kids?'

I considered what she had just said. 'What you're saying makes sense,

Naina. But if I had a baby, I wouldn't be so bored all the time. Especially when Ravi is travelling. He's always complaining that I don't have a goal in life. Maybe motherhood will solve all my problems.'

'Oh to hell with what Ravi says and what Ravi thinks. I can't understand why you let him run your life. Don't you have a mind of your own?'

'I do.'

'Well, then? You need to start asserting yourself a bit more. If he doesn't agree with you on some things, tough luck. You need to hold your ground.'

'Ravi is not Ashok. I can't get away with that.'

'See? See what I mean? You even talk like a victim. Tell me, what will happen if you stop toeing the line all the time? What's the worst that will happen? Will he leave you? Divorce you?'

'Yes.'

'So what? You will find someone else.'

I remembered my conversation with Ravi about *Indecent Proposal*. I told Naina about it.

'There you go. Your own husband tells you monogamy is overrated.'

'I don't think he meant it. Maybe he was just arguing for argument's sake. It was a bit silly of me to bring it down to a personal level.'

'Saint Anjali. Always ready to give the benefit of the doubt. Always ready to take the blame. I would be careful if I were you, Anju. All this talk of monogamy and polygamy; it's always a worry when husbands start talking like that.'

'What are you saying? Do you think he is having an affair?' I couldn't believe how twisted this conversation had become. When had we reached this point?

'Who am I to say what your husband is doing? All I'm saying is be careful. Wives are always the last to know.'

There was silence as I digested what she had said. Maybe it was time I started asserting myself in my marriage. I hugged her.

'I'd better go now. It's late.' She blew a kiss and left.

I stayed on the sofa for a long time, mulling over our conversation. Naina had told me several things. Should I simply take it all with a pinch of salt and shrug it off? Or should I take it on board?

There are no easy answers.

21st May

I so, so, so wanted an Aussie friend!

But making friends with the Aussies is tough business. Ravi attributes it to me getting tongue tied as soon as I come across a *gori* and he is probably right. I feel awkward in the company of Australians mainly because they look and sound different. Plus, I am never quite sure if they understand my accent.

'I don't see why you are so embarrassed by the idea of having an accent. It only means you know one language more than they do', he'd said once. Easy for Ravi to say – he has spent a long time wining and dining with Aussies. He had even been married to one, for goodness' sake.

After Ravi left for Singapore, I've been struggling to get through the day. Nothing much has happened on the job front. The rejections keep pouring in, and nowadays I even dread walking up to the mailbox. It can't possibly contain any good news. Simply more letters that begin with the inevitable 'We regret to inform you ...'

Sonali and Tushar invited me over for dinner a couple of days ago and I was grateful not to have to spend yet another empty evening by myself.

Now that I know Sonali's sad secret, I have been trying harder to get close to her.

Other than that one evening out, I have spent all my time alone, huddled in the house, the TV on at full blast, sometimes in my pyjamas all day.

Sheer boredom led me to take Ravi's advice and enrol in a yoga class. The friendly receptionist, who answered the phone, told me that classes were on Mondays and Thursdays from 6.30 pm to 8.00 pm. She rattled off a few details like my instructor's name and where I could park if I was driving down. For the first time in a long time, I felt excited. At least twice a week I would have a reason to step out of the house.

I wasn't quite sure what one wore to yoga, so I chose my thick grey track pants and a loose long sleeve top. As soon as I walked into the class though, I knew I was overdressed. Everyone else was in leotards and tiny vest like tops.

The instructor, a lady called Natalia Something or the Other (it is a long Russian sounding surname) stood tall and imposing on a slightly elevated platform, and called out instructions to the students.

I arrived late (it had taken me fifteen minutes to figure out which room I was supposed to go to) and ran in breathless, cursing myself for not having left home sooner. Natalia didn't stop for me or make any effort to welcome me to the group, which kind of startled me.

I stood in one corner of the room, wondering how to proceed. Everyone was lying down on a narrow, rectangular blue mat with a long red belt and two red foam blocks next to them. My eyes combed the room and I noticed a tall shelf stocked with all these supplies. Was I supposed to help myself to these or simply wait? Oh God, please! Someone release me from this misery. Natalia kept her eyes firmly closed as she demonstrated a rather complex exercise, hands stretched up in the air, face turned up towards the ceiling, one slim foot stretched backwards.

Fed up with not knowing what to do I decided to head back home. Next time I would arrive early and figure out exactly what was involved in

these sessions. Just as I was about to turn, I heard footsteps from somewhere in the distance. Whoever it was, was hurrying down the passage around the corner and the footsteps became louder. Some weird sounds followed, as though the person had tripped over an object and I heard a soft, female voice exclaim 'Damn!' in an exasperated voice.

Suddenly a tall blonde emerged from around the corner. She wore leotards like the rest of the yoga group and I let out a sigh of relief. Here, at last, was another late arrival. I would now be able to observe her and follow her lead. I stared at her as she came towards me. Tight high ponytail that swung briskly as she half walked half jogged. Fair skin ... blue eyes ... dazzling smile ... oh my God! It was her smile that I remembered so clearly. In every other way, she looked completely different from my brief memory of her. She was no longer made up to the nines and dressed to kill, but I was certain it was her. Walking towards me, smiling, breathless, beautiful, was Annalise Gallagher – Ravi's ex-wife.



The shock was tremendous. She was the last person I had expected to see.

And yet, she was the only familiar face around. Loneliness and boredom had sapped me of all energy. Here I was, standing alone in a strange building, too afraid to enter a class, petrified of doing the wrong thing. Everything around me smelled foreign. My husband was far away. I was out of my element. And here was this pretty, friendly girl whom I sort of knew and whom I wasn't supposed to like. In spite of all my reservations, just the sight of her smiling face filled me with so much relief that I had a wild longing to throw my arms around her.

'It's okay. Natalia looks perfectly scary, but she won't eat you', Annalise Gallagher was actually talking to me!

I smiled but could think of nothing to say.

'New, eh? Come, follow me. I'm going to get an earful after class for being late. But she'll let you off the hook since you're new.'

I followed her into the crowded room, my head bent low, too afraid to lock eyes with Natalia. Annalise marched fearlessly ahead and grabbed two blue mats and a couple of red belts from the shelf and handed me my share. 'You can spread your mat right there', she whispered, pointing out an empty space in the far right corner of the room.

I did as instructed. Ten minutes later, once I had settled down and generally figured out the drift of the lesson, I turned my head, my eyes darting here and there, trying to find Annalise. I finally found her. She was in the opposite corner staring straight at me, a puzzled look on her face.



I didn't concentrate much on what Natalia said in class. It was hard not to steal surreptitious glances at Annalise every now and then. Most of the time, she was hidden from view because of the other students but I caught occasional glimpses of her as she did the *Surya Namaskaar* or deep breathing exercises.

The class ended on the dot of eight. Everyone gathered their water bottles, returned their mats to the shelf and hurried out of the room. I was surprised no one stopped to chat or socialise. The Aussies fascinate me. They come and go as they please and don't seem keen to get to know one another. How was I ever going to make a local friend? I wondered where Annalise was. The room had emptied by then and she was nowhere to be seen. Part of me was relieved. What could we possibly talk about?

'Hi there. I was wondering what was taking you so long.'

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Annalise stood right outside the room and seemed to be waiting for me. But why?

'Me?' I asked, surprised, and turned to look behind just in case there was

someone else there.

She gave a light, tinkling laugh. 'Yes. For a moment, I thought you might have left without me noticing.'

I looked at her with a mixture of confusion and excitement. 'I ... I ... know who you are', I blurted.

There was a moment's silence. She smiled at me. 'Oh! Well then, that's good. That makes two of us. Because I know who you are too.'

I was taken aback. How could she possibly know who I was? Ravi hadn't introduced us at the reunion. In fact, he didn't even know I had seen her that day. It turned out that Annalise had seen us together at the reunion, knew through the grapevine that Ravi had recently married 'an Indian girl' and figured out I was the new Mrs Jathar.

'I have a good memory for faces. Although I must admit, I didn't recognise you today at first. You looked different the other day', she said.

Was I actually chatting with Ravi's ex-wife? My goodness, who would have thought this possible?

'Shall we formally introduce ourselves? Just for fun. Hello. My name is Annalise Gallagher. But I hate being called Annalise. So please, call me Anne. I think it suits me much better.' She held out her hand.

I smiled and we shook hands. It was hard not to like her. 'My name is Anjali Jathar. And I don't mind being called Anjali.'

'An-jee-lee,' Anne said, 'such a lovely name. What does it mean?'

'Offering or gift.' I felt shy in the presence of this beautiful girl, who was making an effort to talk to me. Surely she had to be somewhere more important and exciting. And yet, she didn't seem keen to move on.

'Oh, I love Indian names. They sound so exotic.'

I didn't think Anjali was exotic. In fact, the very opposite. But I was glad she liked it. Suddenly, it was very important that she should like me. I wanted to talk to her. There was no one at home waiting for me – just a measly tomato and cheese sandwich to look forward to for dinner. 'Thank you. I like your name too.'

'I wish Ravi had introduced us at the reunion. I did suggest it. But he never got around to it', she said, looking disappointed.

'Maybe ... maybe ... he thought ... you know . '

'That I would be an evil influence on you?' she asked, and let out a loud peal of laughter. 'He would've probably been right, you know.'

'Were you and Ravi in the same class at college?' I asked. I wasn't sure if the question was too personal.

But she didn't seem offended in the least. 'At uni. Yes. We have loads of friends in common. So we keep bumping into each other at someone's house.'

We stood chatting for half an hour. I could not believe my ears when I heard the clock in the passage strike the half hour. It was 8.30 pm!

'Is that the time?' Anne exclaimed. 'Oh my goodness! I am going to be so late. I'm meeting someone for drinks. But I'm so glad we met, An-jee-lee. Will you be coming again next week?'

I nodded.

'Great. We can talk more then. Look, do you have a car? Or can I drop you somewhere? It's rather late—'

'Oh no. Please. No, thank you. I live just up the road from here. A very short walk.'

'Okay, then. Have a good night. See you in a few days.'

I came home in a daze. What will Aai and Baba say if I tell them my first

Australian friend is none other than Ravi's ex-wife? They will probably die of shock.

I sat for a long time on the balcony, thinking about what happened at Yoga. For a change, I didn't switch on the TV or read a book. My thoughts were enough company. I went over and over my conversation with Anne. I remembered the shock of first seeing her at class. And then her puzzled frown as she stared at me from across the room. And finally, our instant rapport afterwards.

I have done the impossible. Even though it is still early to be entirely certain, I think I've made my first true-blue Aussie friend today.

17th June

It's my birthday today! I woke up feeling sorry for myself, having to spend it all alone. But then I decided that instead of moping at home, I would treat myself to lunch at the Indian takeaway down the road and grab the latest movie from the Indian shop. The day, however, turned out to be very different. Around 10 am, the doorbell rang. I had just finished my shower and changed into a dress.

I opened the door and stared. There stood Naina, Vibha and Sonali, all smiling from ear to ear.

'Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday wonderful Anjali, happy birthday to you!' Naina trilled.

'Thank you so much! Oh my goodness, what a surprise! But how did you know?'

'We had talked about star signs at the potluck. Remember? Now, can we come in? Or are you just going to stare at us?' laughed Vibha.

I made tea for everyone and then opened the gifts they had brought. Naina gave me a set of 4 coffee mugs, and Vibha and Sonali had jointly bought me a dusky pink leather handbag.

'You guys are amazing. You shouldn't have got me gifts. But thank you.' I was touched when Vibha told me she had taken a day's leave, just so she could be part of the celebrations. I wondered when Ravi would call. We hadn't talked about my birthday before he left for Singapore, and he hadn't mentioned it when we spoke two days ago. It was still early. He would probably call later in the day.

I ended up having the greatest fun. The girls took me out to lunch at a Mexican restaurant in Parramatta and refused to let me pay my share. 'That's silly', I protested, as Naina firmly gave me back the \$20 note I handed to her at the end of the meal. 'You've already given me gifts. I can't let you buy me lunch as well.' But they wouldn't listen.

We returned to my place and chatted over two rounds of *chai*. My eyes kept darting to the phone. My parents and in-laws had both left messages while I was out, but there was nothing from Ravi. How could he forget? He maintained a diary for every other little thing, and was always checking it to make sure he hadn't missed any appointments or meetings. Why couldn't he have noted my birthday as well?

The girls left at 5 pm. As they were leaving, Sonali turned to look at me. 'Hey, has Ravi called yet?' she asked.

'No, not yet. He's probably busy.'

'Why don't you come and spend the evening at my place? Tushar and I can drop you back after dinner. I don't want you to be alone on your birthday.'

I felt a warm glow on hearing her words. 'I'll be okay. Thanks for offering. You all have made my birthday really special.'

I sat up watching TV until midnight, just in case Ravi called. But he didn't. If it hadn't been for my friends, my birthday would have been a very lonely one indeed.

19th June

This afternoon, I got a call about a job I had applied for. When the phone rang, I was running around the apartment, locking all windows, already late for my lunch date with Naina. We were planning to try out a new Chinese restaurant that had opened down the road.

I was tempted to let the call go to voicemail. I knew it couldn't be Ravi. He had called earlier, apologising for having forgotten my birthday. 'I'm sorry, Anjali. I had one meeting after another, and ... well ... look, I'm sorry. Did you do anything?' I wasn't in the mood to chat with him, but I forced myself to tell him about my outing with Naina, Vibha and Sonali. He sounded surprised but pleased that I had not spent my special day alone at home.

I grabbed the phone on the fifth ring and was momentarily disoriented on hearing a female voice speaking in an Aussie accent. My pulse quickened. Could she be calling about a job? My legs began trembling and I had to sit down. The lady asked to speak to Annjeeleigh.

'Yes ... I am Anjali', I said, breathlessly.

'Oh, hello! This is Chloe from Stunning Roofs. You sent us your résumé a few days ago?'

If only Ravi was next to me to guide me through this call. I had not the vaguest idea how to handle this.

'So, you're interested in taking up the role of a telemarketing assistant?'

'Yes.'

'The job is three days a week. A part-time permanent role. Is this a good time to do a quick phone interview?'

'Yes, sure.'

Chloe rattled off a string of questions in a brisk manner.

Do you have local experience? (No!)

Have you worked in telemarketing before? (Yes! Ravi has taught me never to let the truth stand in the way of a good story.)

'Why would you like to work for us?' I wasn't sure how to answer this one. I didn't really want to work for them *in particular*. I was desperate for *any* job.

I hesitated. 'Because it seems like the right job for me.' I could have kicked myself. It was hardly an inspired response.

Chloe didn't seem to mind that I had temporarily misplaced my brain. 'Give me one example of how you handled an irate customer in the past.'

I racked my brains for a suitable answer. Chloe waited. And waited. And waited. I broke into a cold sweat and my brain turned into jelly. I couldn't think of a single example. I was doomed. I knew she would hang up any minute and I would dust, scrub and vacuum for the rest of my life. Maybe I should become a cleaner or a maid. That was what my life was reduced to anyway.

Chloe cleared her throat. 'Perhaps we can revisit this question further down the track. Moving right along .' The next few questions were comparatively simple and easier to respond to.

What brought me to Australia? (Marriage)

How soon could I start if offered the job? (Tomorrow?)

Did I have a driver's licence? (Not yet)

The interview lasted fifteen minutes. She never did come back to the question that had thrown me off guard.

'Thanks, An-jee-lee. I will be in touch in the next 24 to 48 hours. We are still interviewing other candidates.'

I hung up and burst into tears. I hated this country. I wanted to go back. I

would never find a job in Australia.



Naina saw straightaway that I was flustered. We had just ordered our meal. Salt and pepper fried chicken with traditional Chinese tea for me. Steamed scallops and prawns plus vegetarian fried rice for Naina. The restaurant only accepted cash, which annoyed Naina. She was a credit card person and didn't have any money with her.

'Don't worry, Naina. Let me pay for you', I said, holding out a \$50 note to the young girl at the counter.

'Thanks, darling. I promise to pay you back. Shall we sit there?'

She pointed at a table for two in the corner. A tablecloth with tiny pale green checks was laid over it and a tall plastic tumbler containing chopsticks was placed in the centre. As soon as we sat down, Naina leaned forward eagerly.

'So, what's the goss? You look as if you're bursting to tell me something.'

'I had my first interview.'

'Oh.'

'What?'

'I thought you were going to tell me something exciting.'

'This is exciting.'

'Is it? Okay, tell me about it. But wait ... not before you hear my news. You know that man at the bus stop I always tell you about? The Indian guy? Oh my, such a flirt. You will never believe what he said to me today ...' and Naina was off.

She told me her story in excruciating detail and didn't notice her food go

cold. I listened half-heartedly. I had heard it all before. It was three o'clock by the time I got back home, after having stopped at the Indian shop to buy *basmati* rice and *toor dal*. It was only as I was putting away my shopping that I realised we never did end up discussing my interview.

Later in the evening, around 5 pm, Chloe called and said the magic words I had never dreamt of hearing: 'We are pleased to offer you the job. We would like you to start in two weeks' time.'

As soon as I hung up, I let out a loud whoop of delight and punched the air. Yes! Yes! Yes! I have done it. Ravi is going to be so proud of me.

I have been officially offered my first job in Australia. I have arrived!

24th June

Can there be secrets in a marriage?

Aai had always told us: 'Never have secrets from your loved ones'. But something happened today that I don't want to ever tell either Ravi or Aai.

I cried a lot this morning. Tears of boredom and frustration. The morning dawned dull and gloomy with a thick cloud cover. I was missing India terribly. The soulful Rah numbers playing in the background made things worse. Each song took me back to a cherished memory. '*Tere mere sapne*' reminded me of my first crush in college. He had been in Third Year B.Com while I was still in eleventh. We never spoke and he never guessed how much I adored him. It was over before it started. '*Dekho rootha na karo*' was the song Baba always sang in mock despair whenever Aai was angry with one of us. Just the memory of his kind, loving face and his typical gesture of throwing an arm out towards Aai, while she lightly smacked his hand with her *saree-pallu* and walked off in a huff broke my heart. I wept loud, wretched sobs and only the thought of my neighbours hearing me made me finally stop.

I had a dull headache. This could not go on. I could not stay cooped up in the house all day, crying and feeling sorry for myself. I had a shower, ironed my jeans and t-shirt, grabbed my library books, which should have been returned two days ago and stepped out of the apartment.

On the way to the library, I saw signs for a 'Garage Sale'. A square piece of cardboard was tied to a lamppost and an untidily written message in red ink said: *Garage Sale. Between 7 am and 3 pm.* The address was scribbled under it. Now, a Garage Sale is something I had never heard of in India. But Vibha mentioned the other day that it's a great way to pick up knick-knacks at massively reduced prices.

'But what exactly is it?' I had asked, perplexed.

'Oh, a family might be moving houses or just wanting to get rid of stuff. So they hold a sale in their front yard and sell these items at ridiculous discounts', said Vibha.

'Like what kind of things?'

'Anything and everything. Dinner sets, books, furniture. You name it and it's there.'

It seemed rather odd that Vibha would ever shop for second hand stuff at a garage sale. Her clothes and possessions are always top quality and bought from the most expensive branded stores around the world.

The conversation came back to me as I gazed at the sign and tried to remember where exactly the street mentioned on it was. Oh yes, of course. It was the one right behind the chicken shop. A two to three minute walk. I decided to try it out. I had never been to a garage sale before.

The house turned out to be an ordinary, weatherboard one with overgrown grass and shrubs in the front yard. Two long wooden tables stood in the centre of the yard, covered with a pink plastic cloth and stacked with loads of things. Toys. Books. Clothes. A couple of children's bicycles. Cutlery. Saucepans. Vibha hadn't been wrong. You

name it and it was there.

Half a dozen people milled around, peering closely at what was for sale. My eyes were drawn to a huge cardboard box standing in the corner. Scrawled across it in blue ink was: 'Dinner set. Reduced to \$10'.

I went up to the lady of the house. She stood near one of the tables, smoking and coughing at the same time.

'Hello,' I said, shyly, 'I want to know about that dinner set.' I pointed at the cardboard box.

She blew a last puff of smoke and tossed the cigarette to the ground, crushing it under her feet. 'Come along, darl. I will show you. Such good value for money.'

Indeed it was. For just \$10, I would get 8 dinner plates, 8 bowls, 8 coffee mugs and she would also throw in some forks and knives for free.

The set was beige with a pale blue and pink border and said 'Made in China' at the back.

'Thank you. I will buy it.'

I handed her the blue \$10 note, which she stuffed into her pocket before handing me the big box. It was heavy. I placed my three library books on top of the box and staggered back home.

After dropping off the box, I went to the library. I spent an hour there, browsing through magazines. On my way back, I passed the video store. I hadn't been there before. Never really felt the need to. The Hindi movies I get from the Indian shop keep me entertained. But today was all about doing things for the first time. First garage sale. First time at the video store.

The shop was unlike anything I had ever seen. Certainly there wasn't anything like it in India. Neat rows of metal shelves were lined with videos from a vast range of genres, arranged alphabetically. First came

the children's section which I breezed right past. Then came *Romance* followed by *Thrillers*.

Suddenly, with no warning, I had left all familiar names far behind and was in new and strange territory. My heart began pounding as I stared at the names and covers of videos in this new section. *Tangy Encounters. Seduction & Sizzle*. I had never seen anything like this. The vastness of the collection dazzled me. I had never guessed until then how big the market for Erotica was. Every video was labelled 'R' (for restricted viewing). I knew I was about to do something terrible and wrong. What was a good Indian girl like me, brought up by simple parents who had the simplest of tastes and desires in life, doing in a place like this? And worse, being tempted by these movies. What would Ravi say if he found out? For a moment, I was terrified that I would bump into someone I knew.

Although I was frightened of the repercussions, I was unable to escape. Some deep, dark force pulled me forward and I didn't fight it. I was hungry to find out more. One step followed another, until the room slowly began to spin around me. I stretched out a trembling hand and picked a video. The cover showed a semi-clad couple clasped in a fierce embrace. Just touching the video galvanised me into action. I turned on my heels, clutching the video face down, and briskly walked back to the checkout.

My steps faltered a little when I saw the young man (possibly in his mid-twenties) scanning items at the counter. Oh God. How could I let him see my video? I stopped and thought hard. Should I return the offending item? There was still time. Life would go on as normal. Sooner rather than later, I would forget the sense of wild euphoria I had experienced on seeing the sizzling cover picture. But the need to watch it ... to learn what was in it ... was stronger, much stronger than my resolve.

Deciding to take my chances and throwing caution to the wind, I walked quickly to the counter.

'G'day', said the young man, cheerfully. 'How're you doin'?'

'Good, thank you', I said, stiffly holding out the video.

'Do you have membership?'

Darn. I hadn't realised I had to register for membership. I shook my head and spent a dismal few minutes filling out a form with my details, grateful that he had placed the video face down.

He scanned it without as much as a second glance. I wondered how many bored housewives borrowed similar videos. Maybe women did this kind of thing all the time. Maybe I was the only one who had never seen an adult movie in her life. Who knew? Who really cared?

As I stepped out of the shop, holding the movie in my hand, I froze.

Ashok, Naina's husband, stood right outside near the traffic signal, waiting to cross the road. I was about to turn and hurry back into the shop, when he looked sideways and our eyes met.

What on earth was he doing there? Then I realised it could be any one of a million things. The video rental shop is at a major intersection and everything from the post office to the fruit-n-veg shop to the Indian grocery store is on the same strip.

On seeing me, Ashok's face broke into a delighted smile. 'Hello Anjali. How are you? What are you doing here? When does Ravi get back?'

I was so frightened that I could think of nothing to say.

'Anjali?'

'Oh. Ravi is in Singapore. Back ... back next month', I stammered.

'Oh really? Tell him not to travel so much. He needs to be home with his lovely wife. Spend more time with her.'

Good idea, Ashok, I wanted to say. But I merely smiled. At that moment, all I wanted was for Ashok to go away and not see the video.

Luck was not on my side. Ashok cocked his head to one side and with a tiny smile, said 'I see you've got a movie. Anything interesting?'

I felt my ears ringing and wondered if I was going to faint. Oh, how I wished the rental place gave plastic bags for videos! This was surely the end of my marriage. It couldn't possibly get worse. I hid the video behind my back. I would never be able to look Ashok or the rest of the Sargam group in the eye if he discovered my terrible secret.

'Oh, no. Nothing interesting. Just something to help me while away the time when Ravi is not here. It gets quite boring.'

'So, what movie have you taken? We have a great collection at home, in case you want to borrow some. Just ask Naina and she will happily lend you a few.'

I was going to die. I was sure of it. 'No ... no ... I mean, thank you. Yes, I will ask Naina one of these days.' God. Didn't the man have anywhere to go to? Why was he hell bent on talking to me? The pedestrian light had turned green and then red two times, and yet he showed no signs of moving.

Ashok smiled and waited. I began silently wheeling and dealing with God. Please God. I will never again come to this shop as long as I live. Please distract Ashok from asking me about my movie.

God took pity on me. Ashok changed the topic. 'Oh, by the way,' he said, and I wondered fearfully what he was going to say next. 'We will have you over for dinner one of these days.'

I shook my head. 'There is really no need for all this formality.' I would be alright.

'No, Naina should have invited you. I will speak to her tonight. Do you need any help around the house?'

'Umm ... no ... but thank you. Okay, I'd better go. It's getting late.' As I turned, I quickly stuffed the video into my large handbag.

That had been close.



The air had turned chilly by the time I got home. As soon as I walked into our apartment, my eyes sought out the answering machine. Had Ravi called and left a voice mail? There was no red light flashing. I felt my heart sink with disappointment.

Feeling deflated, I walked into the kitchen and began preparing a light snack for myself. I never cook when Ravi travels. It is too much effort for a single person. In a way, I hoped Naina would indeed invite me over for dinner or even just a chat. It would help alleviate, to a small degree, my isolation and boredom.

I put wholemeal bread into the toaster and switched on the kettle. Ravi refused to buy white bread. 'Not as healthy', he'd said. Tea and peanut butter on toast. That would be enough. Maybe a piece of fruit afterwards. I decided to watch the movie after dinner.

I felt frightened and excited at the same time. What would I learn from the movie? After scoffing my toast in a few big bites, I began sipping the tea and finally, sat back to watch the video. I had dimmed the lights in the living room and lowered the volume on the TV, not knowing what to expect.

The tea turned cold. I sat mesmerised, unable to tear my eyes away from the screen. There was no way I could have ever anticipated the images I was seeing. I could not believe my eyes. All that moaning and groaning, grunting and sighing. I felt my body go hot and then icy cold. As the couple on the screen writhed against each other, I grabbed a cushion and hid my face behind it. Slowly, I peeped out. Had they finished? No. It went on. And on. And on.

I wanted to run away.

I wanted to watch forever.

I wanted to die.

Was this kind of thing normal? Did ordinary people like Ravi and myself do it like that? Unable to bear it any longer, I switched off the TV and stumbled to our bedroom. The movie has shocked me deeply and I cannot get rid of the images from my head. There had been nothing tender or loving in those scenes I had just watched. It was pure lust. But it has filled me with a longing and an ache that I can't seem to get rid of. A longing for something more in my own love life. The woman in the movie had looked like she was in a state of rapture. Her face had been flushed, her eyes glazed with desire. I want to feel like that someday. I want to be taken to dizzy heights of passion and desire where I'm ready to explode. But I can't mention this to Ravi. No! It would be too embarrassing.

I wonder if all wives are satisfied with their sex lives or if many of them, like me, are in search of an indefinable something that is missing. They say practice makes perfect. Does that mean with time, Ravi and I will get better at making love? Will I enjoy it more once we've been doing it for a few years? Will I ever know real passion? So many questions. And such few answers. I'm too drained, emotionally, to think more about this. I'm sure the answers will come with time. I can only hope that things improve sooner rather than later. One is young only once, after all.

2nd July

My first wedding anniversary! And no Ravi.

I can't believe it's been a year already since I got married. How the months have flown!

I had planned our anniversary during my flight to Australia itself. Ravi and I would give each other gifts or flowers, then go out to a movie followed by a late dinner. We would make wild, passionate love as soon as we came home and talk long into the night about how we were the best thing that had happened to each other.

I sighed wistfully as I flicked through our wedding album earlier today. Every photo brought back memories. I remembered waking up on my wedding day and feeling ecstatic on finding that the colour of the *mehndi* (henna) on my hands had deepened during the night. Someone had told me that the darker the *mehndi*, the stronger will be my husband's love for me. I remembered how Aai had helped me drape my heavy red and gold *saree*. She had stood holding a couple of safety pins in her mouth and expertly tucked the folds of the *saree*, making sure the *pallu* was the perfect length. I smiled when I saw the reception snaps. Ravi had chosen to wear a cravat inside an open-necked shirt and had explained patiently why he found it infinitely more stylish than a regular tie.

With a heavy sigh, I closed the album and spent the rest of the day watching our wedding video, rewinding the bits that were especially poignant and special. Like when we took the *saat phere* (seven steps/vows) around the sacred fire. And when we fed each other ice-cream after dinner at the reception. I was so engrossed in it all that I didn't hear the phone ring at first. I jumped up suddenly and ran to answer it. It was nearly 7 pm and the caller turned out to be exactly who I was hoping it would be.

'Happy wedding anniversary, Anju,' Ravi said, and I felt as though my heart would burst with happiness. He remembered!

We chatted for a few minutes. He asked about how I was coping and seemed surprised that I hadn't done much all day.

'Watched our wedding video?' he said, sounding astonished as though it was completely unheard of for new brides to do such a preposterous thing. 'I hope you fast forwarded all the boring bits.'

We both laughed and I was still laughing, albeit a little sadly, when I finally hung up. I marvelled at the irony of it all. He wanted me to fast forward the boring bits. And I wanted to rewind most of the scenes. We couldn't be more different.

6th July

I began working at Stunning Roofs today. The office is in its spanking new premises in a suburb called Parramatta. I was introduced to all the staff members by a tall, thin lady who reminded me of Mary Poppins. She is an Irish lady called Sinead (which I later learned was pronounced 'Shin-aid'). There are ten other telemarketing assistants in my team. Everyone is given a desk, a phone and a long database of customers to call.

'Don't look so frightened, Ann-juh ... sorry, how do I say your name again?' said Sinead, looking fed up.

'Anjali.'

'Can we call you Angie instead?'

Angie? I didn't look like an Angie. But how did it matter?

I smiled.

'Great. Hey guys, please help Angie get settled. And be kind to her. At least, until she is familiar with us all.' Sinead let out a loud guffaw but no one else in the room seemed to have understood the joke.

Thankfully, there was one other new recruit who started today too. A thin, short, bespectacled girl called Daniela. We were given desks next to each other and by the end of the day, had become firm friends. Daniela is of Polish heritage and has lived in Australia since the age of two.

Life is finally looking up. Naina is the most amazing friend a girl could ever wish for. I am lucky to have a colleague as generous and tolerant as Daniela (she didn't laugh at my accent, while some of the others did). And I am looking forward to getting to know Anne Gallagher better.

9th July

There are some women you just cannot be jealous of. No matter how beautiful or accomplished they are. Anne Gallagher is one of them.

Anne loves India and everything to do with India. Bollywood. Butter chicken. Papadum (the Aussie way of saying '*papad*'). Henna. *Gulab Jamun*. She went backpacking to Delhi, Goa and Mumbai about ten years ago and came back transformed.

'I can't begin to tell you how much India taught me', she said one night, as we stood chatting after yoga. We had got into the habit of talking about superficial topics. Nothing too personal – India, her childhood (she grew up on the Central Coast), her current job in Interior Design, my childhood in Mumbai, my current job in telemarketing and so on.

At first, I thought of telling Ravi whenever he called from Singapore about having met his ex-wife at yoga. But the moment was never right. And after a few days, it just seemed easier to not say anything. It was the second time I was keeping something secret from him. I wondered if I was turning into a compulsive liar. But a lie by omission is not really a lie, is it? He had never asked me outright if I had met Anne.

Anne was puzzled when she learned that I had not told Ravi about her. 'Is it to be a secret?' she asked, a tiny smile playing around her lips.

'No. Not a secret. I will tell him. I just haven't found the right opportunity.'

Today's class was slightly different and took my relationship with Anne a tiny step further.

Just before leaving for class earlier today, I looked at the sky darkened by heavy clouds and knew a downpour was coming. I searched everywhere for the umbrella and silently cursed myself for never returning things to the right place. Ravi never has trouble finding things. It is always me. I stood in the centre of the hall, hands on hips, and looked around with narrowed eyes, almost willing it to appear from behind the tall pile of books. Nothing! I was going to be terribly late at this rate. Sending up a silent prayer that it would not rain until I got back

home, I made a mad dash out the door, remembering just in time to grab the house keys before I slammed the door shut.

The class went well and we learned lots of new exercises. I felt aches and pains in muscles I didn't know I had. By the time eight o'clock rolled around and we stepped out of the building, rain was pelting down as though someone had overturned giant tubs of water in the heavens. Everyone else ran with their umbrellas towards the car park where they had left their cars. Anne was still talking to Natalia, our instructor, and had not yet emerged.

I stood shivering inside the corridor, the tips of my tracksuit pants wet already after having stepped into an unseen puddle.

I heard footsteps and turned around to see Anne hurrying towards me.

'Have all our wonderful classmates disappeared? Did no one offer you a lift?' she asked, looking slightly annoyed.

I shrugged. It was not a big deal at all. I would just wait until the rain eased a bit.

'Don't be silly. You only live up the road, don't you? That's what you told me last time. My car is just around the corner. I'll drop you home.'

I didn't resist. Anne's car was neat and it somehow matched its owner's personality. She had turned the heater on immediately and the car was filled with warm air. We didn't talk much on the short drive to my place.

'Why don't you come up? I can make you some tea. Indian *chai*', I invited, shyly when we pulled up outside my apartment block.

Anne hesitated. I could tell she was tempted and I thought she was about to accept. But at the last minute, she shook her head. 'Not today. Maybe next time?'

I know we like each other. And I also know that the time is fast approaching when we will finally talk about the one thing we have been

avoiding – Ravi.

17th July

Ravi got back from Singapore today. I was in a terrible sulk. It had been two months since I had seen him and I had been pining all these days, wanting to throw myself into his arms as soon as he walked into the house. But for some reason, I could not whip up enough enthusiasm.

'Everything okay, Anjali?' he asked.

I nodded. He spoke cheerfully about the fancy restaurants he ate at while he was away, the wine tastings he took his important clients to and the hotel gym he frequented at least thrice a week. He looked tired and a bit washed out. It couldn't have been easy for him, I guessed, living away from home for two months.

'Are you alright?' I asked. 'You don't look too well.'

'Tired.'

'Glad to be home?'

'Yes. I'm sure you have lots to talk about. New job. New friends. You even started doing yoga.'

I had been telling him little snippets about what I had been up to every time he called from Singapore. Other than that horrid video and my friendship with Anne, I had left nothing out.

'Yes.'

'Enjoying yoga? Made friends there?'

'Yes.'

He looked at the pile of unopened mail I had kept aside for him during

his absence and groaned.

'Forget about it today', I said quickly. 'You can sort through them tomorrow. I hope you're not going to do any office work on your first day back, Ravi?'

He gave a tired smile. 'I was considering it. But I have a terrible headache, Anjali. Make me a cup of tea and after that I think I might just lie down for a bit.'

I laid his head in my lap and applied coconut oil to his hair. I gently massaged his temples and head until he finally drifted off into an exhausted sleep. I sat for a long time into the night, his head in my lap, my fingers lightly stroking his hair. Once he was fast asleep, I bent my face low towards his and gently kissed him on the lips.

1st August

The weekly call to India today nearly drove me to kill myself. Mother-in-law dropped a bombshell by announcing that she and Papa were going to visit us soon.

'It will be good if you come. Anjali will have company while I'm at work or travelling', I heard Ravi say to his mother.

I was a bit moody for the rest of the morning. Ravi went around whistling and humming, unusually cheerful. He didn't notice my not-so-sunny mood. Why couldn't they have waited a few more months before coming over? It's only been about seven months since I got to Australia. Ravi and I still barely know each other. I still crave time alone with him. How on earth will things get better between us if his parents grab his time and attention, both of which are in short supply, to begin with?

'When did they make this decision?' I asked, careful not to sound like a petulant child who had just been denied a lolly. 'It's a bit sudden. Or did you know about it?'

'Does it matter?' he asked, looking annoyed.

'It's a simple question.'

'No, it's not a simple question. With you, it's never a simple question. It is always loaded with innuendoes and I have to circle around all the hidden minefields before answering it.'

I kept quiet.

'Mumma is looking forward to visiting us. She hasn't been to Australia since ... well, for a long time.'

I knew what he had nearly said. His parents hadn't been to Australia since he had been married to Annalise. I hoped they wouldn't make comparisons between her and me. That would be awful.

Mumma coming for a visit means I will have to pull up my socks and tidy up the house. Ravi's mother is a tidiness freak. I had once seen her wiping down the fridge, which had been scrubbed to within an inch of its life just the day before, and then meticulously wiping the light switches.

Something drastic will need to be done to my wardrobe before she descends upon us. It is impossible to open my cupboard without a pile of clothes tumbling out. Ravi's side is, of course, systematically arranged. Neatly hung business shirts. Socks bundled in pairs and lined up precisely in the top drawer. Even the undergarments are folded.

Fun times ahead for me!

13th August

Ravi told me he would be home late today. Annoyed at having to spend yet another lonely evening, I decided to stay out until late myself. But whom should I go out with? I had spent a lot of time recently with Naina and felt like a change. I called Vibha from my office during lunch break.

'I would have loved to, Anju. But ...' and she hesitated. 'I'm busy tonight.'

'Oh,' I smiled, 'Going out?' Vibha was such a party animal. Always out at nightclubs or pubs or dinner parties. You couldn't get her to attend a function at your place unless you gave her a fortnight's notice.

She cleared her throat. 'No, I'm not going out. At home. Just ... just have guests over.'

I could tell she was reluctant to talk more. Vibha reveals very little about her personal life. She is always eager to find out what's happening at my end, but the minute the questions turn towards her, she clams up.

Anne could be an option but I didn't know her well enough yet to spring a last minute invitation.

I decided not to ask Naina. One reason was that Ashok did not really like her going out once he got home from office. But the other, bigger reason was that whenever I was out with her, Naina only talked about herself. About which man had been flirting with her at work and which woman's husband kept making eyes at her at dinner parties. It all gets a bit tiring for me sometimes.

I didn't want to go out by myself. So, in the end, I asked Daniela at the office if she wanted to go shopping at Westfield. Thursday night is traditionally late night shopping in Sydney. All shops stay open until 9 pm, which is a welcome change from the usual 5 pm. It was one of the earliest things that had shocked me about Australia. The shops, except for some of the big supermarket chains, all close at 5 pm. How on earth do people manage to do all their shopping? What about those who work full time? Back in Mumbai, we would almost daily be running down to the shops as late as nine o'clock to buy last minute supplies – sugar or chart paper for a college assignment, just about anything.

Daniela wasn't too keen when she heard my plans for window-shopping. 'To the shops?' she asked, with a slight frown. 'I'm not really in the mood for it. I hate shopping at the best of times. But I don't mind stopping for coffee and some cake if you're game. How does that sound? I know a

really good place. They serve the most divine coffee.'

It didn't really matter where we went. I simply wanted to stay out longer than Ravi did.

Daniela promised me she would drop me back home afterwards.



The coffee shop was noisy and crowded. Loud music belted out of an old-fashioned music system. We ordered our *chai* lattes and cakes. I settled for a blueberry muffin and Daniela ordered a lemon cheesecake.

As soon as our orders arrived, Daniela sipped her *chai* and then sat back, arms folded. 'So, tell me about yourself', she said. She wanted to know all about where Ravi and I first met. In spite of her solemn demeanour, Daniela was a romantic at heart.

'Tell me everything. Start with how you both first fell in love with each other.'

'We didn't', I smiled.

She was taken aback. Didn't? What did that mean?

'I mean we didn't fall in love when we first met. Ours is an arranged marriage.'

Daniela was curious. No one from her immediate circle of relatives and friends had ever had an arranged marriage. She knew these things existed but wanted to know more. She had heard there was the dowry system in India. Didn't girls mind that they had to pay money to the husband's family just to be accepted into it? The concept confounded her. She couldn't get it into her head that a man and a woman would agree to tie the knot and spend a lifetime together when they knew 'bugger all' (her words, not mine) about each other. I explained that it was what we were conditioned to expect.

'But did you have a choice in the whole matter? Could you, for example, have said no if you didn't like the boy?' Daniela had such a sweetly concerned look on her face that I was tempted to lean forward and give her a hug.

I laughed. 'Yes, I did have a choice. In most big cities and developed towns, the girl usually has a say in the matter.'

She let out a huge sigh of relief as though I had luckily escaped a miserable fate.

'Thank goodness. And how long did you know each other before you got married?'

'Seven days.'

'Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?' she screamed. 'You're kidding me, right?'

'No. I'm serious', I was giggling by now, not sure why it was such a preposterous thing to consider.

'You're crazy', said Daniela firmly. 'What a terrible gamble. How do you guys in India figure out if the couple is compatible in bed? Imagine being stuck with someone whom you're not attracted to? What happens if you have different goals?'

I had never thought about arranged marriages in this light before.

By the time I arrived home, it was past nine o'clock. Despite my attempts to stay out as late as possible, Ravi was not back. Typical! Some things never change.

29th August

Each evening after work, I continue my efforts to make our apartment look presentable enough for my in-laws. They are due to arrive in a week's time and I've been feverishly going over my to-do list again and

again.

The cupboard in the second bedroom, filled with spare pillows, towels and quilts, has been emptied and three shelves are now reserved exclusively for them, along with some hanging space on the right so that Mumma can hang her *sarees* and Papa his coats, etc. In the kitchen too, I've made quite a few changes. Ravi had a fit yesterday when he opened one of the wooden cabinets and saw rows of yoghurt jars, filled with lentils, flours and dried fruit. Each yoghurt jar had a yellow label on the outside with a neat description of the contents.

'My goodness, Anjali!' he exclaimed. 'What on earth are these?'

I peered over his shoulder to get an idea of what he was staring at. 'These are all the lentils and flour and stuff.' I couldn't see what the fuss was all about.

'Yes, I can see that. But why are they in yoghurt jars?'

'Well, I couldn't see why I should throw them out. They're great for storage.' I was rather proud of my thriftiness.

But Ravi was annoyed. 'Anjali, there's no need for you to be so careful with money all the time. I hope you're still not converting everything into rupees? Tomorrow we are going shopping and buying proper jars to store the lentils. Please get rid of all this.'

And so naturally, he was equally upset when I told him about the dinner set bought at the garage sale while he was in Singapore.

'You did what?' he shouted. 'Anjali, are you okay? Do you really expect me to eat from second hand dinner plates? Is that why I slave for 365 days a year? For you to go around collecting hand-outs?'

'But ... but Ravi. They only cost me ten dollars. I thought it was quite a bargain.'

'I don't care if you pay two dollars for it. I don't care if they were given

to you for *free*! Do you hear me? I don't use second hand stuff. And I won't have you using any either. Go and give those to charity tomorrow.'



As promised, Ravi took me shopping in the city earlier today. We bought an entire storage set. 24 plastic boxes of varying shapes and sizes. He then picked up an exquisite dinner set, which cost \$120 and a set of fluffy bath towels.

'Is there anything else you need?' he asked, looking around.

'No. Nothing.'

'You complained last week about not having enough shoes. Go and look in that section. There are some good quality shoes on sale. See if you like anything.'

Despite being on sale, there weren't any shoes under \$50.

'Those tall boots there. Go try them on. You don't own anything like that', Ravi urged. We finally emerged from the shop with three pairs of shoes for myself: black suede flats for everyday use, bright red sandals with high heels to be worn to parties and functions and of course, the tall leather boots which gave me a cowgirl kind of look.

Once we got home, I put my shopping away neatly and ticked off items on my to-do list. The spice jars were replenished: turmeric and chilli powder, cumin, mustard seeds, *garam masala*, *hing*, whole pepper, cardamom and cloves. The basic supplies were ready. I peeped into the pantry to make sure we had plenty of wheat flour, *basmati* rice and an assortment of *dals* (*toor*, *chana*, *moong* and *masoor*). Every room has been vacuumed and dusted to within an inch of its life. I have done the best I can. Time will tell if it is enough.

4th September

We arrived at the airport at 9 am. Ravi craned his neck over the crowd to catch a glimpse of his parents. Hordes of people emerged, pushing heavily laden trolleys, waving energetically as soon as they saw their loved ones. Even the flight crew finally strolled down through the arrivals gate, pulling their tiny black overnight bags behind them and still no Mumma and Papa.

Ravi frowned. 'Mumma won't change. I bet she is still at customs arguing about why they should allow her to bring in *besan laddoos*. I had reminded her not to bring food. It's too much hassle.'

I remained quiet. It wouldn't do for me to agree with him about his mother's shortcomings. And hadn't I done the same?

At last, the sliding doors opened with a soft hiss and Mumma and Papa emerged, pushing a heavy trolley together. Papa was beaming from ear to ear. He saw us instantly. Mumma's face looked thunderous. She was obviously hopping mad about something and looked as though she would burst in half if she didn't tell someone about it straight away.

We hurried towards them, and I bent to touch their feet. Papa placed his palm on my head, giving his blessings and patted my shoulder.

'How are you, Anjali *beta*?'

I nodded and smiled. 'Good, Papa'

Mumma didn't even realise I had touched her feet. '*Kai he tumche Australians* (My goodness. These Australians!) They threw out all the *laddoos* and pickles. I made them with my own two hands. Slaved over them for an entire week. I begged them to have mercy. In fact I begged all of them, not just the man who was talking to us. I told them my son was waiting to eat all this. They couldn't be so unfair. But do you think they listened to me? Do you think they cared?'

I felt an uncontrollable urge to giggle and held my palm over my mouth in case I burst out laughing. Ravi looked annoyed and kept shaking his head at his mother as though she was a recalcitrant kid who needed to be

admonished.

'Mumma, I have told you so many times not to argue with the customs staff. They know what they are doing. And by now you know the rules in Australia. I did tell you not to bring any food. See what I mean? All that effort you went through, for nothing.'

Mother and son glared at each other for a few seconds and I noticed how similar they look. They have the same long, straight nose and the same slightly close-set eyes. Both had tiny frown lines on their foreheads.

Ravi blinked a few times trying to look less annoyed. 'Okay, forget about it. It's nothing big. You can make *laddoos* and pickles for us now that you are here. I have been dying to eat your food.'

This mollified Mumma slightly. Any mention of her fantastic cooking put her in a good mood. I felt annoyed though. Ravi never praised my cooking no matter what I prepared. And this was the first time I'd heard about him 'dying' to eat his mother's food.

'You can teach Anjali all your old recipes. Especially the fish curry you always make. The one with coconut and *tirphal*.'

'Oh don't worry, Ravi. I will teach Anjali lots of things. By the time I go back to Mumbai, she will be an accomplished cook and housewife.'

I looked down and remained silent. I guess I have loads of preaching and teaching and fault finding to look forward to. My heart sank. I could just about handle Ravi constantly telling me how to better myself. But Ravi and Mumma together on a "Let's Improve Anjali" campaign ... what could be worse?

As I walked behind Ravi and his parents and we stepped into the brilliant Australian sunshine, I shivered. I felt the hair on my arms rise and had a sudden, terrible premonition. Things were going to change. I could feel it in my bones. I stared hard at the back of Ravi's head and felt frightened. Very frightened.

10th September

If I liked Ravi's mother even half as much as I like his father, I would have liked her a lot indeed. Just for fun, I decided to make a list of all the things she has been complaining about since she arrived:

- A. You don't prepare *rotis* every day, Anjali? Don't expect me to eat all this pita bread and stuff. It tastes like cardboard.
- B. Are you going to wear that to the temple? Where are all the *sarees* I gifted you during the wedding?
- C. How come you use readymade ginger and garlic paste? It tastes like chemicals. I can only cook with fresh garlic. So if you want to eat my food, you will have to go get me some fresh garlic and ginger. Oh and some fresh coconut and *chinha* (tamarind) too.
- D. In my day, a newly married woman always applied *sindoor* in her hair. (arched eyebrow and pursed lips)
- E. Bottled lemon juice? At least keep some fresh lemons in the house.
- F. You address Ravi as '*arre* Ravi'? In my time, girls always addressed their husbands as '*aho*'. Women today want to be on par with the men. That's why the world is going from bad to worse.

This last complaint amuses me the most and absolutely blows me away with its total lack of logic. How can the crumbling state of the universe possibly be attributed to Maharashtrian girls addressing their husbands with the familiar '*arre*' rather than the respectful '*aho*'?

My mother-in-law is a simply dressed woman. She has a long, thick plait and wears faded cotton *sarees* most of the time (Ravi has often urged her to try on western clothes but she has staunchly refused). A dozen colourful glass bangles jingle and jangle on both her wrists. She finds something to complain about all day long. Papa ignores her as much as possible.

'Aho, have you noticed that the fruits and vegetables in this country have no taste at all? Do you call this thing a mango? It is nothing like the mangoes we get back home.'

Whenever Mumma complains, Papa shakes his head and mumbles, 'let it be, Suhasini. How does it matter?'

Papa, on the other hand, is a lovely human being. An unassuming, simple man with no airs or hang-ups. He is content sitting all day in the rocking chair, reading first the *Sydney Morning Herald* and then whichever Indian magazines are lying around the house.

Papa's 'live and let live' philosophy always infuriates Mumma. 'You never have an opinion on anything', she is often heard saying and more than makes up for her husband's retiring nature.

Mumma's fluctuating moods wouldn't be so hard to handle if Ravi hadn't miraculously transformed into a little lost boy. Almost overnight, Ravi has forgotten how to iron and make tea and buy vegetables. Everything is left to Mumma. 'Go shopping to the fruit and veg shop with Mumma today, Anjali. She has a good eye for the best vegetables' or 'Mumma, no one irons like you do. Not a single crease. Amazing'.

Mumma has already taken over my kitchen. She has re-arranged the cupboards, scrubbed every single *tava* and saucepan (apparently, they weren't clean enough) and sorted through my plastic containers only to pronounce smugly that there were three containers with missing lids.

A few annoying things happened today. It was my day off from work and Mumma wanted to prepare *Kolhapuri* fried fish.

'It's my secret recipe. But I will teach you, Anjali. If anyone ever asks you for the recipe, make sure to always leave one key ingredient out when you tell them. That way no one will be able to cook it the way you do.'

I was fascinated. Did people really plot and plan so much when swapping something as simple as recipes? Why does Mumma go

through life as though she is always on the verge of winning a game of chess and waiting to checkmate her opponent?

We went to the supermarket together. Mumma went through each aisle, checking everything. She read the ingredients on the back of each packet she picked up, wondering why one brand cost more than the other.

We got home an hour later having bought three times as much as we had originally intended.

'Okay!' she said, rubbing her hands with excitement. Cooking is her forte. 'Let's get started. Get me some rice flour. I need it to coat the fish.'

Uh-oh.

'Mumma, I don't have rice flour. Can we use something else instead?'

'No rice flour? How come? Has it finished?'

'No. I ... I ... have never used it.'

'What are you saying?' said Mumma in the tone most people reserved for reacting to news of calamity.

We stared at each other. Master Chef versus apprentice. 'If you had only told me earlier, we could have shopped for it. Now what are we going to do?'

Silence.

'Do you at least have *atta*? Wheat flour? Or not even *that*?'

'Yes I do.'

'Thank God. Anjali, I need you to chop some onions for me. Can you manage? I'll make both fish curry and fried fish. Make sure to chop them really fine. Take five, no, take six big onions. Tell me once you are done.'

Six big onions?! That would surely be the end of me. I weep profusely when chopping onions. Suddenly I had a brainwave. I quickly looked into the pantry, reached up and pulled down our food processor. With a flourish, I tossed in the onions, one by one. Within seconds, a mound of finely chopped onions stood ready in an oval platter. Just then, Mumma walked into the kitchen.

She stared in surprise at the onions. 'What? You have chopped six onions already?'

'Yes,' I replied happily, feeling a little smug, 'it was easy. I just put them in the food processor.'

Mumma pursed up her lips and looked tired. 'It's okay, Anjali. If it's too much trouble for you to carry out my simple requests and if it is not possible for you to chop them with a knife, then I will do it myself.'

I wondered if I had heard her right. Was she kicking up a fuss because *I had used the food processor instead of a knife???* Was it not good enough simply because I had taken the easy way out?

'I'm sorry, Mumma but I don't understand. Are these chopped onions not okay?'

She shook her head. 'I come from a different school of thought. We don't believe in taking all these short cuts. If you want to eat my food, things will have to be done a certain way.'

Papa called out from the living room. 'Suhasini, the girl has already chopped the onions. How does it matter?'

On hearing the kindness in his voice, my lower lip began to quiver.

'You don't get involved in this', she admonished and Papa went back to reading the paper.

I sighed. 'Don't worry, Mumma. I will use these for another dish. And I will chop some more for you. With a knife.'

Mumma sniffed loudly and walked out of the kitchen.

Papa looked up at me when I finally emerged, red-eyed from the kitchen. Our eyes met and he smiled at me, making a gesture with his right hand as if to say 'don't worry about her. You know what she's like'.

Sitting at the dining table at night, Ravi made *ooing* and *aahing* sounds while eating the curry as though he had been starved of decent, edible food for decades.

By the time dinner was done and I came to our bedroom to change, I was physically and mentally wiped out. I tried to guess what kind of a mood Ravi was in. He was already in bed with the bedside lamp switched on. A thick folder lay in his lap and he was making notes on a pad. He looked tired, but that was nothing new. He is always tired but equally determined to stretch himself to breaking point for the sake of his brilliant job. I'm beginning to feel impatient. He is obsessed with his job. And his friend Suraj is the same. Their wives play second fiddle to their careers.

For once I didn't walk on eggshells around him and plunged right in.

'Ravi, guess what happened today', I said, as I applied cream to my face. 'Mumma asked me to chop onions for the fish curry and — '

He didn't let me finish. 'What's this about, Anjali? Are you going to complain about Mumma?'

I was taken aback. 'I'm not complaining. Just telling you something. I cut six onions in the food processor. And after all that, Mumma didn't think they were the right shape for the fish curry. Apparently, the curry tastes good only if the onions are chopped with a knife.'

I waited expectantly. There was a long silence. Finally Ravi snapped shut his folder and looked at me.

'Anjali, my mother isn't getting younger. She is set in her ways. But her heart is in the right place. And plus, they are here only for a few months.

Can't you at least *try* to please them? It can't be that difficult, surely?'

Just a simple 'Yes, Mumma shouldn't have done that' would have done the trick. I wasn't asking him for a solution. Neither was I trying to get him mad at his mother. I was simply telling my side of the story.

'Okay, Ravi. I get it.'

'Good,' he said and went back to his notes.

I guess he does have a point, although I'm a bit annoyed at the blunt way he put it across. Since Mumma is here only for a few months, maybe I should try harder to ignore a few things and not be so sensitive. The *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law/daughter-in-law) saga is hardly unique to my family. Yes, that's what I'll do. I will try and be more tolerant. It will make things much better for all of us.

16th September

The novelty of my job has worn off. No one wants to talk to telemarketers first thing in the morning. And I'm fed up with people rudely hanging up on me.

So I decided to take a sickie today.

As soon as Ravi left for work, I picked up our cordless phone and sneaked into my bedroom. Mumma and Papa sat in the balcony, drinking tea and watching passers-by. Sinead sounded sympathetic when I mentioned a sore throat.

'Have a good rest, Angie. Will you be in tomorrow, do you think?'

'Yes. I think so.'

Once I hung up, I let out a whoop of delight. Yippee. The day was all mine. I had no intention of telling Mumma or Papa that I had taken the day off. I didn't tell Ravi about it either. He would have been furious at

such a lackadaisical attitude towards work.

I decided to take a train to Hornsby, which had a big shopping mall.

Mumma looked surprised to see me still in my nightgown. She stared first at the big, wooden cuckoo clock and then at me. 'What are you doing? You still haven't had a shower? You will be late for work.'

In my excitement, I had forgotten the time. I usually left for work by around 8.30 am and it was nearly that now. It wouldn't do to get them suspicious. I made up a flimsy excuse about having to start work late today because the bosses were away at a meeting and hurried into the bathroom to get ready. I couldn't wear jeans and a t-shirt or they would guess immediately that I wasn't going to the office. So I dressed up in tailored black pants and a white chiffon top, which didn't need ironing.

I was about to run out the door when Mumma stopped me. 'Where is your lunch *dabba*? Didn't you pack it today? There is cabbage from last night. Shall I pack you some?'

'No, no. That's okay', I protested. 'I will pack it.'

I ran back into the kitchen, opened the fridge and quickly spooned some cabbage into a take-away plastic container. What a shame. I had been meaning to eat out.

'What time will you be back?' asked Mumma. She asks me this every single day. If I fail to return at the time promised, a Q&A session starts. 'What took you so long?' or 'did you stop somewhere on the way home?'

'I will be home the usual time, Mumma', I said, forcing myself to sound patient.

As soon as the main door shut behind me, I sighed with relief. Escaping from a prison might prove easier than getting out of Mumma's clutches.

There was the usual long queue for tickets outside the station. A big board showed a continuously updated list of train timings. My train

would leave in 11 minutes from Platform 2. I had plenty of time. Feeling excited, I bought a magazine from the nearby kiosk and made my way to Platform 2.

My adventure had begun!



As soon as I walked into the shopping centre, I remembered that I hadn't had breakfast this morning. Usually, I have tea and two pieces of buttered toast. But today there had been no time.

I checked out the mall map and figured out where the McDonald's was. After months of practice, I now know how to order exactly what I want. 'One white coffee and an egg McMuffin, please', I said to the young boy at the counter. I paid cash and took the brown paper bag containing my breakfast. In a corner stood a counter filled with sachets of sugar, salt and pepper, straws, serviettes and stirrers. I grabbed a handful of sugars. After much trial and error, I have worked out that it takes five sugars for a McDonald's coffee to get anywhere close to the delicious sweetness of Indian coffee.

I found a corner table in the food court, and settled down to eat. I was about to take a sip of coffee, when I saw Naina sitting at a table not too far away. She had her back to me, but I could tell from the way she hunched over the table that it was her. What on earth was she doing in Hornsby? Moreover, today wasn't her day off. I was about to get up and walk towards her and yell 'Surprise!' when she shifted slightly and I saw she wasn't alone.

Naina was laughing, tossing back her hair and generally flirting. The young Indian man at her table was holding both her hands in his and talking intently. I began to feel slightly queasy. I didn't have any idea who the man was.

I pushed away the remaining half of the McMuffin. It was impossible to tear my eyes away from the lovey-dovey couple. At one point, Naina

leaned forward towards the man and taking a tissue, dabbed at something on the corner of his mouth. What on earth was Naina up to? It didn't look like a corporate meeting, although the man was wearing a suit.

Suddenly, the man glanced at his watch and exclaimed loudly. He leaned forward and dropped a kiss on Naina's forehead. An oddly intimate gesture. She turned her face up towards him as though expecting a kiss. But he simply ruffled her hair, patted her cheek and walked away.

Naina sat alone for a few moments, her head drooping. I was tempted to walk up to her and demand an explanation, but I didn't have the courage. I watched her finish her coffee. Finally, she stood up, smoothed her skirt, and tossing her handbag onto her right shoulder, walked away in the opposite direction.

I didn't enjoy my shopping expedition as much as I had expected. For the rest of the day, Naina's secret lay heavy on my chest. She was obviously doing something terribly wrong and possibly dangerous. Why would a married woman with a devoted husband like Ashok, bother with another man? If I had been married to someone like Ashok, who came home from work at the same time every evening, who called me 'princess' and 'darling' even in public, and who worshipped the very ground I walked on, I would have called myself the luckiest woman in the universe.

I returned home at the usual time in the evening, empty handed and deep in thought. Even Mumma's remarks about how much dust there was on the windowsill left me unruffled. I had more important things to think about. Like what will happen when Ashok finds out what his wife is up to.

20th September

I knew it wouldn't be long before Mumma introduced the topic of grandchildren. I was in the kitchen, kneading dough to make *rotis*. Mumma stood next to me like an army sergeant, left hand on hip, peering over my shoulder and giving instructions to make sure I did it

right.

'Make a hole in the centre of the dough, Anjali. No ... no ... not like that ... just with your two fingers ... yes ... correct' followed by 'press the dough with the centre of your wrist. You need to apply more force. The better you knead, the fluffier the *rotis*.'

I tried following her instructions.

'So Anjali, tell me something', said Mumma.

Uh oh. What was I in for this time?

'You know Mrs Kale who lives next door to us? In Mumbai?'

I had a vague memory of a dumpling of a woman who wore *Kanjeevaram sarees* high on her waist and waddled around.

'Her daughter recently gave birth to a baby boy. They named him Ajinkya.'

I knew where this was going. 'That's nice.'

'Mrs Kale was so excited. She celebrated by giving all the neighbours a 1kg box of *motichoor laddoos*. She acted like no one had had a grandchild before.'

I smiled and nodded.

'You know, Mrs Kale's daughter has been married only for a year. It's so good that they didn't wait long. I don't understand all this modern rubbish of waiting a few years before having the first child. A woman should always have her first child straight away after marriage. That way, you are still young enough by the time they grow up. Look at me for instance.'

I did look at her. She was flushed and her eyes had taken on a glazed look.

'I had Ravi when I was only twenty-two. Now, people sometimes joke that I look like his older sister.'

I wondered when she would get to the point.

'So,' she said and had the grace to sound a little awkward. 'What about you and Ravi? Any plans?'

'For?'

'You know ... a baby. Papa and I are both looking forward to grandchildren. We are not getting any younger.'

'No plans yet, Mumma.'

'So, you are not even trying?'

'I don't think Ravi wants a child just yet. He is concentrating on his career and wants to build some assets, maybe buy a house first.'

'Oh, there's plenty of time to buy a house and build assets. The clock is ticking and you aren't getting any younger.'

I wanted to remind her that I was only twenty-seven, but I kept quiet.

'Papa and I are not getting younger either', she said again.

Finally I could bear it no longer. 'Mumma, I really don't have any say in all this. It might be best if you talk to Ravi.'

She sniffed as though I had insulted her. 'There isn't any problem, is there? Is everything okay?'

I looked at her for a long time, tempted to talk about Ravi's unbearable working hours. His workaholic nature is certainly beginning to have an impact on our marriage.

At the last minute, I changed my mind, shrugged and left the room

25th September

I have been maintaining a distance from Naina after the shopping centre incident. She is either having an affair or on the brink of one and I want to first work out a few things in my head before I speak to her. I'm not sure whether to confront her or to pretend that I hadn't seen anything. Do I owe any loyalty to Ashok, who has always been kind to me or should my allegiance be with Naina? I haven't told Ravi anything about this for two reasons. First, I'm not sure how he will react. And second, I don't want this to affect his friendship with either Naina or Ashok, and by extension, the entire Sargam group.

On a couple of occasions Naina has called and left a message on my voicemail. But I can't bring myself to call her back. What if I blurt out something silly and ruin our friendship forever? I disapprove of extramarital affairs. When my college friends and I used to discuss the dos and don'ts of marriage, I was always the one who expressed strong opinions about infidelity.

'But what if a woman is in an emotionally and physically abusive marriage?' Shehnaaz had asked once as we sat in the college canteen enjoying freshly made *rava dosas* and *masala chai*.

I had given it careful thought. 'That's different. We are not talking about abusive relationships. Just regular relationships where for whatever reason, one partner looks elsewhere for pleasure. In an abusive relationship, a woman should end the marriage before beginning a new relationship.'

Shehnaaz, Ruhi and Mira had all laughed heartily on seeing my stern expression. 'It's obvious our darling Anjali will never have an affair. She is the universal good girl who will never do anything wrong. Is that right?' said Ruhi with a dimpled smile.

'Never say never. But yes, in a way you're right. An affair is a deliberate decision. It never just *happens*. You choose to cheat. You don't just get up one day and realise you have cheated. So, if it is a conscious act, why don't more people stop themselves from doing it?'

Shehnaaz had shaken her head sadly. She was the wisest one amongst us all. 'Oh Anju, my darling. You cannot go through life with such white or black opinions. There are so many shades of grey in between.'

'What do you mean? Are you condoning it?'

'I am not condoning it. But neither am I dismissing it. I don't agree that infidelity is always a choice. Sometimes, depending on the circumstances and causes, it can simply *happen*. Even when the perpetrator is unwilling and reluctant.'

This conversation, which took place over six years ago, floated back to me as I pondered over how to deal with the Naina dilemma. I was still debating whether to call her or wait another few days, when the doorbell rang. Mumma and Papa were spending the day in the city, riding on the Monorail, visiting the Art Gallery NSW and strolling around Darling Harbour. They wouldn't be back until late and Ravi had said he would pick them up from the railway station.

I put aside the Sudoku puzzle I had been solving and opened the door. Naina stood outside, a quizzical expression on her pretty face. I was stunned. We stared at each other for a few seconds.

'Okay, you obviously hate me suddenly for some reason. But aren't you going to at least invite me in?' Naina asked, a hint of a smile playing around her lips.

I gave myself a mental shake and smiled back. 'Of course. Please. Come in, Naina.' I stood back and looked at the floor, as with a sharp glance, she squeezed past me and walked in. Sitting cross-legged on the sofa, she beckoned me to join her.

'So when did we stop being friends?' she asked, bluntly.

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, cut out the acting, Anjali. It doesn't suit you. Something's the matter. You know it and I know it. So out with it. Is it something I have said or

done?'

A pause. 'Yes.'

She leaned forward. 'What is it? Is it because of what I said the other day when we bumped into Sonali? Let me tell you now, I was not trying to make you look bad. I was just trying to make her feel better.'

I had no idea what she was talking about. I vaguely remembered meeting Sonali one afternoon at Macquarie Centre where Naina and I had gone to watch a movie. Sonali had looked hurt at not having been included in our rendezvous. Naina had conveniently said that the outing was my idea.

'I'm sorry I blamed you for it. She would have been livid if it had been my idea. Sonali and I go back a long way and she wants to be included in everything I do.'

'No, Naina. I didn't give that incident even a moment's thought. I know what Sonali is like. Would you like some tea? I was just going to make myself some.' I needed some time to gather my thoughts. Naina's surprise visit had caught me off guard.

'Yes, okay. But only half a cup. I just had a cuppa before I got here.'

'Would you like juice instead?'

'Nah. Tea is good.'

I pulled out two mugs and filled them with hot water before tossing some sugar and tea bags into them.

'Just a dash of milk today please, Anjali. My tummy doesn't feel right. Must be something I ate yesterday at the office party.'

We settled down opposite each other. I sipped my tea silently, reluctant to meet her eyes.

'Anjali, you have to tell me what's wrong. And don't pretend there isn't something bothering you because I know you well already. I can read

you like an open book. You're hiding something from me. So, out with it. What is it?'

I kept sipping tea and finally leaned forward and placed my cup on the centre table.

'I saw you the other day.'

Naina looked puzzled. 'Okay. Where?'

'At the shopping centre in Hornsby. A few days ago.'

She frowned, trying to remember and suddenly her brow cleared. She gazed silently at her hands.

'Yes. I had gone there to ... do some shopping.'

'You were with a man.'

'Yes.'

'But what were you doing with him, Naina?' I blurted. 'It ... it didn't look like an ordinary friendship.'

Naina sat back against the cushions, gazing at me intently out of her soft, dark brown eyes. 'You're dying to find out if I'm having an affair with him, aren't you?' She sounded half amused and half irritated.

I said nothing.

She let out a low, bitter laugh. 'Since you absolutely must know, the answer is *no*. I am not having an affair with him.'

I was about to heave a sigh of relief when she added: 'Yet.'

I felt deflated and slightly ashamed of Naina. Ashok is the most good-natured man I've met in a long time. He deserves better.

'I see', I said, finally. 'I won't stop you, Naina. You are an adult who can

think and weigh the consequences of what you do. All I want to know is why? Why would you go to so much trouble to jeopardise your marriage when Ashok has always been a gem of a husband to you?'

'Oh, my marriage is safe. Don't worry, Anjali. You worry so much about everything. It's only a bit of fun. I'm not going to sleep with other men, if that's what you're stressing about. A kiss here and there, a little cuddle ... where's the harm in that? On the contrary, it's quite healthy for a marriage.'

Maybe I have old-fashioned values and morals. Do modern men and women believe variety is the spice of life?

Naina leaned forward and took both my hands in hers. 'Just accept me the way I am, Anju. Don't judge me. Will you promise to always be my friend? No matter what?'

I hesitated. She is obviously going through some kind of mid-life crisis, if it is possible to have a mid-life crisis when you are only twenty-five. In a way, I feel sorry for her. She is just a confused and lost soul, seeking constant attention and reassurance. For some women, the love of one man is not enough. I couldn't break a friendship because of a flaw in character. I squeezed Naina's hand and we smiled at each other.

We both recognised that our friendship had rocked dangerously for a few brief moments. But now, thankfully, it is back on an even keel.

28th September

Anne Gallagher and I have all the essential ingredients of friendship. We laugh at the same things, enjoy reading the same authors and in general have loads of things in common.

Meeting twice a week at yoga has brought us close gradually. Anne amuses me for lots of reasons. She is funny and curious and brave. But what amuses me most is her love affair with my homeland. Anne is obsessed with India and loves watching Bollywood movies. She has

watched at least half a dozen Shah Rukh Khan films and is convinced that anyone more beautiful than Madhuri Dixit is yet to be born.

Anne is not only interested in Indian movies but also in every aspect of living and growing up in India. During our after-class discussions (sometimes we even come half an hour earlier to chat), she asks me endless questions about my growing up years. How was it being raised a female in India? Were we treated like second-class citizens or did we have the same opportunities as the men? Who is *Sai Baba*? Is the sacred fire really still kept burning at the temple in Shirdi? What is it like living in a joint family? What is the hierarchy of power when so many people live under one roof?

For someone who was once married to an Indian, it is strange how little Anne knows about India.

'You are so good, Anjali', she said today, as we sipped coffee together before class. 'I have learned so much from you. Ravi never bothered to talk to me about these things. Whenever I asked him anything he would say, "*I am trying to forget India*".'

I realised, with a jolt, it was the first time Anne had spoken of Ravi in a personal vein.

An invisible boundary had been crossed.

Two women, not two wives, stand on opposite sides of a wide chasm. Between them is the unknown, the unspoken, the unheard. Their connection is inevitable. The only mystery now is how long it will take them to cross the chasm and meet each other.

We are no longer ex-wife and current wife. We are simply Anne and Anjali.

Our friendship has just taken a giant leap forward.

1st October

I've decided it's time to look for another job. Something more interesting. And certainly more challenging. As I was reading the newspaper this morning, my interest was piqued by the large number of ads for travel consultants. Several of them asked for little or no previous experience, stating at the bottom of the ad in smaller print next to an asterisk: *'Full training will be provided'*. I had done a one-year course in Travel and Tourism in Mumbai while I was still in college and then worked for a couple of years in a small travel agency.

The thought of selling exotic locations to enthusiastic travellers, and occasionally winning a free trip to a glamorous locale, all as part of training, excited me. What fun it would be to do something like that!

Suddenly, a short, snappy advertisement caught my eye. Boutique travel agency looking for a consultant to join their friendly, vibrant team. No previous experience required. Full training will be provided. To apply, please call Kimberley. This was followed by a phone number, which I copied carefully onto the back of an empty envelope.

'Ravi, what do you think about this? Should I apply?'

He read the ad quickly and then went over it one more time, this time more carefully. 'Hmm, sounds interesting. It's in the city, which is great. There's nothing quite like working in the city. It's a whole different experience. You will enjoy it.'

Ravi has been keen for me to move away from the drudgery of my telemarketing job. 'It's a great launching pad, but it's time to look for new opportunities', he had said many times.

The job advertised at Ellis World Travels sounds interesting. As far as I am concerned, it ticks all the boxes. City based, small and a close-knit team, no experience required. The salary is \$22,000 per year, which I thought was phenomenal until Ravi burst my bubble.

'The salary is pretty miserable, Anju. But travel agencies are hardly

renowned for their fat pay packets. Don't think too much about it. The experience will be good.'

4th October

We had another Sargam get-together today, this time at Sonali's place. Thanks to Ravi's hectic work schedule, it has been a while since we have all met. Tushar and Sonali are both strict vegetarians, and so we decided on a 'heavy snacks' menu, which included things like *pav bhaaji*, *ragda pattice*, *chhole* and *bhel*.

'Why do we always end up making Indian food?' asked Vibha, plaintively, when we were all discussing what to prepare. 'Can't we maybe have an Italian theme once? Or Chinese or something?'

Everyone agreed it was a great idea and the next time around, we would plan it a bit differently.

Ravi insisted we took Mumma and Papa along. 'They will get bored sitting at home. As it is, they are at home all day.'

I wasn't overly keen to have them join us as I've been feeling a bit suffocated by their constant presence. Mumma's inquisitiveness is becoming tiresome. She looks me up and down whenever I come out of my room dressed to go out and quizzes me on my wardrobe: 'where did you get that top?' or 'how much did those pants cost?' If the phone rings, she hovers around near me, pretending to be busy with something but in fact eavesdropping on every word spoken. At the end of the call, she asks, 'who was it on the phone?' She brings in the mail every day and scrutinises every single envelope, turning it over to see if there is a return address and sometimes even holds it against the light to see what is inside. It's enough to drive a girl mad.

Unable to bear it any longer, I confided in my mother last night over the phone. 'She is so nosey, Aai. Never leaves me alone. Criticises everything. I wish she would go back to India soon.'

I was huddled in my bedroom, hunched over the phone and whispering into it. Ravi wasn't home yet, which was good since he didn't approve of calling India merely on a whim.

My mother is a practical woman and has no patience for sob stories. She came briskly to the point. 'Now, Anju. What do I always tell you? Your mother-in-law is set in her ways. After a certain age, it is impossible to change. You, on the other hand, are still young and mouldable. Learn to ignore a few things. You are out of the house three days a week as it is because of your job. The rest of the time, just go along with what she says. She is only there for a few months.' I felt better after talking to Aai.

I recalled the conversation with Aai and felt a bit ashamed of my reluctance to take my in-laws along with us to the dinner. Like Ravi said, they didn't really have much to look forward to all day. The Sargam catch-up would be a good outing for them.

Mumma was excited when we told her about the Sargam potluck in the evening. 'What is the menu going to be? And what are you contributing?'

I told her. '*Bhel*?' she asked, with one raised eyebrow. 'Why did you pick the easiest option? We could have made *ragda pattice*. It's one of my specialities. And it looks more impressive than *bhel*.'

There's hardly anything in a global menu that's not Mumma's speciality. In the end however, she decided not to argue the point. I chopped onions, tomatoes and coriander leaves and packed them in individual plastic containers. I would prepare the *bhel* once I got to Sonali's.

Mumma and Papa were both dressed and waiting nearly an hour before we were due to leave. I was excited at the thought of finally wearing a *salwaar kameez*. It's been so long since I've worn anything Indian and the Sargam parties are always a good occasion to bring out all my ethnic attire, including the bangles and *bindis*.

'Where is your *mangalsutra*?' asked Mumma, when I finally emerged from my room, dressed and ready.

I was wearing a red pendant on a slim gold chain as it matched my red and green outfit. I hadn't worn the *mangalsutra* because it clashed with the gold chain and wearing both would make me look overdressed.

Ravi had followed me out of the room, straightening the collar of his shirt, and heard Mumma's question. He looked at me for a few seconds, his eyes dropping to the red pendant. Unlike my own father who insisted all his life that Aai should wear the *mangalsutra* 24/7, Ravi has never been too fussed about it. *When in Rome, do as the Romans do* is his favourite slogan.

I wondered if he would stand up to his mother or as was so often the case, he would turn a deaf ear and blind eye merely to humour her and keep the peace.

Mumma and I both stared at him waiting for a response.

He turned around to look at his mother. 'It's okay, Mumma. Anjali's necklace matches her dress. How does it matter anyway?'

Mumma sniffed disapprovingly. 'She's a married woman, Ravi. And married women wear the *mangalsutra*. It's bad enough that she doesn't wear it every day. But she should make an effort when we go out.'

They were talking as though I wasn't in the room. What a big fuss about nothing! I wondered briefly if I should simply go back to the room, remove the necklace and wear the *mangalsutra* instead. But why should I give in to her demands? My husband wasn't bothered about it one way or the other.

It was only when Papa finally interrupted, asking Mumma not to make such a big fuss about nothing, that she finally let the matter go. She looked pained and unhappy but at least the moment had passed.



Sonali looked happy for a change and seemed to have forgotten the movie incident when Naina and I hadn't invited her. She had decorated

her apartment with candles, incense sticks and dimly lit lamps and the atmosphere was one of subdued elegance.

Everyone arrived on time, including Naina, which was unusual. One by one, they hurried over to greet Mumma and Papa and welcomed them to Australia.

'So Auntyji, how is everything? I hope your daughter-in-law is doing a good job of looking after you', laughed Rishi, in a teasing tone. He winked at me and I glared back.

Mumma gave a smug smile. '*Arre Rishi, theek chal raha hai. Anjali vaise acchhi mulgi hai* (All well. Anjali is a good girl).' She spoke Hindi with a Marathi accent. I tried not to giggle.

Vibha was nursing a sore throat and announced that she wouldn't be singing today. Everyone groaned. Vibha was a great singer.

Ashok assembled his keyboard and smiled at me as I walked past. I found it difficult to meet his eyes after my confrontation with Naina about the brewing 'affair'. When we had last met, we had got along really well. Throughout the evening, I caught him giving me puzzled glances. I had barely exchanged half a dozen words with him. I wished I didn't feel so awkward. He was a lot more fun to chat with than Vibha or Sonali, who only spoke about fashion and travel (Vibha) or the woes of cooking and cleaning (Sonali).

Naina seemed cheerful and happy and hugged me affectionately a couple of times. 'All okay between us?' she whispered once, as we walked past each other in Sonali's kitchen. I gave her the thumbs up sign.

Between us, we all sang at least fifteen songs. Mumma and Papa looked impressed and clapped enthusiastically after each song.

'And now, before we conclude the music session,' said Naina, speaking into the microphone, 'I am going to request junior Mr and Mrs Jathar to sing their signature song together.'

Ravi and I both looked puzzled. Until then we hadn't even known we had a signature song.

Naina giggled. 'Your dazzling duet – *Tere mere milan ki ye raina.*' Of course! The song we had sung together at the previous Sargam get-together.

Ashok began playing the introductory notes of the song. Tushar joined him on *tabla*.

I stood up and walked towards Naina who was holding out the mike. Ravi followed.

This time, I had no difficulty finding my voice. I felt more confident about singing in front of a crowd, and having Ravi beside me made things easier.

Once again, the room fell silent as we began singing.

As I sang, I looked up at my husband. He was reading the lyrics. I felt a mix of emotions surge through me. Delighted that he was beside me and not globetrotting in some distant corner of the world, but disappointed that things hadn't really improved in our marriage. He was still obsessed with his career. Our time together was always interrupted by a call he had forgotten to make or emails he had to read. Above all else, as I looked at his profile, at the tiny red mark on the tip of his chin where he had cut himself while shaving this morning, I felt a deep, overwhelming sadness. All my life I had dreamt of a knight in shining armour, who would sweep me off of my feet and carry me in his arms into the sunset. He would be passionate, debonair and so completely obsessed with me that he would have little time for the rest of the world. He would wake up every morning with my name on his lips and go to bed each night dreaming of me. But things had turned out differently.

The loud clapping startled me. I hadn't realised we had finished singing.

Mumma came up to me and patted my shoulder, 'you sang beautifully, Anjali. What a lovely voice you have!'

I looked at her in surprise. What a strange woman she was. She never lost an opportunity to criticise me. And yet, she had just paid me a lovely compliment.

'Thank you, Mumma.'

After dinner, Vibha, Naina and I helped Sonali clear up and load the dishwasher. It was nearly 11.30 pm by the time everyone left.

6th October

I missed hearing the alarm this morning. The warm, piercing rays of the sun crept through cracks in the venetian blinds and woke me up. I remembered with a start that today was my interview with Ellis World Travels. I had applied for the role as soon as I had seen the ad in the paper a few days ago, and heard back from a lady called Kimberley practically straight away. We had fixed the interview for 8.30 am today.

'Oh my God. It's seven o'clock!' I screamed on looking at the bedside clock, giving Ravi the fright of his life. He had been snoring beside me and shot up in bed, looking confused and disoriented.

'My goodness, Anjali. Do you have to scream like that? You nearly gave me a heart attack!' he yelled back, still recovering from the shock.

I was staring at the clock. If I didn't take the 7.30 train, I was going to be dreadfully late. The travel agency was a ten-minute walk from the station and I had to factor in the time to buy a ticket.

Fortunately, thanks to Ravi's constant demands to get my act together, I had become more organised. Last night, I had ironed my clothes for the interview and hung them up in the cupboard. I had also polished my black shoes and they stood, glossy and clean, near the main door.

I grabbed my towel and rushed to the bathroom only to find it locked. Mumma had chosen today of all days to have her shower first thing in the morning. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.

I stood outside, wondering what to do. I had no clue how long ago she had gone in or how much longer she would be. Finally, out of sheer desperation, I knocked loudly on the door.

'Mumma. Mumma? I'm sorry, but can you please come out soon? I have to leave in fifteen minutes. I have an interview.'

Mumma muttered to herself. '*Kay ga bai* (goodness me!), I can't even have my bath in peace.'

I ran back to the bedroom. 'Ravi, will you drop me to the station?'

He looked at the clock. 'Yes, I guess I'll have to. You won't make it, otherwise.'

I jumped into the shower, which now was empty, thank heavens, and prayed hard that I would reach my interview on time. It was my escape ticket from a dead-end job. I could not afford to stuff things up.



It was 8.40 am by the time I arrived at the travel agency. I pushed open the narrow glass door and walked in. There was no one in sight. On an ornate, antique desk stood a brass bell and a placard that said '*If desk is unattended, please ring the bell*'. I rang the bell.

After about thirty seconds, a middle-aged lady walked out. She had the curliest hair I had ever seen, a creased, kind face and eyebrows that were raised in a look of perennial surprise.

'Hello?' she said.

'Hello', I replied. 'My name is Anjali. Anjali Jathar. I'm here for the interview.'

'Oh, of course. With Jake Ellis. Umm ... you are a bit late.' She looked pointedly at a slim and elegant silver-toned watch on her wrist.

'I'm really sorry.'

'Look, Jake is interviewing another candidate. She arrived early and since you weren't here anyway, we decided to send her in first. Please sit down,' she said, pointing at a beige, leather sofa, 'and I will see if Jake can interview you next. Can I bring you a glass of water?'

'Thank you', I said.

While I waited and sipped the iced water, I looked around. The travel agency was obviously named after Jake Ellis, which meant I was going to be interviewed by none other than the Big Boss. On the walls, were blown-up pictures of the Statue of Liberty, Trevi Fountain, the Taj Mahal, Leaning Tower of Pisa and the Eiffel Tower. At the front of the foyer stood tall wooden shelves stacked with thin brochures about different destinations. It all looked very exciting. I couldn't wait to be offered a job here.

Fifteen minutes passed and the lady's head popped out around the door. 'Okay. You can come in now. Jake is waiting for you.'

Jake Ellis had his back to me and was looking out the window when I knocked on the door to his office. I saw a tall man, about 5`11 (roughly the same height as Ravi), wearing a charcoal grey suit. He had a mop of unruly blonde hair that skimmed the top of his collar and he stood with his hands in his pockets, legs slightly apart, and hummed a tune.

'Excuse me', I said, feeling nervous. He looked so posh. I didn't want him to ever turn around. But he did. And I looked into a pair of twinkling ice blue eyes.

'Anjeelee?' he said, in a deep and gravelly voice. 'Anjeelee Jatarr?' He gave a lopsided grin. I noticed that his tie was crooked and his suit slightly crumpled.

Despite my nervousness, I smiled at his pronunciation. He made my name sound melodious and almost poetic. He grinned at me. 'I'm probably saying it all wrong, aren't I?'

'No, no. It's okay. Yes, I'm Anjali Jathar. I'm very sorry for arriving late.'

'No worries.'

The interview lasted for twenty minutes.

Jake went out of his way to make me feel comfortable. Even asked me if I would like a cup of tea or coffee before we began the interview. We went through a long list of questions, which he had written on a notepad. He asked me about my education, my work experience in Australia, what skills I could contribute to the company and where I saw myself five years from now.

'And what brought you to Australia in the first place?' he asked, leaning backwards in his swivelling chair, his hands clasped behind his head.

'I got married and came here. My husband is an Australian citizen.'

'I see. And do you like it here? It's very different from India.'

'Oh yes, it's very different. But I like it. I'm getting used to it.'

'Which part of India are you from?'

'Mumbai.'

'Ah yes. It used to be called Bombay, right?'

'Yes', I smiled. 'Have you ever been to India?'

'Yes, a few times. It's one of my favourite countries in the world. My best friend is Indian. Tuhroon Tuhnejah.' (I figured out he must mean Tarun Taneja).

'I see.'

'I can even speak a bit of Hindi', he laughed. 'Toomaarra naam kiya hai? (What is your name?) Meira naam Jake hai (my name is Jake).'

I wanted to giggle.

'You must teach me more words. I love speaking Indian.'

It's strange how most westerners think 'Indian' is a language. They are always amazed to learn that in India, going from one state to the next means not only a different language, but a completely different set of cultural, food and dressing habits. Not quite the same as going from NSW to Victoria.

And then it hit me. He said I should teach him more words. Did that mean I had the job?

He must have guessed my thoughts, because he leaned forward and wrote something on the notepad. 'I have one last question for you, Anjeelee.' His blue eyes twinkled merrily and I was startled to find myself thinking how easy it was to get lost in them.

I waited.

The question, when it came, was flippant and casual and I wondered if there had been any point in asking it at all.

'If you were a cereal bowl, Anjeelee, what colour would you be?'

I wondered if I had heard him right. 'I beg your pardon?' I asked, stalling for time.

He repeated the question and looked at me, one eyebrow raised, mouth twitching.

'Umm ... a cereal bowl?'

Jake nodded.

'I ... I ... wouldn't be any one colour, Mr Ellis. That would only limit me and my potential. I would be a host of colours. Then I could explore the various facets of my personality.'

He smiled. 'Nice one, Anjeelee. Nice one. Thanks for your time. We'll be in touch with you by this evening.'

I stood up and we shook hands. Just as I was about to turn and leave the office, his voice stopped me. 'Oh, and Anjeelee, one other thing before you go.'

I turned and looked at him.

'Please call me Jake.' He winked and grinned. There were laugh lines on either side of his lips.

I nodded and could think of nothing to say.

'Have a good day', he added. I turned on my heels and left.

The memory of the interview stayed with me for the rest of the day.



Kimberley, the lady who had greeted me at reception, called me later this evening to say I had got the job at Ellis World Travels and wanted to find out if I could start in four weeks' time?

Since four weeks was the notice period at my current job, I agreed readily and she said, 'Congratulations. We will be in touch soon about contracts and stuff. Welcome to the team!'

I walked on air for the rest of the evening.

Mumma and Papa were the first to know about my good news, since Ravi was not yet home.

'Congrats, Anju *beta*. We are very happy for you', said Papa.

'Will it be better salary than your present job?' asked Mumma.

I was too happy to be annoyed with Mumma's question.

'Yes, a little better. Not much. But certainly better.'

Ravi looked excited when I finally told him. 'That's great. We must celebrate by going out to dinner over the weekend.'

Wait, not this weekend. I have some urgent work to complete. Maybe next.'

I smiled happily. I doubted very much the dinner would happen sometime soon, considering how busy Ravi always was, even on weekends. But the thought was lovely and I clung to it.

Mumma prepared semolina *halwa* just before we sat down for dinner and looked a little annoyed when I told her there was no saffron in the house.

'There's always something missing. Did you buy the tamarind like I told you the other day? Next time, make a list before you go shopping. You must keep saffron in the house. It comes in handy when making sweet dishes.'

She spooned the *halwa* into *katoris* and asked me to hand them around.

'Yummy', said Ravi, taking a large mouthful. 'No one makes this like you do, Mumma. How come *halwa* all of a sudden?'

'Anjali got a new job. Who knows when your celebration dinner will happen? We can at least celebrate with *halwa*. It would have tasted a lot better if Anjali had remembered to keep saffron. Where do working women nowadays have time to keep the kitchen properly stocked? In my time ...' and she was off.

Papa and I smiled at each other.

For the first time, I felt a tug of genuine affection for Mumma.

8th October

I have been practising talking the Aussie way. Not with huge success, but at least it's a start.

They say so many words differently from the way we say them in India. The first few times I said 'buffet', (pronounced *boofey* in India), I got a few puzzled stares. 'Oh, you mean *buff-ai*.'

Ravi urges me constantly to use the ways and mannerisms of the locals so that I don't stand out as a foreigner.

This morning, out of the blue, he announced that he was taking me out to dinner with his office workmates. 'They wonder if you actually exist since no one has ever met you. So I thought maybe I could introduce you to them at a dinner. I have booked a table at an Italian restaurant for this evening at 7 pm. Be ready by the time I come home. We will be leaving straightaway.'

I was so excited at the thought of going somewhere alone with Ravi, instead of having Mumma and Papa trailing behind, that I hummed and sang all day long, even while dusting and mopping.

'*Kay ga, Anjali*, (What's going on, Anjali,) very happy today!' said Mumma, watching me as I scrubbed the saucepans, which had stubborn stains of oil.

I smiled at her and continued scrubbing. I was going out with my husband tonight! Yay! Not even Mumma's usual snide remarks could put a dampener on my mood.

At around 5 pm it suddenly hit me that I hadn't checked with Ravi in the morning about what to wear. Was it to be a formal outfit? Or jeans and t-shirt? Or something in between? Oh God, he was going to kill me if I made the wrong choice. I considered calling him at the office, but that thought lasted only half a second before I squashed it. Ravi hates being called at work and had warned me often that unless it was an emergency, I was not to disturb him. To me, not knowing what to wear to a dinner with strangers definitely belonged to the emergency category. But I think Ravi had meant things like dying of food poisoning or a stroke or a heart

attack.

Desperate not to make a fool of myself, I looked up Vibha's office number in my little black diary and called her. She would know the answers to all the world's fashion problems.

'Well, if you're meeting Ravi's colleagues for the first time, I doubt it would be a casual setting', she said in her low, husky voice. I often wondered if Vibha smoked. She had the scratchy, gravelly tone mostly associated with smokers. 'Hmm ... let me think. I wouldn't go too formal. Not too casual either. Do you have, maybe, a long, tight skirt? And a loose flowing top? And some semi-high heels, a thick, chunky necklace ... not too long, the necklace I mean. It should reach just above your rib cage. And I wouldn't wear dangling earrings. Delicate studs, maybe.'

I felt dizzy. Vibha probably owned a million dresses and accessories. But I was hardly sailing in the same luxury boat.

'Yes. Thank you, Vibha. You've been a great help. So sorry to have bothered you at the office.'

Vibha waved away my apology, 'any time, my dear. I'm only a phone call away. Glad I could help. Oh, and Anjali, I have a day off work tomorrow. I wasn't going to do much originally. But now I'm thinking, why don't we catch up for coffee?'

I readily agreed. It was my day off too and I've been looking forward to getting to know Vibha better. We chatted for a few more minutes before hanging up.

I ran into the bedroom and began sorting through all my outfits. My cupboard was hardly user friendly. Dresses were mixed with trousers and some long sleeve tops were entangled with each other into a tight knot. It was a depressing sight. I finally found a navy blue skirt that I had forgotten all about and a white top, which would need at least half an hour of ironing but seemed suitable for the occasion.

When the bell rang at 6.30 pm, Mumma hurried to open the door. I heard

Ravi's voice as soon as he walked in. 'Where is Anjali? Is she ready? We have to leave for dinner in fifteen minutes.'

'She has been in her room for the last one hour. I can only hope she is ready by now', I heard Mumma say in her butter-wouldn't-melt-in-my-mouth tone. It was easy for her to talk. She wasn't the one going out fine dining with a bunch of strangers and a perfectionist husband for the first time in her life.

Before Ravi could respond, I walked into the living room.

Ravi stopped talking mid-sentence. He looked me up and down, taking in the skirt, top, chunky necklace and black sandals.

'That outfit looks lovely on you, Anjali. Good girl. Smart choice!'

I glowed on hearing his praise.

'Make me a cup of tea, Anjali, while I get ready. We will leave in fifteen.'

As I prepared Ravi's tea, I thought about the evening ahead. I felt wary but also excited. I had chosen the right outfit, which was a good start. Ravi seemed to be in a good mood and was obviously looking forward to the evening, judging by all the humming and whistling I could hear from the bedroom. I smiled to myself as I squeezed the tea bag, rolled it around the spoon to prevent it dripping and tossed it into the bin. It was going to be a great evening. I could feel it in my bones.



The restaurant turned out to be a stylish, expensive looking/sounding/smelling one with an old world charm and occasional rustic touches. The floor had big black and white tiles, which grabbed your attention as soon as you walked in and made the room look deceptively spacious. At the entrance, a square board with a golden border stood propped on top of a tiny round table. On the board was written: *'Please wait to be seated'*. I looked around, my eyes large as

saucers, as I took in the décor, the well-dressed patrons and occasional glimpses of chefs in white aprons and tall white hats, moving deftly around each other in the kitchen.

A young girl, dressed in black, hurried towards us.

Ravi smiled at her. 'We have a booking for 7 pm. Under the name "Ravi".'

She peered into the big diary that lay open on the round table, sliding her pen smoothly down the page until she found what she was looking for.

'Aha! Yes. Table for five. Please follow me. This way.'

All the tables were covered with snow-white tablecloths. Wicker chairs with thick arm rests and a tiny, rustic looking lantern in the centre of the table added to the sense of effortless elegance.

Ravi told me to sit in one corner and then he moved around and sat opposite me. He opened one of the large menus placed before us and got engrossed in reading it. I picked up one too. In the car, Ravi had brought me up to speed on who was joining us at the dinner and what their roles were in his office. Paul Smith was the Big Boss, the ogre who had been dangling the carrot of promotion in front of Ravi for the past year. Ben Rogers was a consultant, just like Ravi, only couple of rungs higher up on the corporate ladder. Paul was bringing his wife Siobhan (pronounced *Shi-von*) so that she and I could keep each other company.

I felt out of my depth. This kind of ambience and setting was completely foreign to me.

Ravi scraped back his chair and stood up.

A beautifully groomed couple stood smiling down at us.

Introductions were made. 'Paul, Siobhan, this is my wife Anjali', said Ravi with a smile. Siobhan held out her hand and leaned forward towards me. I wondered if she wanted to maybe whisper something in

my ear and I cocked my head sideways, thinking it strange that she was being so familiar in the very first meeting. For a few seconds, Siobhan and I both looked confused. She then lightly kissed the air somewhere around my cheek and mumbled, 'glad to meet you'. How was I to know that Siobhan was going to greet me with a kiss?

Feeling flustered, I sat down and observed Siobhan covertly from the corner of my eye. She opened the fan shaped cloth serviette and laid it neatly over her lap. I did the same.

Just then, Ben Rogers arrived. He was probably in his early fifties and had a round florid face and a loud laugh. He looked delighted to see me and grasped my right hand in both his and spoke in exaggerated slow tones, dragging out each word.

'He-llo ... Anjeelee ... how ... are ... you? Are ... you ... enjoying ... Australia?'

I wondered why he was talking in this manner until I had a sudden brainwave. Did he possibly think that having arrived recently from India, I could not speak proper English, or heaven forbid, understand it? I had a sudden urge to giggle, which I quickly stifled.

'I'm fine. Yes, I'm enjoying Australia', I said trying to sound brisk and confident.

Soon everyone got busy reading the menus. There was a separate one for drinks and they debated whether to have white wine or red. I was mainly quiet and whenever Paul, Siobhan or Ben turned around to include me in the conversation, I smiled politely, keeping my replies short and simple. I was asked if I liked pizza or preferred pasta. After much discussion around the table, everyone finally decided on a bit of everything.

Yummy smelling garlic bread was brought to the table in tiny round baskets. The waiter placed a glass of chilled Coke in front of me. I was the only one at the table not having alcohol and I watched Siobhan take delicate sips of her wine, dabbing her lips with the serviette each time. The pizza arrived first. A huge platter filled with ten big slices. It was

gourmet vegetarian, with brinjal, zucchini, onions and half a dozen other vegetables.

'This looks very nice. Brinjal is my favourite', I said, smiling at Siobhan.

She looked puzzled and stared hard at the slice she had placed in her plate. 'What's brinjal?' she asked, turning her head to include Ravi in the question.

It was my turn to look puzzled.

'She means eggplant', said Ravi, with an apologetic grin. 'It's called brinjal in India.'

'I see', Siobhan looked impressed with this crash course in Indian vegetables.

I picked up my slice of pizza with both hands (it was too soft and squishy to pick up with one hand alone) and took a huge bite. It tasted delicious. Just as I was about to take my second mouthful, I caught Ravi's eye. He was glaring at me. I blinked and looked around the table. Had I started eating before everyone else? No. That was not the case. Suddenly it hit me. Ravi's glare had nothing to do with me eating pizza and everything to do with *how* I was eating it. Everyone, including my husband, was cutting the pizza slice expertly with a knife and fork unlike me who was wolfing it down as though I had just returned to the land of bounty after a prolonged famine.

It was too late to switch eating habits. And anyway, I have no clue how to eat with knife and fork. All my life I have either eaten by hand or at the most, with a spoon when we're in the mood for a bit of style.

By the time the pasta was brought to us in steaming, oval platters, I was so frightened of making the wrong move that I could hardly participate in the conversation.

Paul and Siobhan went out of their way to make me feel comfortable, asking me questions about my hometown, what I had studied and how it

felt to come to a new country for the first time. Although I was better able to understand the Aussie accent thanks to my telemarketing experience, I am still uncomfortable in the presence of foreigners. I decided that the best way to avoid making a faux pas or saying something politically incorrect was to keep my communication to a bare minimum. And so, I mostly gave one-word answers whenever I was asked a question.

The evening ended around 10 pm. A sense of awkwardness hung around the air. I could feel it hadn't been the grand success I had envisioned it to be. Ravi looked deflated, Ben seemed bored and Paul and Siobhan had been trying to stifle yawns right through dinner. We all shook hands and said how great the food had been. Paul and Ben thumped Ravi on the back and said, 'see you at the office, mate.' The evening was over.

Ravi was silent during the drive back home. I stared out of the window at the inky darkness and missed India with a longing so fierce that I felt tears prick my eyelashes. I was sick and tired of being 'the foreigner'. Fed up of looking, sounding and being different. I wanted to be around people who looked like me and who understood every word I spoke. Even at work, I was constantly quizzed about my country and culture. People asked if elephants and camels strolled on the streets. Why did women wear the *bindi*? What did it signify? Can you explain the Indian head nod? What were Indians trying to say when they did that strange head rotation? Was it a yes or a no? You haven't read the *Kamasutra*? But you're Indian, aren't you? Did everyone in India speak *Hindu*? This last question always annoys me the most. No! Hindu is a religion, a way of life. *Hindi* is the language.

'I liked your colleagues', I said, timidly.

'Yes, they're nice', Ravi said, sounding tired. He switched on the radio and turned up the volume. I took the hint and was silent for the rest of the drive.

9th October

Vibha and I met up at 11am today. The coffee shop didn't have many customers and we chose a table in the corner.

We both asked for iced coffees and Vibha also ordered a chicken and leek pie for herself. 'I haven't had breakfast and I'm starving.' She looked stylish in beige pants and a dark brown turtleneck jumper.

As we chatted, I couldn't help thinking how different Vibha was to Naina. She was more interested in finding out about my interests and hobbies than talking about herself. Despite being single, she didn't talk about men or falling in love or any of the topics Naina is normally obsessed with. It was quite a pleasant change. After yesterday's dinner fiasco, it felt good to be with someone as relaxed and unassuming as Vibha.

'You have known Ravi for a long time, haven't you?' I asked her. 'Much longer than the rest of the Sargam group has known him?'

'Yes', she smiled. 'My cousin Rahul was one of his best friends at university. Rahul used to have the biggest, loudest, absolute *hungama* parties at his place in those days. I was always invited. And so was Ravi, of course. I gradually became part of their uni group and we went everywhere together.'

Wow. So, if Vibha had known Ravi since his university days, chances are she knew—

'I met Anne several times', she said suddenly and I nearly jumped out of my skin. It had been exactly what I was thinking.

'Anne?' I said, dazed. How typical of Vibha not to skirt the issue and come straight to the point. No one else from the Sargam group had ever mentioned Ravi's ex-wife. Probably terrified of how I would react to any mention of my predecessor. But Vibha was different.

'Yes. His previous wife. Nice girl.'

I liked it that Vibha never felt the need to walk on eggshells around

people. It would have been easy for her to say a few nasty things about Anne merely to remain in my good books. But I could tell she was someone who wouldn't criticise others just to please you or win favours.

'Was she?' I asked, carefully.

'Yes. I liked her a lot. She used to make me laugh. She adored everything to do with India and even insisted I buy her a *saree* when I went back to Delhi for a holiday. I still remember the colour. It was pale pink with a silver border and had little sequins all over it. She looked lovely when she wore it for Ravi's birthday party. And once — ' She stopped suddenly, mid-sentence.

'Are you okay talking about all this, Anjali?' she asked, looking concerned. 'I won't if it upsets you.'

'I am not upset in the least', I rushed to assure her. 'I always knew Ravi had been married before. It was hardly a secret. And, you will not believe this, but I have met Anne. Quite a few times. We're actually good friends.'

'What? No way! You've got to be kidding!'

'It's true. We met at yoga and hit it off from day one. I couldn't believe it at first either.'

'Wow. How cool is that!' Vibha grinned and shook her head as though amazed at such a miracle. 'You're very broad-minded, Anjali. Fancy being friends with your husband's ex-wife!'

I smiled at her. 'Since you knew Anne before, I'm sure you know how easy it is to like her. She has no hang ups. What you see is what you get.'

'True', said Vibha.

We talked for a long time. She waved away questions about her personal life by saying 'oh, let's not talk about me. I lead such a boring life. Work, work and more work.' I wondered why she was always so reluctant to

talk about herself. Perhaps she is hiding some deep, dark secret that she doesn't want anyone to find out. Our friendship is still too new for me to ask personal questions. Someday, maybe, Vibha will confide in me. Someday, when she trusts me enough to tell me what exactly she is hiding.

16th October

A chance remark by Naina gave me my first inkling of what might have gone wrong between Ravi and Anne.

Naina had come over and we were poring over the *Sydney Morning Herald* looking at job ads this afternoon. She was bored with her part-time, customer service role at the bank and was looking for greener pastures.

'How are you getting along with Aunty and Uncle?' she asked suddenly.

Fortunately, my in-laws were out all day on a cruise. It was organised through the local community centre, and Ravi had booked their tickets.

'I'm getting along alright. I work three days so that gives me a chance to get out of the house.'

'How long are they here for?'

'Well, it was to be for 3 months. But Ravi has been considering extending their stay by another 3 months.'

'Thank goodness Ashok's parents only make short trips. I would go crazy if they stayed that long. Do they drive you mad?'

I shrugged. I don't like talking about Ravi's parents to my friends. It seems disloyal.

'Anyway, I was thinking of going to a movie on Wednesday. I have two complimentary tickets. Wanna come?'

'I'd love to. But let me first ask Ravi.'

'What's there to *ask* Ravi? If you are free, just tell him that you are going out with me. What's the big deal?'

'Naina, it doesn't work that way. Plus I have Mumma and Papa staying with us. I need to first find out if it's okay. Maybe they have other plans.'

'It's a weekday. I'm sure there are no other plans. Does Ravi ask you before making plans with his colleagues? Every time he comes home late, does he first ask for your approval?' Naina never wasted an opportunity to hint at Ravi's unattractive traits. Why would she be against him? Ashok seems very fond of Ravi.

'You don't like Ravi, do you?' I asked.

She hesitated, 'I didn't say that.'

'You didn't. But I can tell.'

'Don't feel bad if I tell you something, okay? Ever since I heard about what happened with his ex-wife, I kind of lost some respect for him. It wasn't very nice of him. I'm sorry if that annoys you. But it's a fact.'

My heart began pounding. Ravi had never talked about why his previous marriage ended.

'What do you mean?'

'You don't know?' Naina looked aghast.

I shook my head.

'This is awkward. Forget I said anything. Let's change the topic.'

How could I forget it? It was now vital that I got to the heart of the matter. 'No, Naina. Don't do this to me. Please tell me. What happened with his ex-wife?'

'You will hate me if I tell you.'

'Why would I hate you? We are friends. Tell me.'

She hesitated, then cleared her throat. 'I heard he married her for her passport. So that he could get Australian citizenship.'

'Oh.'

'Then dumped her once he got what he wanted. How cruel is that?'

I stared at her for a long moment. This was terrible. How could Ravi have done something like that? Yes, he is a workaholic and a perfectionist. But his heart is in the right place. How could a man with such strong principles about right and wrong have done such a mean thing? I thought of Anne, her smiling face, her subtle but good-natured references to Ravi and felt sorry for her.

Naina looked concerned and leaned forward to hold my hand. 'I'm sorry, Anju darling. This must be a terrible shock for you.'

'It is.'

'Don't tell him I told you. I shouldn't have said anything. But I thought you knew.'

I shook my head and pushed aside the newspaper. Naina must have noticed the shift in my mood, for she collected her bag and stood up.

'I think I should go now. Will you be alright? Promise me you won't sit and mull over it. It's all water under the bridge.'

After she left, I went out to the balcony and stood, lost in thought, for a long time. Everything made sense. And yet nothing made sense. I thought about Ravi and Anne. What must their marriage have been like? Had Anne ultimately found out the true reason why Ravi had married her? Had they fought about it? Had he denied it? A million thoughts raced through my mind. Only when the sky turned a soft pink and the sun dipped behind the horizon, did I walk back in to start preparing

dinner.

19th October

Daniela had been devastated when she learned I had handed in my resignation.

'Nooooo!' she wailed and looked crestfallen. 'Why did you do that? Don't you love me anymore?'

I laughed. Daniela is always dramatic. 'I found another job. It's at a travel agency in the city called Ellis World Travels.'

'Wow. I'm so jealous. Going up in life, eh, Angie?' she cocked her head and winked at me.

This morning she gave me her own good news. 'I have something to tell you too,' she said, smiling happily.

Daniela had finally got engaged to her long-standing, commitment-phobic boyfriend who popped the question to her over the weekend. She waved her left hand in front of me and a slim, diamond engagement ring caught my eye.

'Oh my God, Daniela. It's so pretty!' I said.

'Yes. It cost an arm and a leg, too. But like I said to Matt, it's not like I'm going to get engaged all the time.'

'I should hope not', I laughed, giving her a tight hug. I am so happy for Daniela. She had almost given up hope of Matt ever proposing. Whenever she broached the topic, subtly at first and then blatantly, he had always said he was not ready.

'When's the big day? Do I get invited?' I asked. It was all very exciting. I have never been to an Australian wedding. Even though Daniela is Polish, Matt is a true-blue Aussie, so the wedding will certainly have

several Aussie elements.

'We haven't fixed the date yet and *of course* you are invited', said Daniela. 'But my friends and I will plan a hen's night before the wedding and you simply *must* come.'

'What's a hen's night?' I asked, intrigued.

'You don't know what a hen's night is?' Daniela squealed. 'Oh Angie! It's a kind of bachelorette party. A party thrown before a woman gets married. A last hurrah before she buckles down to a life of anonymity and drudgery.' This image was so far from what Daniela would ever be that I had to laugh.

I was excited. Loads of good things were finally happening in my life. A new job in a trendy office. A hen's night to look forward to. The only dampener is Ravi's news that he will be travelling again in a few weeks. This time, he's going to Hong Kong for a month.

28th October

I've been careful not to go to Naina's place ever since I saw her and the mystery man at Hornsby Shopping Centre a few weeks ago. I could not risk bumping into Ashok. It would be so awkward, knowing as I now did, what his wife was up to.

As luck would have it, I bumped into Ashok this morning at the railway station on my way to work. It was a very cold morning and I was staring at my feet, watching my breath form a tiny, shapeless cloud in the air when I noticed another pair of legs opposite me. The person was wearing black trousers and the shoes looked gleaming and polished. I looked up slowly and found myself locking eyes with none other than Ashok Kapur.

It was a terrible shock. He was the last person I would have expected to bump into. Ashok is famous in our group for hating Sydney trains. He often complains about how they are never on time. That is why he drives

to work. 'Ashok!' I said, and my heartbeats quickened. I didn't like the idea of being alone with him. Who knew what can of worms would be opened? 'Hi. What are you doing here?'

'Exactly what you are doing, I hope. Waiting for my train.' He didn't smile.

'But you never take the train. Don't you always drive to the office?'

'My car's in servicing. Will get it back by this evening.'

'Oh, I see.' I stared at him for a few seconds and then looked uncomfortably away.

'Anjali,' he began. I winced. 'I need to talk to you. There's something I have been meaning to ask you for a long time. Can you afford to go a bit late to work today? We could have a coffee maybe. There's a coffee shop just behind the station.'

I hesitated. I didn't like the idea of going with him for a coffee. What if Mumma or Papa visited the fruit shop near the station, which they often did in the mornings? They wouldn't be too impressed to see their daughter-in-law merrily having coffee with her friend's husband when she should have been at work. I knew, though, that it was finally time to have 'the chat' with Ashok. I could not run away forever.

'I can go a bit late, Ashok', I said, smiling nervously. 'But let's just talk here instead of going to the coffee shop. See that bench there? We could sit there. It's away from the crowd and less noisy.'

He agreed.

We walked slowly to the bench, neither of us saying a word.

As we sat down, Ashok looked at me. A direct, honest, piercing gaze. I could not meet his eyes.

'Anjali, I can tell something is wrong. You are not your usual self.' As soon as the words left his mouth, I felt crushed and vulnerable. Up until

then, I had been pretending to myself that I could go through the rest of my life without ever having a confrontation with Ashok. People have lived with secrets that go to the grave with them, after all. It was hardly a rule that every secret should be revealed over time.

'Why do you say that, Ashok?' I asked, stalling for time.

'Why do I say that?' he said, and I was hurt by the sneer in his voice. Ashok had never come across as the sneering type. 'Because you are acting strange. I had thought we had got along well when we first met. But the other day, at the Sargam night, you didn't say much. You went out of your way to make sure we were never in a room by ourselves. Stop pretending, Anjali. Please.'

I had no idea how to respond. Should I blurt out that his wife was about to have an affair? Or should I be vague and skirt the issue? With whom did my allegiance lie? Naina or Ashok? Who deserved my loyalty more? Should I keep one friend's secret or betray another friend's trust? I was caught between a rock and a hard place. No matter what I decided, I was going to end up hurting someone. Once I realised that hurt and betrayal were a given and that there was no way out, it was easier to make up my mind.

'It's ... it's about Naina', I began, terrified about what I was going to unleash on a friend's marriage.

'Yes. I figured that out. Who else can it be about?' He spoke gently and I saw glimpses of the old Ashok. Gone was the sneer. In its place was a tired grimace, which passed for a smile.

'I ... I ... I'm sorry, Ashok. But I don't know how to say this.'

He looked at me for a long moment. 'Let me make this easy for you, Anjali', he said finally with a heavy sigh. 'You saw her with someone. Would that be right?'

I looked at him in amazement. Did he know? What did he mean? But how could he know?

'Ye-es', I drew the word out hesitantly.

'Did you recognise him or was he a stranger?' he asked. Did it matter? Would it be more tolerable if she were having an affair with someone he knew? Would it be worse if it were the other way around?

'I didn't recognise him', I said.

'Good. And you've been wondering if she is having an affair with him. Correct?'

I didn't like to tell him that I was hardly wondering. His wife had practically confessed to me.

'Something like that. Yes.'

'Anjali, you're a good friend. Both, to my wife and me. You have known Naina for a few months. I have known her much longer. There's something you need to know about her.' He paused. Please God, please don't let him tell me they have an open marriage. I could bear a lot of things, but I don't think I could bear it if he told me that.

'I married Naina when she had just turned twenty-one, fresh out of college. She had been the Rose Queen through all five years of junior and senior college. Boys were crazy about her and wrote her name in blood. She had the world literally at her feet.' Ashok's eyes turned misty. I listened in silence. 'Naina had no time for any of her lovelorn suitors. She had been going around with a man, many years her senior, for over five years, ever since she was sixteen.'

I looked up at this. How could he be so blasé about his wife's ex-lover?

'Don't look so surprised, Anjali. It was Naina who told me all this. She never hid her past.'

I nodded, waiting for him to continue.

'She had had her heart set on marrying him even though they had never talked marriage or lifelong commitment. One day, when she was in her

fourth year B.A., he suddenly announced his engagement. He was going to marry the only daughter of an industrialist family friend and move permanently to San Francisco. His fiancée was a plain woman, couple of years older than him. Naina was convinced he was marrying her for her father's money and formed a tight little grudge in her heart against him, which I think she still carries to this day. She and I met at a mutual friend's wedding, a few months after her ex-boyfriend married and left India. I fell in love with her at first sight and proposed shortly after. She was still grieving her lost love and told me so in no uncertain terms.'

'And what did you say to her?' I asked, smiling at him. 'That you would be a better husband?'

He smiled and looked sad at the same time. 'I told her I would shower so much love and tenderness on her that she would forget one day that she had ever loved him.'

'She obviously took you at your word, Ashok.'

'Yes, she didn't need much cajoling. I knew she was marrying me on the rebound. It was her way of telling the world and him that she wasn't wasting away and dying of a broken heart. But I think she never got over the rejection. Years of me telling her every single day how much she means to me and how much in love with her I am have not convinced her that she is desirable and beautiful. Which brings me to the main thing I was going to tell you, Anjali.'

We looked at each other, secure in the knowledge that our friendship was back on an even keel.

'She still feels the need to constantly be reassured that she is an attractive woman. I have learned to turn a blind eye to her peccadilloes. Her minor flirtations are harmless. She will never leave me. Do you know why?' he asked, leaning towards me.

I raised an eyebrow in a silent question.

'Because she needs me more than she will admit. I'll always be there for

her no matter what she does and she knows it. Even a foolish woman can sense true love when it comes to her. And Naina was never foolish.'

As I sat in the train later, finally on my way to work, I pondered over the conversation with Ashok. I couldn't help but think what a sad group of friends we all were. Here I was, pining for the love of a man who was obsessed with his career and had no time for his wife or the little joys of life. Then there was Naina who had the eternal devotion of her husband and yet found herself haunted by the memory of an old rejection. And of course, poor Sonali, tortured by her inability to bear a child. Inevitably, I thought of Anne. Had she too suffered? What could be worse than realising somewhere along the way that you had never been truly loved and that your marriage was a mere farce? That you were little more than a meal ticket?

I leaned my head against the window and shut my eyes. The realisation that I was not alone in my turmoil was cold comfort indeed. My heart ached, not just for myself, but for all my friends who were silently locked in their own battles.

2nd November

I started at Ellis World Travels today, and by the end of the day, I had worked out three very important things.

- A. Lunch breaks were flexible and you could take your break at any time during the day.
- B. The customer was ALWAYS right; and
- C. Every woman who worked there had a crush on Jake Ellis.

For point number 'C', I exclude, of course, the lovely Kimberley whom I had met before my interview. She is old enough to be Jake's mother and I think is well past caring how wicked he looks when he flashes his dimpled smile or turns on the smooth charm that has all the rest of the female staff simpering in no time.

There are three women and two men who have the job title of 'Travel Consultant'. Kimberley is 'the Office Manager', and she does everything from managing accounts to taking the mail to the post office.

Jake arrived well past lunchtime. He was wearing a black business suit, a pale pink shirt and a tie that again looked awry, as though he couldn't be bothered pushing it back into place.

'The new girl starts today, right?' was the first thing he said as he walked in, glancing around the room. I was in the little hidden corner at the back of the room, grabbing a handful of display brochures and he didn't see me.

'Yes she is', said Kimberley and called out to me. 'Anjeelee, come say hello to the Boss.'

I came out into the main office and he grinned on seeing me. 'Welcome aboard, Anjeelee. How does it feel to be working for the best company in the world?' He was leaning against Kate's desk and he winked at her as he asked me the question. She blushed, simpered and pushed back an imaginary curl from her forehead.

'It feels good, thank you.'

'Great. It's the one thing on which we all agree. Right, team?' he looked at everyone and everyone beamed back at him.

He walked towards me. 'Has anyone begun training you yet?'

'Yes. Kimberley has been very kind. She showed me where everything is kept and where I can make tea or coffee. We are going to start some formal training in a bit.'

'That sounds good', he smiled and I saw tiny creases form in his right cheek. There was a light scar over his left eyebrow, which I hadn't noticed at the interview. I wondered what had caused it.

'Oh, and one other thing. Anjeelee is a great name, but do you have a

nickname maybe? Something shorter? Can I call you Anne?'

No, you cannot call me Anne. That is my husband's ex-wife. Of course, I didn't say that to him.

'Well, everyone at my old job called me Angie', I offered.

'Angie. Perfect. You look like an Angie anyway. Welcome again, Angie. We are all excited to have you as part of our team. See you later. I'm off to bed.'

I was confused. He was going home to sleep? He had only just walked in.

'Just kidding, Angie. Just kidding. No rest for the wicked, I'm afraid.' He winked at me and disappeared into his office, the same one where he had interviewed me only a month ago.

When he winked like that and grinned like that, crinkling up his ice blue eyes, I could see why every girl in the office had a crush on him. Jake Ellis is a handsome devil and I have a feeling he knows it.

6th November

'We say "brolly" for umbrella, "arvo" for afternoon and "ta" for thank you. We always respond in the negative, so if you ask us "How are you", we say "Not bad". If you ask "How was the weather", we say "Not hot enough". When we ask someone to "bring a plate" to a dinner party, we are not asking them to bring an actual empty plate, but rather a prepared dish.'

Anne and I were having a casual dinner at a little Thai place in Marsfield.

The evening at the Italian restaurant with Ravi's colleagues had been occupying my thoughts for days. I had been gauche and clumsy on that occasion and I've been determined never to feel that kind of

awkwardness again.

I've taken Ravi's advice and watched a few Australian movies, paying careful attention to how certain words are pronounced. I've also started watching TV programmes and listening to the news on radio regularly. But, I know I'm still a long way from feeling comfortable in the company of Aussies.

Desperate to integrate into Australian society, I called up Anne and begged for help. There was no one else I could ask. Vibha and Naina, although polished and poised, are hardly authorities on Aussie culture. No, I needed an authentic teacher. I needed a local girl, born and bred in Australia.

My friendship with Anne is getting stronger by the day and now that I kind of know what had happened between her and Ravi, I felt sorry for her. Determined to get to the root of the matter, if only if to help me understand Ravi better, I decided to broach the topic of their separation. Naina's revelation about why Ravi and Anne split had been devastating. I needed to hear another point of view. Ravi would never talk about it. But I knew that if I asked Anne outright, she would more than likely give me an answer. I would simply have to wait until I found the right moment in our conversation.

Anne laughed a soft, tinkling laugh when I told her about the dinner fiasco. We had just finished ordering Pad Thai, Pad Kee Mao and Jungle Curry and were sipping delicious coconut juice.

'Oh dear. You are such a funny, dear little thing, Anjeelee. We Aussies are not such a difficult bunch, you know. We're the most easy-going and tolerant race, to be honest.'

'I know, Anne. I know. But it's not about that. I want to feel at home here. And I will always feel like a foreigner if I don't learn some of the local habits.'

'I can see where you're coming from, Anjeelee. And I will be honoured to be your coach and mentor. Mark my words, young lady, you will be

effortlessly Aussie in no time at all. But don't ever forget your roots or where you come from. It is your foreignness that makes you unique.'

I grasped her hand in mine. 'Thank you, Anne. You will never know how much your help means to me.'

'Have you been watching much TV at all?'

I nodded.

'Oh, good. That's the first step. It's the best way to understand how we speak.'

I listened carefully and soaked in how she spoke, dressed and generally carried herself. She says 'please' and 'thank you' a lot and never interrupts when another person is talking. When the smiling Thai waitress brought us a jug of water, Anne leaned forward to fill my glass before filling hers. And when the main course arrived, she opened the white cloth serviette and spread it over her knees.

Anne picked up her cutlery and I followed suit. She then scooped a piece of chicken from the jungle curry and placed it in the centre of her plate.

'Now, let's imagine this tiny piece is actually a huge schnitzel or a steak. How would we eat it? Watch me. Dig the fork into the section you want to cut, see where I place my forefinger on the fork? Then holding the fork in place, cut the piece with the knife held in your right hand. See, like this?' She demonstrated as if she was teaching someone in kindergarten, which made me smile. 'Once you have cut the piece, scoop it up with your fork, and put it into your mouth with the back of the fork facing outwards. Like this.'

I watched fascinated. It looked simple enough.

We took over an hour to finish our dinner, since I was practising and of course fumbling and giggling the first few times.

I felt a rush of love and gratitude towards Anne. How was it possible that

the two of us had become such good friends? She was the easiest person to get along with. No hang-ups. No complexes. And certainly no grudges. In all the time I have known her, she hasn't said one nasty thing about Ravi. We often joke about things related to him. 'Does he still iron his hankies?' she had asked me once, and we had both burst out laughing.

'Yes', I'd replied, and had a fit of hiccups from laughing so hard.

'Oh, my Lord. That used to drive me up the wall. Not normal, I tell you.' I had giggled on seeing her perplexed scowl. 'Oh, oh, and what about the colour red? Does he still have a phobia about wearing anything red?' Many years ago, a dubious astrologer had told Ravi that red was an unlucky colour for him. Ever since, Ravi had refused to wear red. No matter how much anyone tried to convince him that it was probably superstitious nonsense, Ravi wasn't game to take the risk.

Now, as we finished our dinner, Anne gave me a long look.

'You're a good girl, Anjeelee. I don't know how you do it. How do you put up with Ravi's demands? I certainly couldn't. Does he expect you to make his bed and polish his shoes?'

I smiled. 'Make his bed, yes. I don't really polish his shoes.'

Anne threw back her head and laughed. 'Oh Anjeelee, you're a scream. I meant that figuratively. You know, his way or the highway. Everything should be the way he wants it.'

'Oh. Yes, I see. Yes, he is still like that.'

'How do you manage? I could never understand how he expected me to be his bearer, butler and cook all rolled into one. I was hopeless at cooking. And yet, he wanted *daal* and *roti* every single day. Is he still like that? Everything must have his seal of approval or it can't be done?'

I can understand now how that kind of behaviour from Ravi would have irked Anne. Especially if she had found out by then the true reason he

had married her. I was still having trouble reconciling myself to the fact that Ravi could have done something so nasty. I had been a bit cool towards him since Naina's revelation about why his marriage with Anne had ended. He noticed my new, detached air and had asked on couple of occasions if I'm feeling alright. I'd been pretending everything was okay. It isn't in Ravi's nature to dig deeper. Although I was upset by what Naina had told me, I wanted to hear Ravi's version of events too. But there hasn't been a right moment to broach such a serious topic. I will just have to wait.

'I can see why you hate him, Anne. After what happened, it makes sense', I said to Anne.

She stared at me. 'I don't hate Ravi, Anjeelee. What makes you say that? We parted amicably. I thought you would have guessed that by now.'

'Yes. But what about what he did?'

'I'm not sure I understand. What are you referring to?'

'Well ...'

'C'mon, we're friends. What is it?'

'I can't understand how you can still be friends with him after what he did. Married you for a passport, and then dumped you straight after.'

There was a long silence while Anne looked at me. 'Where did you hear that?' she asked, finally.

'Isn't it true?'

She sighed. 'How can I sum up my marriage with Ravi in a few simple sentences? How can any relationship be described in a few words? Ravi and I knew the score right from the word go. He never led me down the wrong path and certainly didn't falsely lure me into a relationship. We were young and impulsive and got along beautifully. We were buddies and could talk to each other for hours. Ravi was looking for a way to

stay on in Australia and dreaded going back to life in India. I adored his exoticism. He was unlike anyone I had ever met. One day we looked at each other, shrugged and said what the hell. Let's give it a go.'

She paused.

I remained quiet.

'Our marriage lasted two years and we worked hard at it. Neither wanted to admit we had made a mistake. Ravi had become more Indian after coming to Australia than when he was in India. He had certain expectations from a wife, which I could not fulfil. We were brought up differently. Although we both believed in equality, Ravi expected men and women to have specific roles. A wife must cook, clean and obey. He was keen right up to the end to try and make things work. I gave up on our marriage long before he agreed it was not working out. We parted friends. Why then would I hate Ravi, Anjeelee?'

I was touched by her words. She had chosen to confide intimate details of her marriage with my husband. I felt sadness for what they'd once had.

She grinned suddenly. 'Hey, why so sad? It's all water under the bridge.'

'Yes.'

'It's late. Shall we get the bill? Where is Ravi by the way? Not at home tonight?' she asked.

'No. He is taking a few clients out to dinner. He will probably be home late. I'll make a move now. Don't want Mumma thinking I'm painting the town red.'

Anne grinned. 'Okay. I will drop you. It's on my way anyway', she said, brushing off my protests.

We split the bill in half, paid at the counter and stepped out into the arcade. A group of men, dressed in business suits, walked past just as we

came out. One of them must have dropped a piece of paper for he was bending to retrieve it. Anne said something funny just then and we both burst out laughing. I was still giggling when the man who had bent to get the paper straightened and looked up. The laugh died on my lips. Staring at me first and then at Anne, looking as though he had seen a ghost, was Ravi. We stood frozen. Husband. Wife. Ex-wife. And I heard my world come crashing down around my ears.



Anne was the first to find her voice. She cleared her throat, gave me a quick warning look possibly to make sure I wasn't going to blurt out something stupid and beamed at Ravi.

'Ravi! What a surprise. What are you doing here?'

Ravi opened and shut his mouth but no sound emerged. He was still in shock.

'Hey Anjeelee', she said, looking straight at me, and I felt bile rise in my throat. Oh God. What on earth was she going to say? 'Meet Ravi. My ex-husband', she said, expansively, beaming from ear to ear.

Ravi and I stared at each other, neither knowing what to say. A cold sweat formed on my forehead and I felt the world spinning around.

Even though my heart was pounding at a million miles an hour, my voice, when I finally spoke, was surprisingly steady. I hadn't a clue what Anne was up to, but I decided to play along.

'What?' I said, shock and confusion written all over my face. 'He is your ...?' I let my words trail away.

Ravi could bear it no longer. 'Give me one second', he muttered and walked up to his colleagues who had been waiting patiently for him a few shops down the street. He whispered something to them and I saw them nod and walk away.

He strode back towards us, his face a solemn mask, his eyes darting from my face to Anne's and back to mine. 'Anne', he said at last, and I was startled to feel his hand around my shoulder, 'this is my wife Anjali.'

Anne was priceless. She let out a little gasp, her mouth dropped open and she looked pale and flushed.

'What?!' she exclaimed, and in spite of my terrible nervousness, I felt my mouth twitch. She should have been on stage.

'Wow. Who would have thought! It's like a bad movie, isn't it? My goodness. Who would have thought that Anjali and you are ... are married! And after all the time we both have known each other,' she said turning to look at me, 'we never realised. Life can be so funny sometimes.'

I smiled, not sure what to say next.

'Where did the two of you meet?' Ravi asked, looking at me.

'At yoga', said Anne. She had waited for me to answer, but since I had lost all signs of having a voice, she jumped in again. 'We both go there twice a week.'

'So you have known each other for quite a few weeks, then?' he asked, looking at me pointedly.

I nodded. In a way, it was just as well that I had lost the power to speak. Without even trying, I was playing the part of the shell-shocked wife who had just realised that her best friend was actually none other than her husband's ex-wife.

Ravi shook his head as though still wondering at such a co- incidence. There was an awkward silence while we all kind of shuffled our feet and tried to avoid eye contact.

'Anjali,' said Ravi at last, 'maybe we should go home now. I need to have a quick word with my colleagues. They're having drinks at one of the

pubs down the street. Wait here. I'll be right back. Er ... it was nice seeing you again, Anne', he said, stiffly. They leaned towards each other and he pecked her on the cheek.

As soon as he was out of sight, Anne and I gave each other a quick hug.

'Oh, my God. That was close', whispered Anne. 'That's why I've been urging you to tell him we know each other.'

Ravi returned a few minutes later and we waved as Anne walked away to the car park.



On the drive back home, Ravi remained silent, lost in thought. It was hard to tell what he was thinking and even more difficult to judge his mood. Was he upset? Relieved? Worried? Angry?

He looked at me sideways and I wondered if it was suspicion in his eyes or merely curiosity. 'So, what do you two talk about? I can't see anything in common. You both come from such different backgrounds.'

'We talk about lots of things. Anne is very fond of India. She can never get enough of my stories about life out there.'

'Yes.'

He honked as another car suddenly cut into his lane without indicating. 'I am not entirely pleased about your friendship with Anne. Now that you know who she is, maybe you should maintain a distance.'

I couldn't believe I had heard him right. Why was he uncomfortable? Was he afraid Anne was going to tell me something terrible about him? Or was it simply that like most people he didn't believe an ex-wife and current wife could be real friends?

'Ravi, I should be the one wanting to maintain a distance. Not you. What harm can our friendship possibly do? We meet twice a week at yoga and

occasionally have coffee together, or like today, a dinner. But it is very rare. It's not as if we are in each other's pockets.'

He thought about it for a long time and finally spoke with a huge sigh. 'It's incredible. I still cannot believe it.' I took that to mean he was willing to let things continue the way they were.

'Where did the two of you meet?' I asked. I had asked him this question a few times but he had always shirked it, telling me it was none of my business. It would be interesting to see how he answered it now.

'At university', he replied shortly. 'See, this is why I don't want you interacting with her. You are not someone who can let bygones be bygones. I don't want you coming home after every yoga class and telling me about something she said or did and then trying to delve into my past to dig out any possible secrets.'

'I don't understand why you think I want to find out secrets from your past life. Are there so many skeletons in your closet that I should be worried?'

'I have *no* skeletons in the cupboard. It's just that I'm worried this friendship with Anne will only make you more paranoid than you already are about our marriage. I will allow you to meet her on one condition. You will never make comparisons between us and what she and I might have shared once. Is that understood?' He looked fierce and I knew better than to carry on this conversation any longer.

Once we got home, he sat down at his desk and began filing paperwork and then working on his client presentation for next week. I sat next to him, reading my novel. We didn't talk. I knew he was upset by the whole bumping into Anne episode. I knew the shock had been colossal. But since, according to him, I had found out about Anne's true identity for the first time tonight, shouldn't he have been concerned about what I was going through? After all, had things been different, my shock at finding out who Anne really was can't be compared to Ravi's shock at seeing us together. But I recognised how shaken he was at finding out that Anne and I are friends, something he had probably never imagined happening,

and decided not to pursue the matter further.

8th November

Ravi has already packed his bags. He leaves in three days for Hong Kong. Mumma is heartbroken that he will be away. 'One month? *Arre* Ravi, why can't your company send you on shorter trips?'

Ravi frowned. 'Not you too, Mumma. Isn't it enough that Anjali complains all the time about this as well?' He glared at me. We had argued the night before for over an hour about his workaholic nature.

'Ravi, I'm twenty-seven now. We need to start thinking about having children. How will we ever settle down and have a family if you're out of the house more often than you are in it?' I had said.

'Anjali, we have discussed this. I told you we will have a child in five years' time.'

'I don't want to wait that long. I want to be able to enjoy my kids while I'm still young.'

'That's the other thing. No matter how often we talk about this, you never seem to get it into your head. I only want one child.'

'But what if I want more?' I was fed up with his obstinate stance.

'If you want more, find yourself someone else to have them with. I have told you what I want and that's that. This conversation is over.' But the conversation hadn't been over. We had gone back and forth, moving on to different topics. The focus had finally shifted to my fear of driving.

'I have been telling you for months to take driving lessons', he'd said. 'Why have you not done anything about it?'

It was hard to explain. The thought of driving terrifies me. I cannot imagine myself behind a steering wheel. What if I kill myself? Or worse,

kill someone else? Just the idea of being out there on the road with those huge buses and trucks coming thundering towards me at 100 kms/hr was enough to make me dizzy.

We argued for a bit and then I gave in. 'You're right, I guess. I should put aside my fear.'

'Yes. You should. Driving is an essential life-skill, Anjali. Especially in a country like Australia where it's not always convenient to hop onto a bus or a train. What if you have to go to someone's house for dinner or a function when I am out of the country? Are you going to be travelling by train late at night? Or are you going to keep asking people to drop you home each time?'

I saw his point. 'Okay', I said.

'Okay what?' he asked. 'Promise me that you will look up some driving schools in the next few days and book lessons.'

Don't worry about the cost. It should cost you about \$40 per class and that's quite okay.'

I remembered the argument then as Ravi and I glared at each other. Mumma was right in being concerned about the length of his travelling bouts. For once, I found myself agreeing with her.

'What are Papa and I going to do here all alone if you won't be here? We might as well return to India and be in our own home', she sulked.

Ravi gave an irritated snort. 'Mumma, what about Anjali? She's still here, even if I will be travelling.'

Mumma sniffed. 'Anjali has become so busy nowadays. Big fancy job. All these new friends. Where does she have time for us?'

I refused to comment.

Ravi looked at me. 'Well, I hope Anjali remembers her responsibilities and doesn't get carried away too much with all her *new* friends.' I knew

this was a direct dig at my friendship with Anne. He hasn't quite warmed to the idea of it.

I found his comment about remembering my responsibilities hurtful and extremely unfair. He was hardly around to take his parents anywhere. When he isn't travelling, he is at the office until fairly late each evening. His work commitments sometimes spill into weekends as well. Everything is left to me and since I am dependent on public transport, it all becomes too much sometimes. But since I had agreed to learn driving, things could only get easier.

I made *misal* (savoury, spicy snack) later today, knowing it was one of Ravi's favourite dishes. He ate it without commenting as he scribbled notes in a black diary.

'How is it?' I asked.

'Hmmm? What?' he said, without looking up.

'I'm asking about the *misal*. Has it turned out okay?'

'Oh. Yes. Very nice. Anjali, I'm just trying to finish doing something. We'll talk in a bit. Is that okay?'

I shook my head and walked back to the kitchen. Things would never change. I was getting used to never getting Ravi's complete attention. It was pointless to keep arguing about it.

Later today, as I sat near the bedroom window reading, I thought about how my life has turned out. My long-ago dream of being swept off my feet by a besotted lover seems laughable now. Ravi has no time to be besotted with anything other than his job. His work is his mistress. Even though I keep reminding myself of his reasons for slaving away at his job, I cannot see the logic in it. He is burning himself out in order to build a secure future for his family – a family he ignores and rarely spends time with. I don't have the energy or the inclination any more to change his thinking. If this is my lot in life, then I am going to grin and bear it.

14th November

Ravi left for Hong Kong a few days back. Deciding to finally take the plunge, I registered at the local driving school yesterday and booked lessons thrice a week beginning this week. I didn't sleep a wink last night. I couldn't stop thinking about all the dangers I would face while driving. I know, without the shadow of a doubt that I am going to crash the car during the very first lesson. My car and I would topple over the edge of a valley and tumble forward for miles. I would end up knocking my head against the steering wheel before a huge explosion would cause my car to finally go up in a burst of flames.

Vibha was stunned when I told her my theory. She dropped in impromptu this morning, something she has never done before. 'Vibha!' I exclaimed, when I answered the doorbell. 'What a surprise! What are you doing here?'

'Well, since it's Saturday, I thought you'd be home.'

'Yes, but how come you're free?'

She had come in and greeted Mumma and Papa who looked excited to have company. Settling herself on the sofa, she smiled up at me. 'I'm trying to reduce my workload. All this constant running around and travelling is wearing me down. Thought I'd slow down and smell the roses. You know ... while I'm still young.'

'Good girl. Maybe you should have a chat with Ravi, and teach him a thing or two', I laughed. Mumma didn't look very pleased and I quickly changed the topic. I told Vibha about having booked driving lessons. She was astounded when I told her that I couldn't sleep last night due to worrying. 'Anjali, you amaze me. What is there to be so scared of driving? First, there will be two sets of brakes in the car you learn in. So say, for example, you are driving around like a mad woman, your instructor will be able to stop the car – even in the worst case scenario, and even if you are intent on killing yourself.'

I giggled. Vibha looked funny when agitated.

'Second, just think about the *taxiwallahs* in India who come from remote villages and who have never even *seen* a car. If *they* can manage to learn driving, so can *you*!'

She had a point, I guess.

'*And* third, there are no valleys in Sydney for you to merrily tumble into with your car and instructor. I think you have been watching too many bad Hindi action films. All this talk of going up in flames.'

We both laughed.

'Anjali, make Vibha some tea', said Mumma, just as I was about to ask Vibha if she wanted a cup of tea.

'And make some for Papa and me too', she added.

Papa looked up from the magazine he was reading. 'No, not for me, Anju. I have had two cups already this morning.'

Mumma glared at him. '*Aho*, she is making anyway. Might as well have one cup now. Otherwise, you will ask me in half an hour and then I will have to do it.'

Vibha and I exchanged glances and tried hard to stifle our giggles.

'Suhasini, I don't want tea just yet. Let's not worry about how I feel later.'

Mumma shook her head as though only a foolish person would refuse tea when someone else was making it for them.

'Come, Suhasini. We'll go inside. Let the girls talk.'

She hesitated then decided to follow him into the room.

Vibha and I looked at each other and sighed in relief. It is always awkward to chat in front of in-laws. We talked for a long time. Unlike Naina and Sonali, with whom I could connect on an equal footing, Vibha is someone I am still in awe of. She is still a mystery to me. In spite of

being the only single woman in the Sargam group, she rarely shows any interest in getting married and settling down.

Vibha is always dressed to the nines in expensive clothes bought from boutique stores all over the world. Be it Harrods or Saks Fifth Avenue or Neiman Marcus, she has shopped in all the 'happening' spots. Fur coats, cashmere scarves, gold-studded watches. You name it, she has it. Not only is she the last word in style, she is also drop dead gorgeous. She is a year older than me. I wondered why she didn't have a boyfriend yet.

'Who has time for boyfriends?' she trilled when I asked her if she was seeing anyone. 'I'm too busy earning my daily bread. Boyfriends only distract you from your goal. But now that I'm taking things easy, who knows what might happen?' Vibha works as a Key Account Manager for a prestigious cosmetics company, which explains the wonderful range of make-up she owns. But what it doesn't explain is how she can afford to keep taking expensive holidays every few months to places people would only ever see in magazines or on television.

In a way, I envy Vibha's fiery independence and glamorous lifestyle. But I also feel sorry for her. I have a feeling that she is terribly lonely, but is too proud to admit it, even to herself.

20th November

For some strange reason, Jake Ellis is convinced I speak grammatically better English than the rest of his staff put together. 'You come up with the most amazing words. Like this morning, when you said "dénouement". I'd never heard of that word before.'

Earlier today, Jake and I had been talking about a difficult client whom none of the staff liked to deal with, mainly because of how cantankerous he was. His bookings were now exclusively handled by Jake who was the only one who could deal with him and his many moods.

'Maybe we should ask Angie to deal with him', he said to the rest of the team. 'He might not be quite his usual nasty self with her since she is still

new.'

'That's okay with me. I don't mind', I smiled back at him. 'Maybe he won't understand my Indian accent. How can he be nasty if he cannot understand what I'm saying?'

'Oh, I wouldn't be too sure where Fred Townsend is concerned', he grinned. 'Anything is possible with him. I'm dealing with him at present since none of my wonderful staff wants to. Come into my office, Angie, and I will show you the trip I'm currently putting together for him.'

I followed him to his desk. One topic led to another and we got talking about other difficult people who had been clients of the agency in the past. Jake regaled me with stories of people who cancelled their International flights last minute or failed to turn up after booking expensive hotels or changed their itineraries a few dozen times making life miserable for the consultant looking after them.

'That's the thing with the travel industry. It all looks glamorous from the outside, but is a hard slog on the inside. Oh, there was this horrid person called Mick Doherty, a few years ago. I have never met anyone like him. He was evil, you know a bit like "Iago".'

I was pleasantly surprised to find out he knew who Iago was. He doesn't look like someone who would. Not that people who know Shakespeare's plays have a certain appearance. It's just that Jake is so flippant about everything and doesn't give the impression of someone who has read literature.

'You've read Shakespeare?' I asked, trying not to look too amazed.

'That surprises you, Angie?' he teased.

'No. I'm not surprised. Well, maybe, just a little bit.'

I couldn't believe I had just said that. Had I just told my boss that I couldn't believe he knew about Shakespeare? Until I arrived in Australia, I wouldn't have had the courage to have a one on one conversation with

anyone who wasn't Indian. But, I'm noticing a change in myself these days. Maybe it's the coaching and encouragement from Anne. Maybe it's the confidence gained from my role in telemarketing. Maybe it's having to fend for myself for long periods when Ravi is travelling. Whatever the reason, it's becoming clear to me that I'm bolder now. More comfortable talking to Aussies. Less lost and awe struck.

Jake didn't look annoyed at my candid response. On the contrary, he raised an eyebrow and seemed amused. He leaned back in his swivel chair, crossed his arms behind his head and gave me a lazy smile.

'Pray, tell me. I'm intrigued. Why did you think I wouldn't be reading Shakespeare?'

Jake and I chatted for half an hour after that and the conversation hardly followed a logical sequence. One minute we were talking about the Bard and his penchant for 'disguise' and 'mistaken identity' in his plays and how brilliantly he brought everything together in the dénouement and the next we were talking about personality types and how there were only sixteen different types of personalities in the world.

That's when the whole 'denouement' thing started.

'What on earth does that word mean?' he asked suddenly.

'What word?' I asked confused.

'What you just said. Denuma something.'

I racked my brains to recall what I had just said. 'Oh, "dénuement"? It means the concluding part of, say, a play, where everything is resolved. Something like that.'

'No way. You're making it up.'

'I'm not.' I was affronted.

'I've never heard of it.'

'Jake, it exists. Check the dictionary.'

'I will. How do you know so much about Shakespeare anyway? Are his plays your favourite recreational reading or something? Is that what you read when you're out at the beach?'

I giggled. When Jake talked with that deadpan expression, it was hard not to find him funny.

'I took half-English, half-History in college.'

'Oh, my Lord! I have hired an intellectual. You will probably correct my spelling mistakes and criticise my grammar for the rest of my life', he groaned in mock dismay.

'Probably', I smiled back at him.

After all that friendly banter, I found it difficult to concentrate once I got back to my desk. Kate was carefully explaining their flight booking system to me. But the wild tumble of thoughts in my mind drowned her voice out. I kept replaying in my head my conversation with Jake. His look of awe when I said 'dénouement'. His perplexed grin when I showed surprise at his mention of Iago.

I gave myself a mental shake. What was I doing? Instead of concentrating and learning what Kate was painstakingly teaching, here I was daydreaming like a teenager. But it was hard not to keep going back to the verbal tussle I had just had with Jake. I couldn't remember the last time I had found a conversation so exhilarating or interesting.

I came home this evening in a state of mild euphoria, feeling on top of the world. Ellis World Travels is going to be a lot of fun. I can feel it in my bones.

I feel like the luckiest woman alive!

24th November

Today is Ravi's birthday. I called him as soon as I got back home from work and gave the phone to Mumma so that she could speak first. She asked him a dozen questions about his health, whether he was eating and sleeping on time and if he came back to the serviced apartment at a decent hour each night. Papa, on the other hand, simply wished him, discussed a couple of political happenings in India and handed the phone to me. 'Hi Ravi', I said. 'Many happy returns of the day.'

'Thanks. How's everything going?' he asked.

'Good. How are you?'

'Did the plumber come yesterday to fix that leaking tap you told me about last week?'

'Yes. Charged me \$100 for nothing. He fiddled around for five minutes, opened and shut the tap half a dozen times and that was it.'

'Maybe I should have studied to become a plumber. All that easy money.'

Normally, I would have laughed at something like that. But I haven't been in a very humorous mood lately. Even Papa noticed and mentioned it to me the other day. 'Are you okay, Anju?' he'd asked, looking at me with concern. 'You don't seem yourself these days. Is something troubling you?' I had looked at his thin, kind face and felt close to tears. What is wrong with me? The smallest things make me cry these days.

'You there, Anjali?' Ravi asked, and I was brought back to the present.

'Yes, I'm here. How has work been?'

'Busy. I'm working weekends too. Some days I barely get five hours of sleep.'

I remained silent. Telling Ravi to cut down on his workload would only make him annoyed. Bitter experiences of the past when I had begged

him to take up a less demanding job have made me a wise woman.

'How's your new job, by the way? Are you managing to catch the express train every day?'

'Yes.'

'What's your boss's name again? Jude?'

I stiffened. Why all this sudden third degree? Ravi was seldom interested in anything I did.

'Jake. Jake Ellis. He owns the company.'

'Make sure you work hard and stay in his good books. Who knows, when the time comes, he might choose you for a promotion over everyone else.' That was all Ravi ever thought about – promotions. Fatter pay cheques. The good life.

We talked for a few minutes and then I hung up. I realised later, as I thought about the conversation, that unlike before, I no longer wait for him to tell me he loves me or misses me.

6th December

My life has finally got into a regular pattern and I'm feeling less isolated in Sydney with each passing day. I now have lots of loyal and loving friends – Naina, Vibha, Sonali and of course Anne, none of whom would hesitate to turn up on my doorstep at 2 am if I needed their help. My job at Ellis World Travels keeps me busy and happy and I've reluctantly joined the ranks of the 'Jake admirers'. So far, I had always been suspicious of good-looking men who moved through life scattering broken hearts wherever they went. But I am free to be fond of him because unlike the other girls in my office, I am a married woman and so, not really part of the action.

Since it's the weekend, Naina and I fixed a catch-up and decided to go to

Ikea. She came over around 11 am this morning, and sat chatting over tea and biscuits. Mumma and Papa had gone for a walk.

'So, how is it without hubby dearest in the house?' she asked

'Quiet. I'm used to it, though.'

'You should be celebrating. No more reporting to the headmaster', she laughed. She was stretching her dislike for Ravi a bit. I was tempted to tell her that she had got Ravi and Anne's marriage completely wrong. He hadn't simply married and dumped her, like she had said. He had given it a fair go. But I couldn't risk talking about it, as I didn't want to mention that I knew Anne. Best to leave that can of worms unopened.

'He's married to that job, isn't he?' she said. 'Doesn't he get sick of travelling? Don't you get sick of him travelling?'

'I do. Of course. I'm fed up. But what's the point of complaining?'

'You should go out and party. Why do you stay cooped up at home? If I were in your place, honestly, I wouldn't be waiting hand and foot on his parents. They can do their own cooking and cleaning. You go out. Aren't there any good-looking men in your office? Why don't you socialise more?'

'I go out with you sometimes. And Vibha. I don't need to socialise with good looking men.'

'Why? Because you're married? Marriage has nothing to do with it. Stop being so old-fashioned.'

'Naina, this is annoying. Why are you so hell bent on me having an affair? Is that your answer to all problems?'

'The equation is simple. Workaholic husband + Bored Wife = Affair.'

I could not help laughing. 'Nut case', I said. We waited until Mumma and Papa got back. 'Mumma, would you and Papa like to come with us? We should be back in a couple of hours.' But Mumma shook her head. They

wanted to rest and watch a movie at home. 'You girls go. Come back soon, though', she added.



I have never seen a store as big as Ikea. It is massive. There were three levels filled with ready to assemble furniture, a mind-boggling range of appliances and all kinds of home décor stuff. I felt like a kid in a candy store.

'Oh my God, Naina. This is amazing. How come Ravi never told me about this?'

'Because your darling husband probably shops for furniture only in exclusive boutique stores where he can get things custom designed', she laughed. I grinned back at her. The Sargam group knows that Ravi has a penchant for exclusive brands.

'Doesn't matter. I love this place', I said firmly.

We had the greatest fun. People everywhere were trying out the mattresses and beds by lying on them or bouncing. There were endless lounges lined up against the wall, and customers sat on them and chatted for ages under the pretext of 'try before you buy'. There were entire kitchens and bedrooms for sale. I could not believe my eyes. Was this place for real?

Naina filled her shopping trolley with all kinds of knick- knacks. Lamp shades, colanders, shower curtains, plastic cups, coffee mugs, candles, bath mats.

'My goodness. So much shopping?' I asked, amazed. I hadn't bought anything so far. Every time I picked up something, I wondered if Ravi would criticise it and put it back just as quickly. Left to myself, I would have bought the entire store.

'That's why Ashok is never happy when I decide to visit Ikea. I end up making a massive hole in his wallet', Naina let out a loud guffaw. 'Didn't

you like anything here?' she added, looking surprised. For Naina, leaving Ikea empty handed was beyond comprehension.

'I do. Especially that beautiful set of coasters right there.'

'Well then, buy it.' For Naina, it was simple and straightforward. If you liked something, you bought it. No two ways about it.

I hesitated. 'No. I can't be certain if Ravi will like the design.'

Naina's eyebrows shot up. 'Oh, I see. The good little Indian wife. Do you do anything at all without Ravi's approval?'

'Not really. What would be the point?'

'Anjali!' she squealed. 'I can't believe you took my question seriously. I was only pulling your leg. Do you really mean it? Do you do *nothing* without his approval?'

I could tell from her exaggerated reaction that Naina found it hard to believe me.

'Well,' I said, reluctantly, feeling awkward, 'as much as possible, I try to go along with whatever he wants. Or approves of. I once bought a table lamp from an antiques store. It was beautiful, but he thought it looked tacky. So I had to return it and ask for a refund.'

Naina stared at me for a few seconds and then burst out laughing. 'Ashok should have married someone like you. He would be the happiest man alive if he had. But honestly, Anjali, you can't go on like this forever. One of these days you will *have* to do something that he will disapprove of. Don't you ever get sick of being so boring and predictable?'

I thought about Naina's question long after she had dropped me back and returned home.

Am I boring and predictable?

I probably am. I probably have been all my life.

Before I met and married Ravi, I had never had a boyfriend, never been out on a date, and never visited a nightclub or disco ... never, never, never. My list of 'nevers' was never-ending.

I fell asleep with my face buried into my pillow, trying to drown out confused and disconnected images that kept popping into my head. Somewhere in the middle of the night, my eyes shot open and I sat up in bed, terrified, my heart pounding madly, a cold sweat on my forehead. I was finding it difficult to breathe. The room was dark and I felt disoriented after the dream I had just had. Was I in my own room? I couldn't be sure. I hadn't been in my own room in the dream. I looked sharply to my right and slowly extended my hand. The rumpled bed sheet felt cool and soothing under my touch. The space next to me was empty. Feeling relief wash all over me, I slumped back against the pillow. Thank God. It had only been a dream. For a moment, I was terrified that it had really happened.

I lay awake for a long time, staring up at the ceiling, troubled.

I had dreamt about making passionate love. Clothes were strewn all over the room, a shoe here, a sandal there. We came together in a wild frenzy. It ended with a long, deep kiss, which sucked out my very soul. I wound my arms around him ... his face was buried into my neck... I moved back a wispy lock of hair gently from his forehead and he leaned backwards to gaze at me. I raised my lips to his and saw his beautiful face.

And that's when I woke up.

The man looking down at me was not Ravi.

It was Jake Ellis.

The shock of seeing Jake's face in my dream has shaken me to the core. I haven't been able to go back to sleep and two coffees later, I'm still wide awake ... thinking ... analysing. What can that dream possibly mean? More importantly, do I really want to know?

7th December

'You're having that for breakfast again?' I asked Kate this morning, as we stood in the kitchen. We had both arrived early. Kate had got in a few minutes before me. She had unlocked the glass doors, switched on all the lights (including those in Jake's den) and was preparing breakfast when I walked in. She removed two slices of multi-grain bread from a zip-lock bag and put them into the toaster. I watched as she cut a banana into thick slices. Once the bread popped out, she applied thick layers of peanut butter to both slices, added the banana, and made it all a sandwich.

'Ewww!' I said, pursing my lips.

'It's yummy', she said, grinning. 'You should try it some time.'

I shook my head, wanting to gag. We chatted for a few minutes and then, leaning against the counter, she asked: 'By the way, do you think he has guessed by now that I have a crush on him?'

I was gazing at a magazine left near the kitchen sink. The cover showed a young, very much in love couple, standing on a cruise ship and waving to a huge crowd. But I hadn't really been concentrating on the picture. Instead, I was running through my mind all over again, one tiny piece at a time, the dream I had had the night before of Jake. Every time I thought about what we had done in my imagination, I felt hot, flushed and confused. This kind of thing has never happened to me before. Not ever. Why am I thinking about my boss and that too in such an inappropriate manner? Have I lost complete control of my senses?

On hearing Kate's question, I turned to look at her. 'Jake?' I asked. Saying his name sent a thrill up my spine.

'Yes. I've been fluttering my eyelashes and dropping not-so-subtle hints for months. What do you think?'

How on earth was I to know? I was just the new girl on the block. I said as much to Kate who looked woebegone.

'So, you haven't noticed anything?' she pouted, reminding me of a little girl who had just been denied a ride on the carousel.

Oh, I have noticed plenty of things. How his tie is always a little undone. How the scar on his forehead almost glows when he is excited or upset. I've noticed that when he is deep in thought, he absently rakes his fingers through his hair, leaving it looking spiky and dishevelled. His piercing blue eyes are like a winter sea in whose depths you could easily drown if you stared long and hard enough.

Yes, I have noticed a lot. Just not the kinds of things Kate was referring to.

The cuckoo inside the clock popped its head out and announced that it was 9 am. I wondered when he would arrive. Every time I heard a sound or a footstep outside the office, I glanced up from whatever I was doing to see if it was him. After nearly half an hour had passed and there was still no sign of Jake, I got fed up with waiting. Damn him.

Just then Kimberley walked in and announced that the boss wouldn't be in today. 'Nursing a cold, the old sook. He sounded as if he was dying when he called to let me know. I told him to drink lots of soup, put his feet up and rest. Men! The slightest cough or cold and they think they're on their deathbed.'

I was in a terribly bad mood for the rest of the day. Not quite sure why. I couldn't afford to snap at anyone, as I was still so new in the office. It wouldn't do to be sacked for rude behaviour even before my probation period was up. So I stayed at my desk in my little corner and sulked until it was time to go home.

Just imagine if I was in love with him. I felt sorry for Kate and the other two girls who had to cope without his sunny presence in the office all day long. It must have seemed such a long day to them. Poor girls.

I left the office on the dot of 5 pm. Grabbed my bag and ran out, desperate to be out of there.

It has been a long, long day.

10th December

Anne hasn't come to yoga in a few weeks, as things have been busy at her office. I've missed chatting with her and called her from work during my lunch break. 'Anjeelee!' she squealed. 'I was just thinking of you this morning. We haven't met in so long. How've you been?' We talked for a bit and decided to meet for coffee after work.

'You've lost weight', she said as soon as she saw me this evening. 'Working too hard?'

'Just been busy with this and that', I said, smiling. It was so good to see her. She was wearing a floral dress that came up to her knees and a pair of flat, red sandals. She didn't have much make-up on, other than a light pink lipstick. And yet, her face glowed and she looked happy. We ordered coffees and decided to share a large slice of Black Forest cake between us.

'I've got something to tell you', she said, leaning back against her chair and grinning at me. 'Although, I shouldn't really. It's early days yet. But ... I think I've met someone.'

It took me a second to understand what she was saying and then I leaned forward excitedly, grasping her hands. 'Oh, Anne. That's wonderful news. I'm so happy for you. Who is he?'

'Someone I met through mutual friends. He's a couple of years younger than me. We've gone out a few times. I've been meaning to tell you about him. It's just that I wasn't sure myself and wanted to wait and see how things move.'

'And? Are you sure now?'

'Sort of. We're still getting to know each other.'

Anne told me that she was in no hurry to get married. Neither was Chris (that was his name). They were going to take it one day at a time. 'Looking back, I think Ravi and I took a gamble with our relationship. We were never 100% certain of our feelings for each other, and kind of just went with the flow. With Chris, I want to be more careful.' She paused and looked at me, her eyes narrowing. 'Is everything alright, Anjeelee? You don't look like yourself. Do you want to tell me what's bothering you?'

'I've been thinking, Anne. About a few things. Life in general. And I don't think I'm happy.'

She took a couple of sips of coffee, before speaking. 'Is it Ravi?'

I tapped my fingers on the table and thought about her question. 'Part of the problem is Ravi, yes. I hardly get to see him. Even when he is in Sydney, he is more in the office than at home. We don't go out, just the two of us. It isn't that he doesn't want to. He just never gets around to it.'

'And what is the other part of the problem?'

'What?'

'You said Ravi is part of the problem. Is there something else?'

'Well ... it's just that I don't know if I love him. I've been trying to work out my feelings. Initially, when I first arrived in Australia, I remember being so excited at the thought of being married to him. I had imagined all kinds of things. You know, like any new bride. Doing things together. Going on weekend holidays. Watching movies. Getting to know each other. When it didn't happen, I kind of started feeling detached. He has never said he loves me. Not once.'

She smiled. 'He won't. It's not in his nature to express love through words. You will just have to work it out from his actions. But, you need to give him time. Isn't that the whole magic of arranged marriages? Falling in love gradually?'

I agreed with her. But how can love blossom when there is no proximity, no togetherness? I feel affection for Ravi. He is a decent man. He works hard and his disciplined approach to life has helped me become a better-organised person too. But is that enough for a marriage to survive? 'How was he with you, Anne?' I asked. 'Did he work non-stop then too?'

She shook her head, sighing. 'Anjeelee, we can hardly compare. Ravi and I were young and carefree when we got married. We had no responsibilities. And certainly, no bigger worries than wondering which movie to go to or which friends to hang out with. The man you're married to is someone completely different. He is driven and more goal-oriented now. He wants to build his future. And yours.'

I shook my head sadly. 'No, Anne. It's not enough. I wish it were. But it isn't. I would rather have less money than have an absent husband.' We held hands and looked at each other.

'Hang in there, darling. It will all be alright. Once Ravi is back, maybe you can tell him honestly that things are not working out. That he needs to cut down on some of his workload.'

We finished our coffees, paid the bill and walked out. As I hopped onto the train, I thought about what Anne had said. And felt grateful to have her as my friend. Her own marriage with Ravi hadn't worked out. And yet, she was hopeful that mine would.

12th December

Poor Papa. He tries hard to help me around the house while Ravi is away, without letting Mumma notice. All hell would break loose if Mumma found out that he actually tries to make my hectic life a little less difficult. What were daughters-in-law for if not to make sure the seniors got plenty of rest?

Whenever Mumma is in the shower or reading her prayer books or gossiping with the partially deaf senior Mrs Prasad who lives on the ground floor, Papa quietly grabs a cloth from the cupboard under the

sink and dusts all the artefacts and photo frames around the house.

'Aho Papa, let it be. Please rest. I will do it later in the day', I often protest.

But he waves his arm enthusiastically, motioning me to carry on with whatever I am doing.

Once when I fell asleep on the sofa in the living room, my novel in my lap, he got my favourite cotton quilt from the bedroom and draped it gently over me. I knew it was him, because as soon as the quilt touched my feet, I stirred and opened my eyes slightly just in time to see him retreating.

Three times a week, he goes grocery shopping in the afternoons, so that when I get home from work, the vegetable tray is fully stocked. He wears his fluffy black and white sweater, which he had bought nearly 15 years ago on a holiday in Nainital, slips his feet into the brown, one-size-too-big leather sandals and shuffles to the fruit and veg shop.

'Why, in your old age, are you doing all this?' Mumma snapped at him today. Papa was getting ready to go and buy some carrots and cucumber since he had heard Mumma lamenting that there was nothing in the house with which to make *koshimbir* (salad).

'Suhasini, the shop is only a few steps away from home. It will be a nice walk for me. Why don't you come too? Sitting cooped up in the house all day is not good for your health.'

Mumma scowled. 'Since Anjali is at home today, she can do it later in the afternoon. Leave it to her. Why do you have to go?'

'Yes, Papa', I rushed in and interrupted. 'I did tell Mumma that I had a few things to do later today. Some letters to be dropped off at the post office and I also have to collect the dry cleaning. I will shop for the vegetables then.'

Papa shook his head vehemently. 'You do the other things, Anjali. Leave

the vegetables to me. I am still strong enough to do a little simple shopping. Touch wood.' We all leaned forward at the same time to touch the wooden dining table.

I looked at him and felt affection well up inside me. He is such a dear old soul, always looking out for me and defending me whenever Mumma criticises my housekeeping skills. He never goes to bed until he has checked to make sure I'm okay.

'Anjali, *sagla theek, bala?* (Is everything okay, my child?)', he calls out, knocking on my door each night before he goes to bed.

'All good, Papa.'

If it hadn't been for his quiet but comforting presence in the house while Ravi is away, I would have lost my mind long ago.

14th December

'You've forgotten the apostrophe. There is no need for the exclamation mark. And the semi-colon is in the wrong spot.'

I was standing behind Jake's chair and reading the email he had just finished typing. He had asked me to have a quick look at it before hitting the 'send' button and I was being deliberately vague. Just for the fun of it.

Jake had his back to me as he sat in his chair and I gently, absent-mindedly flicked a piece of fluff that had landed on his collar.

He took a long, deep breath, still not looking at me. 'You smell lovely, sweetie. What perfume is that?'

I was startled. It was such a personal remark. And yet, coming from him, it sounded boyishly casual.

'Nina Ricci', I said, trying not to blush.

Until I met Jake I hadn't realised how easily I blush. My face turns bright red, then slowly settles into a dull shade of pink. Or at least that is how Kimberley described it once when I was struggling to recover from a compliment Jake had paid me about always arriving at the office on time.

'Nina Ricci', he said, rolling the words around his tongue. 'It suits you.'

'Thank you.'

'And what's all this about wrong apostrophe and semi colon? I can't see a single mistake in what I've written. Come to think of it, it's an amazingly worded email.' He glared at me.

I felt confused. Why was he angry? After all, he had been the one to ask my opinion.

'Okay.' I shrugged, determined not to show how hurt I felt. 'You did ask me', I pouted and turned to walk away. He swivelled around at lightning speed and caught hold of my arm. 'Hey, hey, hey. Angie, come here. I was only kidding. Studying Shakespeare has turned you into a dull girl.'

I turned. His fingers were still digging into my wrist. We looked at each other and a light spasm shuddered through me. He blinked. Then frowned. Slowly, he let go of my hand, his eyes never once leaving my face. I knew then that he had noticed. He had noticed how my body had reacted to his touch.

Shame, guilt and embarrassment engulfed me. Without a backward glance, I almost flew back to the safety of my own desk. Once my breathing slowed down, I looked down at the spot on my wrist where his fingers had held me. My skin had turned a dull red.

I told myself to calm down and that it had been nothing. A temporary lapse of sanity. Nothing had really happened. It could all well be a figment of my imagination.

But no amount of logical reasoning could make me get rid of the unease

slowly creeping through me.

15th December

A big day for me today! I had my driving test this morning. My instructor, a middle-aged Chinese man called Ryan, who had accompanied me to the test in case I had any last minute questions, gave me the thumbs-up sign when my name was called for the test. 'Good luck, Angie. You will pass with flying colours. I have trained you well.' I smiled at him, and walked stiffly behind the official who was to accompany me during the test. He looked stern and didn't smile when I greeted him 'good morning'. He merely nodded at me and told me to start the car. The next half an hour was pure torture. I was asked to do the 3-point turn, park on a slope, do angle and parallel parking and then reverse and park between two cars. I made sure I brought the car to a complete halt whenever there was a 'stop' sign, and always gave way to the right at roundabouts. The official made notes on a form throughout the drive and I stressed each time he noted something. Had I just made a mistake? Did I just go over the speed limit? By the time we finished, I had worked myself into a frenzy.

'Please wait here, Mrs Jathar', he said, politely. 'We will let you know the results shortly.'

Ryan and I sat together and I wasn't sure who was more nervous. 'How did it go?' he asked. 'Do you think you will pass? Any mistakes?'

I felt miserable. What if I failed? I didn't think I would be able to motivate myself to do this all over again. 'I don't know, Ryan. I think it went alright. The 3-point turn was not the greatest. Anyways, fingers crossed.'

Twenty minutes later, I was called to the counter and told I had passed. I let out a whoop of delight and nearly hugged Ryan, who was grinning from ear to ear. This was a big moment for me. A step towards independence. The first thought that struck me was that I would never

again have to depend on public transport or Ravi to get anywhere.

18th December

Ravi got back two days ago. It's strange having him around after not having seen him for an entire month. Once again, he has bought gifts for everyone. Couple of shawls for Mumma, a hooded jumper for Papa and perfume and jewellery for me. While Mumma squealed over how exquisite the shawls were, I stared at the presents and wondered to myself if he had got a secretary to shop for him like the last time. I was no longer interested in finding out.

During the time that he has been away, a lot has changed for me. I am turning into a different person. Outwardly, it is easy to see where I have improved. I am more confident, less awe-struck and finally learning to fend for myself. My housekeeping skills are sharper and I no longer have to specifically remind myself to check the fridge, pick up my clothes or keep my wardrobe tidy. These things have become second nature by now. Getting my driver's license has been the biggest feather in my cap. Although the idea of being on a motorway still makes me break into a cold sweat, I am forcing myself to take small steps.

Inwardly, the change in me has been more subtle and it's difficult to put a finger on it. I find myself day-dreaming a lot, and Ravi has had to repeat things on a couple of occasions. 'Anju, wake up. I just asked you if you know where my blue tie is', he said once or 'Anjali, what's the matter with you? Have you heard anything I've just said?' More than anything else, though, I am troubled by my growing obsession with Jake. I think about him all the time. Whenever I read something funny in the newspaper, my first thought is 'I must tell Jake about this'.

This morning, as Ravi was eating breakfast, I sat opposite him, lost in thought. He was watching the morning news on TV and occasionally making general comments to which I paid no attention. I was wondering what to wear to work. I spend a lot of time these days choosing my clothes. Jake often compliments me on my outfits: 'Nice scarf, Angie' or

'Ooh, someone's looking sharp today in that skirt.' I have begun dressing in ways I hoped would draw a reaction from him. Like that time when —

'Anjali! Pay attention. I just asked you three times if I can have some more tea.' Ravi's annoyed tones startled me out of my reverie.

'What?'

'Anjali, I've noticed over the past couple of days that you don't really listen when I talk. Are you feeling well?'

'I'm alright.'

He narrowed his eyes. 'You're not pregnant, are you?'

'Ravi, you've been away. Of course, I'm not pregnant. Anyway, I'm on the Pill. So, all is well. Don't worry.' We have made love once since he's back. I'm not sure when I stopped enjoying it. It's always the same. Very little foreplay. No endearments. And he always gets busy with either reading or watching TV as soon as it's done. During the early days, I had always wanted to be held for a long time after making love. Those were the moments when I had felt most connected to him. But he could never see sense in cuddling and chatting afterwards. 'No time for idle chatter, Anju', he'd say. One of his exit-lines from such conversations was 'I've things to do. Places to see'. He would wink to show me he was saying it lightly. But I knew it was true. There will always be things for him to do.

I have decided that I need to stop all this silly day-dreaming. It's only going to get me into trouble someday. For the rest of the day, I made a conscious effort to put all thoughts of Jake out of my mind.

22nd December

Looking back, my romance with Jake Ellis began so quietly that even I failed to notice it at first.

Eventually, I stirred from my slumber and saw it from a distance. It was

a wild, wicked, all-consuming obsession on both sides. I saw it hurtling down towards us, set on its precise collision course. And I stood directly in its path, powerless to move out of the way. It was too late by then. The roller coaster had begun its thunderous journey. I had no option but to hold on tight and watch as it began slowly, inexorably spinning out of control.

The 'Jake and I' story began with Fred Townsend, the customer from hell.

For several months, none of the staff at Ellis World Travels had ventured remotely close to the Townsend account. Kate, Freya and Mimi shared horror stories of when he had reduced them to tears over minor errors in flight bookings. Joe and John, who came on board much later, quailed after hearing the colourful episodes cheerfully recounted by the girls and refused outright to deal with him.

It became amply clear that the only one who could handle Fred Townsend was Jake Ellis.

A month after I started work at Ellis World Travels, Jake had handed me the Townsend account.

'Jake, why are you doing this? I can't deal with Mr Townsend. He will tear me in half and eat me for supper', I said, plaintively. Jake had summoned me into his office one morning a few weeks after I had begun working there. I had learned more about Fred Townsend with each passing day and knew what a horror he could be.

'Fred Townsend will be like a softly purring kitten by the time I finish training you in how to deal with him.'

It took a few moments for the implications of this to sink in.

He and I were going to work together from then on. I had been chosen to carry out what no other staff member was prepared to do. At first I wondered why he bothered to include me in this endeavour. He had managed remarkably well on his own. But now I know why.

After the incident of the misplaced semi colon and apostrophe a few days ago, when he had grabbed hold of my wrist, I have tried putting some distance between us. But working in such a small office means we can hardly avoid each other for long periods of time. On two occasions when I had been carrying files and turning round the corner in the tiny corridor that led to the storage room, I bumped into him and dropped my folders, scattering loose sheets of paper all over the floor.

'Angie! That's the second time you have done this. Are you sure you're not deliberately lying in wait for me? I'm hardly a match for wicked women who hide behind corridor walls and pounce on unsuspecting souls', he said. To the rest of the staff, possibly listening from the office outside, his voice sounded light and jocular. Jake made mildly flirtatious comments to every woman he met. Kate, Freya and Mimi were all his die-hard fans, each hoping that he would someday pop the question to them, get down on his knees and proclaim undying love.

The reality, unfolding in the hidden corridor, was quite different.

A dozen sheets of paper lay around our feet. I was confused by what he had just said. Did he really think I was stalking him? In an office the size of a postage stamp?

I raised my face to look at him. He is tall. Much, much taller than I am. He hadn't moved away after bumping into me and was looking down, his eyes serious and completely at odds with his joking voice. I could smell his perfume. It was a raw, tangy fragrance and my head spun. If I extended half my arm, I could have touched him.

I don't know how long we stood there. Eventually, my eyelids flickered, and my gaze was drawn involuntarily to his lips. I was shocked by the current that shot through me, and I stepped backwards, desperate to put some distance between us. If I hadn't, I knew I would have thrown myself into his arms and kissed him. Deeply. Desperately. A never-ending, aching tender kiss.

That moment in the corridor was it, I think. When we both knew for certain.

A cat and mouse game had begun!

31st December

'Hey, Anjali, Ashok and I are going to watch the fireworks tonight. Wanna come? I can ask the rest of the group as well', Naina asked me over the phone this morning. It's New Year's Eve. I still find it hard to believe that almost an entire year has passed since I came to Australia. So much has happened since then!

'I'm not sure what Ravi's plans are. But let me check with him and I'll get back to you.' I hung up and stood holding the receiver, lost in thought. Over the past few days, I have tried deliberately to distract myself from thinking about Jake all the time. I'm swimming in dangerous waters and I need to get out before I get sucked in, with no way out. Once I admitted to myself that I'm attracted to him, it has been surprisingly easier to step back and look at things objectively. I can see clearly where the attraction lies. I had met him when I was lonely, with no husband waiting at home to come back to. We get along well. I enjoy our verbal repartee, which leaves me feeling witty and admired. He is an extremely good-looking man, and his constant veiled references to my 'exoticism' have changed my perception of myself. I've begun to feel attractive. I'm actually enjoying the flirtation.

'Go easy, Anjali', I say to myself several times each day.

Although I'm revelling in Jake's obvious admiration, I don't want to jeopardise my marriage. I need to allow room for my feelings for Ravi to grow. But I am powerless to change things. Getting Ravi to sit down and have a heart-to-heart talk is impossible. I need to tell him that we have a problem and I need to tell it soon. If not, things will move along the way they are at present, and it will be too late. I am too frightened of what Jake is doing to my emotions to take it lightly.

I have decided I'll call Shehnaaz, my old friend from college, for advice. I can't discuss this with any of my friends here. It's too close to home and

dangerous. I cannot risk Ravi finding out what I'm going through. No, it will have to be Shehnaaz. She is out of India at present, having gone on a backpacking trip to Nepal with a few friends. A recent letter from her had said she would be back in late January. I will call her then.

Ravi agreed to catch up with the Sargam group in the city tonight to watch the fireworks. 'You're going to love it, Anjali. There's nothing quite as spectacular as the fireworks in Sydney on New Year's Eve.'

Mumma and Papa declined Ravi's invitation to come along. '*Naahi re baba!* (No, thank you)', Mumma said, when he asked her. 'I've heard it's terribly crowded. No, it's alright. Papa and I will watch the fireworks on TV. You all go ahead.'

It turned out to be a beautiful evening. Everyone except Rishi (who was nursing a sore throat) turned up in the city. We had cancelled the idea of eating out. Ashok reminded everyone that since it was New Year's Eve, most restaurants would have been booked way in advance. By the time we took the train and arrived in the city, the place was packed. We were crushed by the sea of bodies, and there was barely any place to move. Just before midnight, the countdown began. Everyone was clapping and yelling out for 1999 to come soon. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six ... Happy New Year! A big roar came out from the crowds. Everyone was clapping and hugging. The fireworks, which happened on the dot of midnight, were more spectacular and dazzling than anything I've seen before. There were synchronised bursts of colours and it looked like a thousand colourful stars were ablaze in the sky. I felt Ravi's arm go around me, and I turned my face up to his. For a split-second, my mind faltered and I wondered what Jake was doing at that very moment. But I quickly stifled the thought, and raised my lips to my husband. Happy New Year, Ravi!

3rd January 1999

'I'm sorry, Anjali. I'm afraid I won't be able to come with you to Coffs Harbour next weekend', said Ravi, dropping the sentence like a bombshell. He had just walked into the house. It was 8 pm and I was

already annoyed. After much cajoling earlier this morning, Ravi had finally agreed to take us all out to dinner tonight. But not before we had argued about it. 'Anjali, I will try my best to get home on time. But just in case I'm late, why don't you go anyway with Mumma and Papa? It will be a nice evening out for all of you.'

I had been furious. 'Ravi, what's the point of me going out for dinner with your parents? The idea is to enjoy things as a family, at least on a Sunday. Sometimes, I really wonder about you. You're not normal.'

He had looked contrite. 'Okay, okay. I can see you're really keen on this. Let's go to the Mexican place down the road.' Somehow, a bit of the sparkle had been lost. But I forced myself to stop sulking and made the reservation. The table was booked for 8 pm (after having checked with Ravi that he would be on time). I had been forced to call the restaurant and move it to 8.30 when I found out that Ravi was running late as usual.

I now glared at him. 'I can't believe you're late again. Don't you ever look at the clock when ... Sorry? What did you just say?'

'I can't come next weekend.'

Vibha had come up with the idea of a weekend getaway to Coffs Harbour. Everyone from the Sargam group thought it was a great suggestion. We have been considering booking cabins in a caravan park and planned to do nothing for two days other than eat, sing and play cards. I have never been to a caravan park before, and I couldn't wait. And now, Ravi had ruined it.

'But, why?'

'The boss has told me I've got to fly to Auckland. He had mentioned this to me before, but originally we were planning on me getting there end of the month. Now something has come up and I need to go sooner.'

'Ravi, this is not fair. We planned this several days ago'

'Anjali, I'm really sorry to do this to you. I would have loved to come

along.'

I had my doubts about this, but I didn't say it. 'You're always spoiling things.'

'You can still go ahead with Mumma and Papa if you wish. That way, you don't need to cancel your plans.'

I looked at him for a long moment. And then, slowly shook my head. He would never improve.

'Yes, Ravi. I will continue with my plans. And you continue with yours. And we'll continue like this for the rest of our lives. You on one road. Me on another.'

'Now, stop being so dramatic, Anju, and let's focus on enjoying tonight's dinner', he said, with a smile that I didn't return. I was no longer excited about the dinner. But I knew that Mumma and Papa had been looking forward to going out all day and I forced myself to put up a cheerful front through the rest of the evening.

7th January

The strain of keeping my mind away from Jake has begun to take its toll on my health. I don't sleep well at night, and walk around in a daze during the day. I can't stop thinking about him and often find myself going into his office for the silliest reasons. To return a pen he had left at my desk. Or to ask his opinion about an email I was sending. Or to tell him a funny episode with Fred Townsend. The tension I feel whenever I'm near him leaves me mentally drained by the end of each day.

I came home from work yesterday with a terrible headache. In fact, I have been feeling a little under the weather for the past few days. It's just as well Mumma has decided not to go ahead with the weekend getaway now that Ravi will be away in Auckland. I don't think I'm quite up to it now anyway. She suggested we could have a family trip once he gets back. The Sargam gang sounded disappointed when they heard we were

pulling out. They wanted to cancel too, but I insisted they go ahead. I don't really mind. For some strange reason, I seem to have lost my earlier enthusiasm for the holiday.

Mumma looked at me sharply when I arrived home last evening. I smiled at her, and went to my bedroom to change. Ravi was coming home late. He had a dinner meeting with overseas clients. 'Don't stay up for me. I won't get home before midnight', he'd said. I changed into my nightgown, and came out into the lounge room. I would have to take some medicine and hop into bed. The headache was killing me.

Papa was watching TV and Mumma looked up from her sewing.

'Anjali, we have eaten dinner. There is *chhole* and rice in the kitchen if you want to eat now. You're very late today. What happened?'

'Oh, a lot of work at the office.'

'You're staying out quite late nowadays. Ravi called earlier to ask if the pest control man had called. Even he was surprised you were not home.'

I was quiet. A vein at the side of my forehead throbbed and my throat hurt.

Mumma didn't guess I wasn't feeling too well. She continued talking. 'I have filled the cooker with soapy water. The *chhole* were burnt a bit at the bottom. Can you wash it and put it away once you've finished dinner?'

Tears stung my eyelids. All I wanted to do was sleep.

Papa was looking at me. 'Anju, are you alright? You don't look very well.'

'I have a headache, Papa. It's been a long day. Mumma, is it okay if I go to bed? I will wash the cooker in the morning.'

She sighed. 'Can't you tell your boss not to make you work until so late?'

I didn't want to think about my boss.

Mumma pushed away her sewing kit and stood up. 'What about dinner? Don't you want anything to eat?'

'No. I don't feel very well. I'm going to put some oil in my hair and go to sleep.' I walked into the kitchen and packed the *chhole* and rice into separate plastic containers. I wiped the kitchen bench top, grabbed 2 headache tablets and coconut oil from the medicine cabinet and went to my room.

I had just drawn the blinds and set the alarm when I turned and saw Mumma standing at the door, an old napkin in her hand.

'Here, put this on your pillow. That way the oil stains won't spoil it.'

I did what she suggested. She took the bottle of oil from my hands.

'Lie down Anjali. I will massage it into your hair.'

'No, no. It's alright.'

She made an impatient clicking sound with her teeth. 'Lie down. What a mess your bed is.' I hadn't had the energy to hang up my clothes.

Feeling awkward but too wretched to argue, I climbed into bed. My head was ready to explode.

She sat next to me. Pouring some oil into her palm, she rubbed her hands together and applied it to my hair.

'Your hair is so dry. When was the last time you put oil?'

'Hmmm', I said, my eyelids closing. Everything was a blur.

My grandmother used to oil my hair when I was a child. It is the most delicious feeling. She would rake her fingers around my temples and scalp until all the oil had been absorbed. I remembered her as I began nodding off to sleep. The room was dark. Only the dim light from the

passage filtered in.

Mumma's fingers were light and soothing and I soon fell asleep.

I thought about Mumma on my way home from work today. She is such a bundle of contradictions. She can be sarcastic and sometimes downright rude and yet her heart seems to be in the right place. I can't believe I'm writing this, but I think I'm beginning to actually like Mumma. Just a little.

21st January

Ravi is in Auckland! For nearly six weeks. He left about two weeks ago.

Now, with Ravi gone, my obsession with Jake, which I had managed to curb just a little for the past month or so, is back.

Over the past several days, I've sensed something happening between us, although I can't really put a finger on it. The chemistry is intense. Sometimes he walks past me, yelling out something to Kate or Kimberley or Joe, and merely the brush of his sleeve against my arm is enough to send shudders down my spine. He is always conscious of my presence in a room. This was blatantly obvious to me today, when just before everyone went home, Jake announced that he wanted to show us a short documentary about the islands of Vanuatu and Noumea.

We dimmed the lights and watched mesmerised as glorious snapshots of the famous islands flickered on the screen. Jake had his head turned slightly away from where I was sitting and was engaged in an animated conversation with Kate, who looked puzzled by the documentary and needed constant updates from him. My eyes lingered on him more often than on what was being shown on screen. Suddenly I remembered that I had left my office swipe card at the coffee shop next to our office. I had gone there during lunch to grab a coffee. I glanced worriedly at my watch. The coffee shop closed in five minutes. I would have to duck out, grab my card and come back.

I looked around at my colleagues. No one was paying any attention to me. All eyes were turned towards the screen, glued to images of azure waters, palm trees, happy tourists. Kate, by now, was practically on Jake's lap and he seemed oblivious to the rest of us.

I scowled at Kate. What a terrible flirt she was turning out to be. And as for Jake, he was impossible. A pretty girl had simply to flutter her eyelashes and he would bring on the full force of his charm. I didn't know who I was more annoyed with. Him or her.

I stood hidden in the shadows for a few moments. The door that led outside was right next to me and slightly ajar. I took one tiny step to the right, creeping closer to the door and was about to slip out when—

'Angie. Is this documentary boring you?' Jake's voice rang out loud and clear.

I jumped and turned around. In the darkness, I could see his eyes glowering straight at me. 'Umm ... I'll be right back, Jake. I've left my swipe card at the coffee shop.' He didn't reply and I slipped out.



Later in the evening, he and I were the last to leave the office. This isn't unusual. I've been staying back late quite often. In addition to Fred Townsend's account, Jake has given me some of the other major accounts he looks after himself and I've had to stay back at the office on several occasions to work with him. Not surprisingly, this development hasn't gone down well with Kate, Freya or Mimi who resent the time I get to spend one on one with Jake.

I went around the office switching off the lights as Jake wolfed down the last of his cheeseburger, which he had ordered from a nearby McDonald's. I had turned down his offer to buy me dinner, saying I wasn't really hungry.

As I walked back towards his desk, he stuffed his empty cup and

wrapper into the brown paper bag and looked up at me. A tiny smear of tomato ketchup clung to the left of his mouth. I could not tear my gaze away from it.

Blinking a few times, I spoke the first thought that came to my head. 'Jake, you amaze me. You noticed I was slipping out of the room during that movie even though the room was pitch dark.'

He sat still on the swivel chair. His eyes held mine as I moved a little closer and a lazy smile played around his lips.

'And you amaze me, Angie', he said softly, his gaze unwavering. 'Do you really think you could leave a room and I wouldn't notice?'

We stared at each other for a long time. I could bear it no longer. Leaning forward, I reached out and wiped the tiny speck of tomato ketchup near his mouth with my right forefinger.

He caught hold of my wrist as I tried to move away.

My heart was beating wildly. I shook my wrist, wanting to release it from his grasp, but it only made him hold it more firmly.

'Jake ...'

He gave me a look of such longing that I thought I would burst.

I don't know how long we stood there like that. It seemed like a lifetime.

Suddenly he let go of me.

'Go home, Angie. I can't trust myself when you're around.'

I didn't wait to be told twice. Petrified of what I would do if I stood there any longer, I grabbed my handbag and ran out of the office.

22nd January

When the doorbell rang this evening, half an hour after I got home from work, I was not in the mood to meet anyone.

Papa and Mumma had left for Canberra. They would be there for a couple of nights to visit a childhood friend of Renuka *maushi* (Mumma's younger sister). It was nice having the apartment to myself after so long.

I wondered who it was. Please, not a door-to-door salesman again. I didn't think I was up to playing the 'no speak English' game this evening.

But it wasn't a salesman.

When I swung the door open, I was stunned to see Vibha standing outside. It wasn't the usual Vibha, though. Gone was the breezy smile and confident demeanour. She looked worried and I could tell she had been crying.

'Hi Anjali', she said.

'Vibha! What's wrong?'

'Shhh ...', she said, her eyes darting right and left worriedly. 'Where are aunty and uncle?' She had stepped in now and was glancing around the living room like a cornered animal as though expecting my in-laws to leap on her from some hidden perch.

'Oh, they have left already. Good timing.'

I had told all my friends about Mumma and Papa going to Canberra for the weekend, and we had been talking about having a Girls Night In at my place, watching a movie with popcorn, baked *samosas* and drinks.

'Thank God.'

I looked at her carefully. She looked pale and tired, and had dark rings under puffy eyes.

'Sit down, Vibha. I was just making coffee. I'll make you some too.'

She shook her head. 'No, thank you. Not for me. You go ahead.'

I raised an eyebrow in surprise. Vibha loved coffee, especially Nescafé. If she was declining coffee, things must be very grim indeed.

'Umm ... okay ... What about tea then? Or juice? I have some fresh orange-pineapple juice.'

But Vibha waved away my offer. 'No, no. Nothing. I don't want anything to eat or drink, Anjali. I just need to speak to you. Have to tell you something. But make your coffee first and come and sit with me.'

As I prepared the coffee, a sudden thought hit me. Had something happened to Vibha's dad? I knew uncle had recently been in and out of the hospital back in India. His liver had finally given way after relentless, non-stop drinking for the past 30 years. Had he been admitted again? Or worse, was he in a critical condition? It would certainly explain Vibha's red eyes and nose.

'Is it uncle?' I asked, hurrying out into the living room with my coffee. Vibha was leaning against the cushions on the sofa, her eyes closed, her breathing laboured. 'Is he alright?'

She looked confused and disoriented. 'Uncle? Oh yes ... yes ... no problem. Dad is home now. Recovering nicely. Ma has employed a full time day and night nurse, who lives in and looks after him. She even cooks both meals for them. So, it's a huge worry off my shoulders.'

I heaved a sigh of relief. As I sat down next to her, I placed my mug carefully on a coaster. 'I can't take this suspense much longer. Out with it, Vibha. What's wrong?'

She shook her head, and her lower lip wobbled. I could tell she was close to tears.

'You are going to hate me when I tell you', she said at last, in a voice so low, I had to lean forward to catch what she was saying.

'Hate you?' I was surprised at her choice of words. 'Why? What's wrong? I could never hate you, Vibha. You know that. So tell me.'

'No. First, you have to promise me that you will not stop being my friend.'

'I promise', I said, and held her soft hands in mine. 'Now, tell me.'

She cleared her throat. 'I'm pregnant.'

Silence.

For a moment, I wondered if I had heard her right. She had spoken so softly, barely mumbled the words. It was entirely possible that I had misheard her.

'Sorry?' I asked, trying to catch her eye. 'What did you just say?'

'I'm pregnant.'

I was confused. What was happening? Vibha was single. She had always said she had no time for boyfriends or affairs or serious relationships. She was wedded to her brilliant career and marriage and motherhood were not on the cards for a long, long time. And now she was pregnant? It didn't make sense.

'Vibha ... I ... what ... I mean ... how?' I fumbled for words, not knowing quite how to articulate what I was trying to say.

'I know you are shocked, Anjali. But I need your help. Please don't ask me for any details. I can't talk about it. Not just yet, at least.'

So, she wasn't going to tell me who the father of the baby was. I was curious but more than that, I was concerned about her well-being.

'I won't ask you for any details, Vibha. Not if you don't want to discuss it. But in what way can I help you?'

'I have to get rid of it.' The words rang out like a gunshot.

'What?'

'I can't have it. It ... it just won't work', she stammered.

'Vibha, are you sure? It's your first baby.' Inevitably, I thought of poor Sonali and what she would have given to swap places with Vibha.

'I have thought about this for days, Anjali. And my decision is final. Please don't try to change my mind.' Her lip was wobbling again, and I rushed to reassure her. Everything would be alright. She wouldn't have to do anything against her will. But, I was hardly the best person to help her out of her predicament.

'Vibha, we will have to tell Naina. She is the only one who can help us. I wouldn't have a clue how to proceed.'

But Vibha shook her head. 'Oh, I know what to do and where to go. That's not the problem. But I can't go alone. I want you to come with me when ... when it happens.'

I quailed at the thought. For some strange reason, Vibha had chosen me as her confidante and aide. I couldn't reject the trust she was placing in me.

'Yes, Vibha. Stop worrying now. I will come with you.'

We held hands and remained silent for a long, long time, each battling with her own inner demons. I thought sadly of the time I had done the pregnancy test, with Naina waiting outside for me. And I prayed hard that things would work out alright for Vibha.

23rd January

This afternoon, I caught up with Naina at her place. Normally, she is busy with housework on Saturday mornings, but since Ashok is away on an overnight work trip to Newcastle, she invited me over for a girly chat.

'Anjali, this magazine has the most amazing article', she said, as we sat relaxing after a scrumptious lunch. 'I'm going to read it to you. It's about how to find out if your boss is in love with you. Wait until you hear some of the signs. They're hilarious.'

My head shot up and I looked at her suspiciously. Why was Naina keen to read this article to me? Had she sensed something? Heard something? No, it was impossible. Jake and I have never stepped out of the office together. So how was it possible to discover anything about us?

I listened as Naina began reading about the different clues that showed if your boss was attracted to you. I tried comparing the points she read to my current situation with Jake. He has certainly never bought me roses or insisted that I move my desk closer to his office. Yes, he does shower me with compliments. That bit is true.

I don't need some silly magazine article, though, to tell me if my boss is in love with me.

I have managed to find that out all by myself.



I called my college friend, Shehnaaz as soon as I got home. She was thrilled to hear my voice. Although we exchanged letters all the time, we hadn't heard each other's voices in over a year. 'Oh, my God. Anju!' she squealed. 'It's been so long.' We chatted for a bit, after which I told her about what was troubling me. She listened quietly until I had finished. As usual, she was practical and came straight to the point. 'If you're so worried about falling for this guy and ruining your marriage, why don't you just find another job? That way you won't be seeing his face every day and the distance will help you get over him quicker.'

I smiled in spite of myself. It was a typical Shehnaaz solution. I have already considered quitting my job. But, although I hate admitting it to myself, the truth is that I've been enjoying Jake's attentions. For the first time in my life, a man is going out of his way to show me that he cares

about me and finds me attractive. That is a heady feeling! And even though I want to preserve my marriage, I want Jake in my life too. 'No, I'm afraid, sweetie, you can't have both', said Shehnaaz. 'Don't get me wrong. If you really love this guy, this Jake or whoever, I would seriously suggest that you re-consider your relationship with Ravi.'

'That's the problem. I don't know if I 'really' love him. Or if it's just an infatuation. Frankly, Shehnaaz, I don't know what to think anymore. I'm so confused. Ravi is a decent guy. If he didn't travel so much, I guess, our marriage would stand some chance. He doesn't abuse me or beat me. He's never kept me short of money. And I can't let Aai and Baba down. Not after all the trouble they've gone to, to get me married and send me abroad.'

'Looks like you're trying to convince *yourself* there, my dear, not me. This is hardly something you can decide in a few minutes. It's too big a matter. Just go with the flow and see what happens. Your heart will know what to do when the time comes.'

I hung up and sincerely hoped she was right.

26th January

It has been an emotional day for me.

This morning, I accompanied Vibha to the clinic. I had told Jake yesterday that I would need a few hours off. He didn't ask any questions and waved away my suggestion that I would apply for leave. 'Don't be silly, Angie. You work terribly hard all the time and you often stay back. Don't worry about taking leave. Just come in when you're done.'

Vibha must have done a lot of soul-searching, for when I picked her up, she looked calm and resigned. We had originally considered getting a taxi. But at the last minute I decided to drive. Fortunately, the clinic was not too far from my place and I could use some of the inner, quieter streets to get there without hopping onto the main road.

I had a throbbing headache. Thinking about what Vibha was about to do had been troubling me for a few days. I wondered how she could be so calm and detached about the whole thing. We didn't talk much during the drive. She was lost in her own world. And I was too terrified of oncoming traffic to think of anything else.

I sat next to her in the reception area and we flicked through magazines until, after twenty minutes, they finally called her name. She stood up and squeezed my hand, looking so young and forlorn that I felt my heart ache for her. 'Good luck, Vibha. Everything will be alright. I'll be back at 2 pm to pick you up', I said.

A few hours later, when I picked her up, she looked pale and her eyes were red-rimmed. 'You okay?' I asked, as I held the car door open for her. She nodded, but didn't say anything. 'I've made you some dinner. Enough to last you at least three days. So you won't need to cook,' I said. We smiled at each other and I started the car.

When we got to her place, I tucked her into bed, smoothed back her hair and sat next to her, holding her hand. 'Can I get you something to drink?' I asked.

She shook her head. 'No, it's okay.'

'I'll fill up a bottle with water. Just give me one second', I said, about to stand up when she held my hand.

'Anju, please, just stay here. I need to talk to you.'

I sat back and waited.

Vibha was silent for a few minutes. Then she cleared her throat and spoke. 'Firstly, thank you so much for coming with me today. I know how much it cost you. Especially since you didn't approve of what I was doing. No, don't say anything', she said, when I started to protest. 'Let me talk. We've known each other for not very long. And although we haven't spent all that much time together, I do think I know you a little by now. I know you didn't approve. And yet, you came with me for

moral support. I can never thank you enough.'

'You don't need to thank me, Vibha. It's what any friend would have done.'

'I don't think so. Anyways, I need to tell you something. About why I chose to go through this. I wasn't ready before to share this with you. But after today, I think our friendship has moved to a different level. Anju, you've probably wondered about the baby's father.'

'Vibha, please, you don't need to explain anything. I don't need to know.'

'I want to tell you. So, please, allow me.' She paused, and leaned against the pillows as though saying those couple of sentences had exhausted her. 'If you didn't hate me for what I did this morning, you will definitely hate me for what I'm about to tell you. The reason I haven't got married yet is because the man I'm with isn't free to love me. In case you haven't worked that out already, my lover is a married man.'

We looked at each other. A few months ago, I would have been horrified by her confession. I had always had very black and white views on what was morally right or wrong. But my own thinking has undergone a shift recently. My confusion about my feelings for Jake and the change in dynamics in my marriage have forced me to look at the world through a different lens. I leaned forward and placed my hand on hers. 'Yes. I kind of figured that out. It was the most obvious explanation for what you were doing.'

'I want you to know that when I first met him and got to know him, I didn't know he was married. I didn't know for a long time. By the time I found out, it was too late. I was very much in love and powerless to back out.'

'I understand.'

'I have tried breaking it off recently. Several times. But each time something happens that makes me change my mind. Someday, Anju, I'd like you to meet him. Not just yet. But some day.'

'Yes. I'd love to meet him someday, Vibha. Now, if you'll listen to me, I think you've spoken enough for today. Lie down properly and get some rest.'

I sat beside her, holding her hand, until she fell asleep. It was only then that I stood up, smoothed back her hair, and quietly let myself out of her little apartment.

I thought about what she had told me on the drive back. She was right. Our friendship has indeed moved up to a new level.

1st February

'We're going to Port Douglas in about 3 weeks. Annual conference', Kate announced as soon as I walked into the office.

'Where's Port Douglas?' I asked.

'Near Cairns. It's the most amazing, most romantic place. I've been there once, long ago. Oh, this is going to be so much fun!'

I begged her for more details. Apparently, Jake takes his staff once a year to an exotic location to celebrate – it was his way of showing how much he appreciated their hard work through the year.

'You're going to love it. He always books an expensive resort. There's a pool, spa, golf, tennis ... the works. I'm so excited. You will come, won't you?'

I felt a twinge of nervousness.

'How long are we going away for?' I asked, wondering how Mumma would react when I told her I was off on a holiday with my work mates.

'Just three days. But, oh it will be the most glorious fun.'



Mumma's reaction, when I told her about the trip after work, was totally unexpected. She listened without interrupting while I stammered and explained that it was really a work trip. Hardly a holiday. We would be talking about sales strategies and discussing plans for the coming year. All boring stuff even though it would be in an exotic locale.

It was then that I properly looked at her. She looked pale and her eyes were red. Had she been crying?

She smiled faintly. 'Anjali, it's okay.'

She didn't say anymore and I wondered at the sudden change of behaviour.

Normally, as soon as I walked in, she would begin some kind of tirade or complaint. The coriander leaves in the fridge were dried and withered. When was I planning to buy fresh coriander? Or, I had left the iron on this morning in my great rush to get to the office. What if the house had burned down during the day?

'Mumma, is something wrong?' I asked, nervously.

She gave me a solemn look. 'Ravi called earlier while you were still in the office.' I looked at her sharply, but there was no innuendo in her voice. For once, she wasn't being sarcastic.

I waited.

Mumma cleared her throat. 'He was quite distraught. Do you remember his colleague, Suraj Mehta?

I nodded. How could I not remember Suraj Mehta? Ravi thought the world of him.

'He has been in Auckland, working on the same project that Ravi is working on. Suraj had a heart attack this morning at the office. Was

taken in an ambulance to the hospital but it was no good. He died an hour later. Dead at the age of thirty-five. Ravi was there when it happened and he told me he would never be able to get that image out of his head.'

I felt as though a truck had hit me. Suraj dead? How could it be? There was so much he had to live for. He had yet to make his first million. Yet to buy that sea-front property. So many dreams left unfulfilled. Oh God. How would his wife and two little kids survive this?

Tears poured down my face.

'Is Ravi alright? Shall I call him back?' I asked. Mumma shook her head.

'No. Not now. He said he has to organise a few things at the office. They are working out what's the best course of action. Suraj's wife and kids are still in Melbourne. He told me he will call you later in the day.'

I nodded.

Poor Ravi. He would be devastated.

We were subdued for the rest of the evening, and no one spoke much. Suraj's death has rocked our little world.

5th February

Ravi has taken his friend's death pretty badly. Now whenever he calls, he sounds subdued and thoughtful.

Although he doesn't talk about him, I know the thought of Suraj's last moments haunt him continuously.

'You should come home, Ravi', I said once. 'It's not good for you being there alone. You have been through a lot. Why don't you ask your company to cut your stay short?'

But Ravi could not see the logic in this. 'No, I will be fine. There's so much work still to be done. Suraj's assignment is incomplete. I am trying to look into that as well.'

I sighed. I know that Ravi would not want to leave things half done and return home. I feel it'll be healthier for him to be with his parents and me at a time when he's feeling upset, but he cannot be convinced.

Ever since hearing Suraj's news, I've been going around in a daze. Jake noticed me lost in thought on a few occasions and finally approached me today to find out if something is wrong.

'Angie. What's up? You haven't been yourself. What's happening?'

It was past 5 pm and everyone else had left. I was reluctant to go home and spend yet another evening watching TV and chatting with Mumma and Papa. I find the evenings the hardest times to get through. After I've talked about my day in general and asked them how theirs had been, there isn't much else to discuss with them. Papa goes for a long walk most evenings, and after returning home, has a shower and spends the rest of his time listening to the radio. Mumma either sews, or watches old Hindi movies she has bought from the Indian shop. She cooks most weekdays, leaving the dishes soaking in soapy water in the sink for me to wash up after I get home from work. I snuggle into bed as soon as I've had dinner and read until past midnight. But I've been getting bored and have started finding excuses to stay longer at work. Jake never leaves before 6 pm and we have got into the habit of sitting at his desk and chatting. Jake is well travelled and he regales me with stories of his adventures. His youth had been pretty wild and I listen wide-eyed, sipping tea while he drinks beer. He has had several girlfriends but none had stuck around long enough to become Mrs Ellis. He makes me laugh and often exaggerates a few things to shock me. Culturally, we are miles apart, which makes him all the more attractive to me. I love sitting near him, my chin cupped in my hands, just listening to him. He has a laugh that is slightly throaty, and I go to a great deal of trouble to say clever and witty things just to hear it.

'Is something bothering you?' he asked.

'A few things.'

'Want to talk about it?'

I sighed. 'No, not really. I am trying not to think about it.'

'Angie, sometimes it's best to talk about it and get it off your chest. Is it your husband? Is something the matter?'

I was startled. Jake seldom mentions Ravi. He knows Ravi is away for a long time but that is as far as his knowledge about my personal life goes.

'No. It's something else.'

I told Jake briefly about Suraj. He listened carefully without interrupting.

'You poor thing. I can see why you're upset.'

I didn't want to talk about Suraj. It made me depressed and teary.

Jake sensed that and leaning forward, looked into my eyes. 'Angie, will you have dinner with me tonight?'

I was so startled that for a moment I could think of no reply. His eyes held mine and I couldn't tear my gaze away.

'I ... I ... no, I have to go home.'

'Why?'

'I just do.'

'Why?'

I shook my head but remained silent, shocked at how much I wanted the evening to continue. Jake reached out and took my hands, holding them lightly. My skin tingled and involuntarily, I pressed my fingers against his.

'Please say yes, Angie. Please.'

The room was silent except for the ticking of the clock in the main office, outside. We were in a tiny bubble of our own, isolated from the rest of the world. I looked at him for a long time, noticing the stubble on his chin, the light scar above his eyebrow and my heart turned over.

'Okay.'

'Woohoo,' he said and looked so much like a happy schoolboy, I was forced to laugh.

I called home. Papa listened while I stammered about coming home late due to a work dinner. I felt terrible. What was I doing? Why had I agreed to have dinner with Jake? Maybe I should cancel the whole thing. Yes, that made sense. It was the safest thing to do. But ... it was just a meal. What could be the harm in that?

Just then I sensed Jake standing near me and I turned to look at him, the phone still against my ear. I felt the warm fabric of his suit brush against my arm, smelled the faint fragrance of his woody, earthy aftershave lotion. I was lost.

I heard Papa's voice from a distance, as though he was speaking from the end of a long tunnel, asking me how I would get home so late. I heard myself replying that a colleague would drop me and not to worry. Finally, I hung up and turned to look up at Jake. We were standing very close.

'Jake ...'

His eyes lingered over my face. Finally, 'Shall we go, Angie?'

I nodded.

He shut the main door and locked it. I shivered a little. With a tiny sigh, I walked with him to the car park.

It was going to be one harmless dinner after all.



We went to an Italian restaurant in Leichhardt, which is the Little Italy of Sydney. Even though it's Friday, it wasn't too crowded and the perky young waitress led us to a corner table for two.

Soft music was playing and I heard the clink of wine glasses and the low hum of conversation as I walked past other tables.

'What shall we order?' Jake asked.

I glanced at the menu. The options, although limited, sounded delicious. I wanted to be adventurous and go past the usual pasta or pizza choices.

'I think ... I will have the chicken and sundried tomato risotto.'

'Sounds good', Jake grinned. 'And what will you have to drink? Wine?'

'I ... I don't drink.' But I was tempted. Anne had urged me a couple of times to at least try a sweet white wine, which she thought I might enjoy more than a red, but so far I had declined.

'Oh Angie,' groaned Jake, looking disappointed, 'do me the honour of being the only person in the universe to coax you into the wicked world of alcohol.'

I giggled. 'Well ...'

'Exactly. Let me order for you. I think I know what you will like. And if you don't like it after a sip, leave it. Does that sound reasonable?'

It did.

Anne's lessons in fine dining came in handy. When my steaming bowl of risotto arrived, I knew how to eat it.

The wine was heady and sweet. I took a tentative sip and rolled it around

on my tongue.

'Like it?' Jake asked.

I nodded. It was delicious.

'Now, don't just guzzle it. It will go straight to your head. Take nice, easy sips.'

We talked for nearly two hours, long after our plates were cleared. My growing up years in India, his travelling adventures, the early years of struggle before he started Ellis World Travels. He was a wonderful listener, leaning forward and giving me his full attention. He found everything I said, however banal, hugely fascinating. It was his absorbed interest that was so flattering. In his presence, I felt clever, witty and funny.

I looked at my watch and was surprised to find that it was nearly 10 pm.

'Jake, it's getting late.'

'It's only ten, Angie. I was thinking we could go to a pub maybe. They stay open until late. I don't want to let you go just yet. Will you stay?'

When he looked like that, so forlorn yet eager, it was hard to resist. But I knew I couldn't do it. The wine had seeped into my veins, making me light headed and carefree. But I had to get home.

'I can't, Jake. Maybe another time. I'm sorry.'

'You are a cruel, heartless woman', he said lightly, but I sensed he was disappointed.

He paid the bill and looked annoyed when I said I would pay my share. 'No, Angie. You're not paying.'

We walked to his car. During the drive to my place, I was quiet. I was feeling slightly dizzy. Jake drove fast, but I could tell he was a careful driver. We pulled up outside my building around 10.45 pm. I sat still for

a few seconds, my hands in my lap and stared straight ahead into the darkness. I felt him stir and turn towards me.

'Good night, Jake', I said, not looking at him. I hadn't moved.

'Angie ...'

I turned my face towards him just as he leaned towards me.

Our lips met.

The kiss was gentle. I closed my eyes. It seemed to go on forever.

At last, I pushed him gently away and opened my door.

'I ... I must go.'

'Good night, Angie.'

I looked away, and glanced up at my balcony. It was shrouded in darkness.

'Good night, Jake', I said, still not looking at him.

I turned and ran and didn't stop until I reached my floor. Gently, almost soundlessly, I turned the key in the latch and entered. I was home.

19th February

Our flight for Cairns left, as scheduled, on the dot of 6.15 am.

I was seated next to Kimberley, who dozed off as soon as the seat belt sign was switched off. Jake sat by himself a few rows down. I could just about see the tip of his blonde head from where I sat. He hadn't said a single word to me during the entire time we were waiting for our flight. I glanced at him several times, but he laughed and joked with Kate, Mimi and Freya and did not look at me once. After The Kiss, we have been

careful around each other. Guarded. Alert. There has been a slight shift in our friendship. We are more aware of each other, and yet we go out of our way not to show it.

As soon as we landed, we grabbed our bags from the carousel and hurried to a waiting maxi-taxi, which drove us at a leisurely pace to our hotel. Queenslanders are amazingly laid-back and do everything at a relaxed pace which is quite soothing to observe.

Kate and the other girls squealed, giggled and sang off-key for the entire drive. Jake, sitting in the front next to the driver, looked preoccupied. I refused to look at him.

From mid-day to 1 pm, we attended a sales seminar, which was held in an ornate, oval room in the hotel, called 'Pearl Hall'. This was followed by a cold lunch, which consisted of an assortment of sandwiches, wraps, salads and fruit juices.

Kimberley had organised a team building session at a nearby park. We would be playing Volleyball, Tug of War and Grass Soccer. I was stunned. Did grown-ups really play these games? I had never played volleyball or soccer, and had only participated once in a tug-of-war at school. I was petrified that I would make a laughing stock of myself.

We started with tug-of-war.

'We need to position ourselves smartly. Angie, you go first. Then you, Jake. Mimi, stand behind Jake. And I'll take last position. It's crucial that the person at the back can take control of the entire team and I'll be good at that', said Joe, sounding like an army drill sergeant.

Everyone laughed. 'Modest Joe', said Jake, winking at him.

As soon as our instructor blew the whistle, we dug our heels into the ground and began pulling the rope. I wound my arms around the thick, rough rope, closed my eyes and pulled with all my strength. Nothing happened. I wasn't moving. Slowly, I felt the strong pull of the opposite team, and my legs began slipping in the sand. The rope cut into the soft

flesh of my upper arms and I began to be dragged towards the line drawn in the centre. I could not cross that line. My team would lose.

I lost balance and slid to the ground, all the while clinging for dear life to the rope. I could hear Jake and Joe behind me, grunting loudly and pulling with all their might. Mimi's loud giggles floated over the air. 'Get up, Angie. C'mon you can do it!' she screamed and dissolved into fresh giggles.

Oh no. We were going to lose. I was being dragged towards the finish line and I could feel my team being dragged down behind me as well.

Suddenly I felt Jake's arm circle my waist and pull me up from the ground.

'Angie! Pull!' he yelled.

Our team dug their heels in, and with all four members now back in position, we managed to pull the opposite team over the finish line just seconds before the buzzer signalled the end of the event.

As everyone jumped in the air and exchanged high-fives, I turned to look at Jake. His hair was untidy and he had mud on his nose.

'Thank you', I said.

'I'm glad we won.'

We stood silent, neither knowing what to say. Freya called out to him to come and grab a drink of water. He was just about to turn away, when he reached out a hand towards me and removed a stray leaf that had got entangled in my hair. It was an oddly intimate gesture.

We exchanged a long look, then turned to go off in opposite directions.

20th February

Dinner tonight was a fancy, formal affair. There were other hotel guests there as well, and the room was crowded. There was mild tension between Jake and me. We exchanged glances often across the table. I would be giggling with Kate or Freya and when I looked up, I would find him staring at me.

'Why aren't you drinking, Angie?' Mimi exclaimed. 'C'mon. Be a sport. Have this.' She poured chilled white wine into a glass. I stared at it for a long time.

'C'mon. Bottoms up!' Kate picked up her glass and nodded pointedly at mine. I decided to throw caution to the winds and followed suit.

'Angie. Go easy', I heard Jake warn from across the table. But it was too late. With a feeling of wild abandon, I brought the glass to my lips and emptied it within seconds.

Suddenly, there was a burst of loud music and someone yelled into a microphone that the dance floor was now open. 'C'mon, everybody!'

Chairs scraped, people got to their feet and hurried towards the dance floor. 'C'mon Angie. Let's dance', said Kate, pulling me as she half-danced, half-walked. Somewhere along the way, she disappeared and I found myself surrounded by strangers. The lights dimmed. The room turned dark.

I wasn't a good dancer. Never have been. I was only going to embarrass myself. Maybe it was best if I went to my room now. What if—

'Angie'. His voice was a low hiss in my ear. I jumped. 'Shall we dance?' His arm went around my waist but he held me at a distance. I began trembling.

'I can't dance, Jake.'

'Nonsense. Everyone can dance.'

'No, I can't.'

'Then I'll teach you.' He spoke softly and pulled me close. 'Will you learn from me, Angie?'

I gazed into his eyes.

The memory of standing within the circle of Ravi's arms on my first day in Australia, shortly after I had arrived from the airport, hit me out of nowhere. How happy I had been. How excited and full of dreams and hopes. As I began drowning in Jake's eyes, I remembered the old Anjali, the girl I had once been and looked around frantically for her. I needed to find her urgently. She would know what to do. But Anjali was gone. I had left her behind, and come so far that she could never hope to find me. It wasn't Anjali dancing in Jake's arms. It was Angie.

I closed my eyes and leaned into him. The wine had begun to take effect. I felt dizzy, as though I was floating on air. Jake held me lightly and I was surprised at how beautiful a dancer he was.

After an hour on the dance floor, the wine had definitely gone to my head.

'Jake,' I whispered. The music drowned out my voice.

I shook his arm and he leaned low. 'Jake, I'm leaving. I need to sleep.'

'I'll walk you to your room.'

I wasn't entirely steady on my legs. How could just one drink have such an effect on me? He put an arm around me as we walked towards the elevator. There was no one else in the corridor.

The elevator door opened and we walked in. I pressed '4'. He leaned across me and hit '6'. The doors shut with a soft hiss.

We stood side by side, our arms barely touching and stared straight ahead. My head felt soft and mushy after the wine.

The 1st Floor ... 2nd ... 3rd ...

Our fingers touched and entwined.

4th ... My level had arrived. The door began to slide open ... I moved to step forward. Felt myself being pulled back. The door closed. Our lips met.

We embraced and kissed. A long, slow, deep kiss.

6th ...

The door opened. We were still kissing as we stepped out of the lift.

With his left hand around my waist, he pulled out the key card to his room with his right and opened the door.

Cupping my face in both his hands, he whispered 'I love you, Angie'. Tears fell hot on my cheeks as we stumbled into his room, locked in a fierce embrace.

Behind us, the door made a creaking sound and shut with a soft click.

28th February

My night of lovemaking with Jake has been on my mind for the past several days. When I let myself consciously tap into my feelings, I feel guilty about how much I enjoyed it. That night, he had been a passionate, yet thoughtful, lover, holding me for a long time afterwards and whispering 'I love you' over and over again. I had wept in his arms, grateful for what he had given me, heartbroken for what I had done, convinced I could never go back to being the same person I was before I met him.

I've come back from Port Douglas a different woman. Frightened. Shrivelled. Shocked at what I've done. Ravi is back from Auckland too and the effort of pretending that everything is normal is beginning to take its toll on my mind and body. I have lost my appetite and sleep evades me most nights. New, irrational fears and phobias plague me

through the day. If someone sneezes as I'm about to leave the house, I'm convinced I will have bad luck for the rest of the day. I jump at the slightest noise and spend most of my time wondering if anyone has guessed about what happened that night at the conference.

I now lie awake for hours each night, thinking about my life, about the person I was, the person I've become. Almost overnight, I've become obsessed with wanting to save my marriage. I can't stop thinking about how hurt and devastated my parents will be if Ravi and I separate. Will they survive the shock of my marriage ending? But even more than hurting my parents, it's the thought of having betrayed Ravi that haunts me the most. Had he been an alcoholic or a wife-beater or a womanizer, I could justify to myself that what I did with Jake was natural. Ravi is none of that. The biggest flaw in my marriage has been its lack of emotional connection. And the fact that I found that emotional connection with Jake, and not my husband, is what is so hard to bear. I can't really explain what I'm feeling. All I know is that I cannot walk away from my marriage. I cannot hurt Ravi more than I already have.

The day after I got back from Cairns, I wrote out a list of Ravi's favourite things. What does he like most in life? A neat home. A clean home. Good food. I could think of nothing else. I racked my brains for a long time to think of something to add to the list but could come up with nothing. If that was all it took to keep him happy, I was determined to do it. I've been cleaning the house every single day. The artefacts are polished to within an inch of their lives. My wardrobe has been emptied and I've re-arranged all my clothes into neatly folded piles. Some have been draped carefully over wooden hangers. The chaos in my mind is soothed temporarily by the tidy rooms at home.

Although I was never really fond of cooking before, I now spend my evenings after work poring over recipe books and then preparing Ravi's favourite dishes. The more complicated a dish, the more eager I am to prepare it, almost as though the complexity will somehow ease my pain. I've made *gulab jamuns*, *biryani* and even *laddoos* over the past few days. Every morning, I am up at the crack of dawn to make Ravi a hot cooked breakfast and then to iron his business shirts.

'You finally know how to iron', he said the other day, looking surprised and pleased. 'Wow, I should go away more often.' When he saw me this morning scrubbing the cabinet under the kitchen sink, he looked at me strangely. 'Don't you think you are taking this whole cleaning thing a bit too far? Are you feeling alright, Anjali?' he asked.

'Alright?' I asked puzzled, feeling a headache coming on. 'Yes. I'm okay. Why do you ask?'

'I don't know. You just haven't been yourself lately. Ever since I got back, you've been acting strange. What's with this domestic diva act?'

'I don't think I was that bad before, Ravi', I said, no longer hurt by what he said.

He laughed. 'You know what I mean. Why are you being so nice to me all of a sudden? Ironing my clothes. Cooking these fantastic meals. Tell me now, what have you done?'

I stared at him. He knew. Of course he knew. He must have found out.

'Why do you ask me that?' I said.

'Well, you must have done *something* since you are buttering me up so much. What is it? Did you scratch the car while I was away?'

I heaved a sigh of relief. No, he didn't know. My terrible secret was still safe.

My relationship with Ravi has changed in small ways. Over the last few days, I've got into the habit of going to bed a couple of hours before he comes to the room. As soon as my eyes close, I have visions of what happened in Port Douglas and I break out into a cold sweat. I don't want Ravi to see all that. By the time he comes to bed, I have slayed my demons and fallen asleep.

Tonight Ravi came to bed and leaned over to switch off the night lamp. I looked up from my diary and caught a wistful expression on his face.

'Anjali', he said, softly.

But it was too soon. I could not bring myself to do it.

'I'm very tired, Ravi', I lied. 'Can we sleep? I have to wake up early tomorrow.'

I knew he was surprised. And more than a little hurt that I wasn't eager to make love. The old Anjali would have never done that. She would have happily snuggled in his arms, excited to receive the smallest crumbs of attention.

I'm not the old Anjali any more.

1st March

Working at Ellis World Travels has become a nightmare. Although I've been pouring all my energy into my marriage, I'm still very much in love with Jake. My body reacts every time he comes close. I ache to touch him. To feel his arms around me. After what we shared in Port Douglas, I know, at last, how beautiful and fulfilling the act of making love can be.

Frightened by the force of my feelings, I've decided to back away from him. Wanting to put some distance between us, I handed back Fred Townsend and other major accounts this morning. Jake looked hurt and taken aback.

'Angie, why are you doing this?' he whispered in an anguished voice. 'It isn't meant to be like this. What we have is good. We are so good together.'

My eyes filled up. He was right. We have been good together. But there is no future for us. I'm not free to love him. How can I simply toss my marriage aside and move on? In my mind, there aren't any valid reasons for ending my relationship with Ravi. And that, I guess, is what's playing havoc with my mind. Other than being a largely absent husband, Ravi

hasn't really done anything wrong.

All my life I had pined for that one special love. Someone to adore me. Hold me. Think the world of me. I had wanted a true, old-fashioned romance. Jake Ellis gave me all that. But I don't really want to go down that path. I need to work on my marriage and somehow find that love within its confines.

Maybe a part of me will love Jake forever. But loving him can only bring heartache and destruction. It is a doomed love. An impossible love. The sooner we both recognise that and put some distance between us, the better it will be for all concerned.

I've decided to start looking for a new job.

4th March

It's finally time for Mumma and Papa to return to India.

I cannot believe how fast the months have gone by. Ironically, after having wished that she would go back soon, now that it's time for Mumma to leave, I don't want her to. In my raw emotional state, I do not want to be left alone with Ravi. My relationship with Mumma has shifted slightly. We understand each other better now. My improved housekeeping skills haven't missed her eagle eye either. She even complimented me a few times. Occasionally, she pats my shoulder affectionately as soon as I walk in the door from work or gets me a glass of Horlicks if I am too rushed to eat breakfast.

'I wish you could stay longer', I said to Papa a couple of times, sad at the thought of not seeing his kind, smiling face every morning. Over the months I've got used to walking out of my bedroom and seeing him sitting in the balcony sipping tea and reading the paper.

'*Aga bala* (my child), we have stayed for so long. We were only going to be here for three months originally. But it's been six months already. We need to go home now.'

I knew I would miss them both terribly.



Ravi and I went to the airport to drop them off. When we returned home, our mood was sombre and sad. The house felt empty and lifeless. I walked into the bedroom Papa and Mumma had used for all these months. There, forgotten on the chair in the corner, was Papa's black and white sweater, the one he wore when he went grocery shopping for me.

Just the sight of it reminded me so strongly of Papa and his kindness towards me over the months that I burst out crying.

I buried my face in the old, sweet smelling sweater, and wept for a long time.

8th March

My marriage is still very much a living, breathing thing. We make love occasionally, but my heart is not in it. Sex is the last thing on my mind these days. I've gone along with it whenever Ravi initiates it because I'm hoping it will bring us close. But as soon as I close my eyes, I remember Jake looking down at me. The way his blue eyes had looked into mine as he had kissed my neck, forehead, lips. Ravi blurs into the background. It is Jake I make love to. As I arch my body, it is Jake I melt into. Only when I open my eyes does Ravi's face zoom back into focus. I have become so petrified of calling out Jake's name during our lovemaking, that I now make excuses all the time. 'Sorry Ravi, not tonight. I have a headache' or 'I can't. It's that time of the month.'

I can't seem to get rid of the guilt. It has seeped into my consciousness and stays with me all day every day. I've always considered marriage to be sacred. My parents raised me to believe that my husband should be my mentor, friend and lover all rolled into one. Falling in love with Jake, and ultimately sleeping with him, has turned all those long-held values upside down and left me in a state of constant self-flagellation. I've tried

justifying to myself my betrayal of marriage vows. There's nothing else I can call it. In my mind, what I did can only be called a betrayal. But no matter how many reasons I've tried coming up with – Ravi was never around or Ravi never tried bringing romance into our marriage or Jake set out to seduce me – I keep returning to the core point that's troubling me: I have wronged my husband and no reason is good enough to justify it. Aai and Baba will be heartbroken if they ever find out. They had such high hopes when I married Ravi. How proud they had been that their oldest daughter had married an NRI and improved her lot in life. How can I walk away from my marriage, knowing that my parents will never recover from such a blow? I want to love Ravi. I want to learn to love him. Our marriage needs a second lease of life.

I guess if I try hard enough, I will someday forget Jake. Or at the very least, I can lessen the hold he has over me. How can I be certain that what I feel for him is the real thing? What if it turns out to be mere infatuation? We are too different. Our cultures and upbringing are worlds apart. Jake and I would never work out.



Ravi has been slowly changing too. In many ways, for the better. Suraj's death reminded him that nothing is permanent. One has to live for today instead of some distant day in the future.

I came home from work today, expecting to spend the evening by myself and was shocked to find Ravi already home. This has never happened in all the months I've been married to him. What surprised me more was that he wasn't engrossed in his office work. He wasn't reading a file or on the phone or working on a presentation. Instead, he was standing in the balcony, drinking wine and deep in thought.

'Ravi, I didn't expect you at home.'

'My last two meetings got cancelled. I was tired and decided to come home.'

I looked at him, alarmed. This was unlike Ravi. 'Are you alright? You don't look well. Do you have fever?' I leaned forward to touch his forehead, but he shook his head and caught hold of my hand.

'I'm okay. But I have been thinking.'

My heart began to pound.

'I'm still troubled by Suraj's death. He practically died in front of my eyes. Some days I cannot stop thinking about him, about the whole waste of a life.'

I continued to listen.

'So young. So much to live for. He was only thirty-five, Anju. He had so many dreams. Wanted to be a millionaire by the time he was forty, just like I do, and he always dreamt of living in a big, sprawling mansion in Neutral Bay or Edgecliff. Wanted to travel the world and see the seven wonders. He worked all the hours God gave us and look what happened. He died before he could make even a single dream come true. What a terrible, terrible waste.'

Suddenly, he pulled me close. I squirmed. 'Anjali, I haven't been a good husband to you.'

I wondered if this was a dream. All my married life, I had dreamt that Ravi would say something romantic and give me his undivided attention. But that had never happened. Until now.

He looked at me and tenderness softened his eyes. 'Suraj's passing away taught me so many things. I am always chasing the tomorrows instead of living the todays. I want to be a millionaire by the time I am thirty-five. But who is to guarantee I will even live that long? We need to start enjoying life straightaway, not at some distant point in the future.'

I thought my heart would break. Why hadn't he said this months ago? Long before I set eyes on Jake.

I took his hand gently in mine. 'I used to miss you so much when you travelled', I said.

He gathered me into his arms and I began crying, my head against his chest. There was sadness in his voice as he spoke. 'I could never see beyond my own ambition to make something of my life. I was sick of living a middle class existence. I have seen my own father, brilliantly talented, remain a lowly paid employee. He had had the potential to be so much more. But he never had the will, the drive to demand more from life. By the time I grew up, I wanted to be nothing like him. I became obsessed with getting away from mediocrity. Foreign shores beckoned. I got here and realised my colour and accent were the only two things that stood between success and me. I drove myself into the ground, worked all the time and kept fun, enjoyment and living on the back burner. But I'm willing to change.' There was a pause and then, 'will you help me?' he whispered, and his breath tickled my ear.

My face was still hidden against his chest.

I would have willingly, happily helped him a few months ago. But in a few short weeks, my whole world has turned upside down. I am powerless to change anything in my marriage until I tell him the truth about what happened in Port Douglas.

And I'm not brave enough to do that. Just yet.

11th March

My secret has made it impossible for me to have normal relationships with those around me. I've been avoiding Naina, Vibha and Sonali and I know they are suspecting that something is wrong.

Jake seems to have taken my message to heart and is going out of his way to maintain a distance. He stays at his desk for long periods and no longer socialises the way he used to.

I had always thought I was good at keeping secrets. But this one is

slowly tearing me apart. Something drastic needs to be done quickly. Or I will, indeed, lose my mind.

14th March

This morning I could not find the birth control pills. They weren't in their usual place. I always keep them in the third drawer of my bedside table, tucked under some empty envelopes. At first, I moved things around gently, expecting to touch the pack. Then I became more frantic. It had disappeared. I racked my brains to remember if I had taken it to another room. I ran into the bathroom to see if it was there. But it wasn't. It was vital that I found it. I returned to my bedroom and finally found the pack, pushed to the back of the drawer. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Ravi was ironing his shirt and smiled at me as I walked past him into the kitchen. 'What's for breakfast?' he asked.

'One of your favourites.'

'Upma?'

I nodded.

Instead of taking the shortcut of preparing it only with onions, mustard seeds and curry leaves, I went the extra mile, adding peas, tomatoes, green chillies, turmeric and grated coconut. Ravi rubbed his hands with glee.

'Yummy. What's the occasion?' he asked.

I smiled but didn't say anything. Pushing aside some magazines, I placed his breakfast and cup of tea on the table.

'What time did you wake up? All this food, ready so soon?'

I looked at him. It was a dull, gloomy morning. I could hear the rain hitting the glass, making the windows shake and rattle. The temptation,

the terrible urge to tell him everything, was weighing me down.

'Anju', he said, quietly. He had eaten a bit of the *upma* and placed his bowl back on the table.

He came towards me and placed both his arms on my shoulders. 'You are always so busy nowadays. Scuttling around all day. Rarely in the same room with me. There's something I want to tell you. Ask you, rather.'

He sat down on one of the chairs and pulled me into his lap. I was finding it difficult to handle this new, improved, loving Ravi. A few months ago, I would have given anything to have him draw me close and whisper sweet nothings. But not anymore.

'I think it's time', he said slowly.

I froze. 'What?'

'Let's have a baby, Anju. I think it's time.'

I felt the treacherous, familiar tears sting my eyes. A baby. Oh, a baby! To hold and kiss and cuddle. Someone who would be a little piece of myself. And then it hit me. We couldn't conceive a baby on a foundation of deception. I could not have a baby with Ravi knowing I was in love with another man.

My tears fell and he mistook them for joy.

'Oh my love,' he drew me close, pressing my head against his chest, 'we are going to be so happy. I know it. I can feel it in my bones. I want you to stop taking those birth control pills. Toss them out now. We no longer need them.'

I hugged him fiercely and cried, certain that my heart would break. If only I could turn back time. If only we had had this conversation a few months ago. I didn't continue the discussion of the pills. But I was determined that I would keep taking them until I had confessed the truth

to Ravi. I could not risk an accidental pregnancy. Not while so much was still unresolved.

I felt myself falling into a dark, deep tunnel, flailing my arms as I tumbled headlong, knowing that I was trapped and that there was no way out.

17th March

I woke up this morning having made up my mind that I had to tell someone about what I had done. I could not go on like this – crying at the drop of a hat, over-analysing everything people said. I thought about whom to confide in. My mother was not an option. She would kill me with her bare hands. Anne would be ideal. But she was away on a holiday for two weeks, spending time with her family on the Central Coast where she grew up. I couldn't interrupt her time with her parents. Vibha was my next choice. But as luck would have it, Vibha was away too, at a work conference. It would have to be Naina. Naina would understand. Hadn't she always said life was for living?

I picked up the phone. She was surprised to hear my voice. 'Oh, my. If it isn't the elusive Mrs Jathar herself', she said and burst out laughing. 'To what, pray, do I owe this honour?'

'Naina, can we meet this afternoon? There's something I need to tell you.'

'How come you're at home today? No work?'

'I've taken a sickie. Was feeling under the weather.'

I waited anxiously all morning, looking at the clock every few minutes. My appetite had vanished and by the time she finally rang my doorbell at 2 pm, I had whipped myself into a frenzy.



Naina looked shocked when she saw me. My eyes were bloodshot from having cried all morning. My hair stood on end, giving me a wild, half crazed appearance and my nose was bright red from the constant scrubbing and blowing.

'Anju, you look terrible. What's the matter?' she asked, as she entered the living room and shut the door.

One look at her and I burst into loud tears. I threw myself into her arms, and she tottered backwards. I cannot recall how long we sat with our arms around each other. I was sobbing on her shoulder. She didn't ask any questions. She simply smoothed my hair and kept repeating 'there there'. Finally, I stopped crying.

'Anjali, you've been acting a bit strange for a few days. I knew there was something wrong. And I want to help you. Will you tell me now what's bothering you?' I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand and began telling Naina.



Throughout my friendship with Naina, she had regaled me with stories of things she had done and things that had happened to her. The colleague who deliberately missed his bus each morning, so he could hop on to hers. The mysterious cards that arrived every birthday, Valentine's Day and Christmas from 'a secret admirer'. The phone calls she often received with only heavy breathing at the other end. The dashing salesman she had 'nearly' kissed at a Christmas party after too much wine. Naina had always egged me on to do brave and wicked things. 'Nothing wrong with flirting now and then', she'd said. 'Keeps a marriage alive, if you ask me.' She was the only friend of mine who believed marriage to be one thing, fidelity quite another.

But her reaction to my story was the complete opposite of what I had been expecting. There was dead silence. The woman who stared back at me showed none of the warmth and exuberance that I associated with her.

'You *slept* with him?' she asked, her shocked voice ringing out in the quiet room like a gunshot.

My eyes filled with tears and I kept shaking my head from side to side. 'I don't know what came over me. He was so intense. Wherever I turned, he was there. And I was lonely. So, so lonely.' I clutched her hand. 'What should I do, Naina? Please help me.' I began crying. She let her hand lie limp in mine for a few seconds before slowly moving it away.

'Anjali, have you lost your mind?' she said, her voice shaking. 'Completely and truly lost your mind? Why? Why on earth did you do it?' I was taken aback. I hadn't expected her to condone it. But neither had I expected outrage. 'I don't know what to say to you. I really don't', she said. 'I will have to go home and think about it.' And she added as a parting shot, 'But I really can't see how you could have been so silly.' An odd look flitted through her eyes as she turned away, leaving me completely lost. I knew Naina well enough by now. The look was one of pure jealousy.

21st March

We had the 'baby' discussion today. Again.

'I know I used to always say that there's plenty of time to have a baby, Anjali,' Ravi said, as he watched me stir sugar into our coffee mugs, 'but not anymore. You're twenty-seven now. I think the time is right.'

This time I could bear it no longer. The strain of hiding my terrible secret about Jake and the fact that I was still taking the pills was driving me insane. Taking a deep breath, I said, 'Ravi, I don't think the time is right.'

He looked shocked. 'Are you crazy? You're the one who begged me for months to have a baby. What kind of a game are you playing, Anjali? Why this sudden change of heart?'

Because I am a liar. A cheat. A coward. There had been a few occasions

when I had nearly confessed to Ravi. At the last minute, though, my courage would fail me. This time too, I evaded the truth.

'Because you are always travelling. Always busy. The baby needs you here. What's the point of being an absent father?' We stared at each other, more adversaries than friends. The air was silent and still. Ravi narrowed his eyes and I wondered if he was thinking about when the dynamics in our marriage had changed so much. Without another word, he turned around and left the room.

26th March

This morning, I got a call from India that terrified me. A few months ago, the same call would have sent me into dizzy waves of excitement. My parents are coming to Australia. Aai is turning fifty in a couple of months and she wants to spend the milestone birthday in Sydney. I knew it would give her bragging rights for the rest of her life and she would be able to regale her neighbours in Mumbai with tales of all the fun she had had.

Ravi was excited when I told him. 'That's wonderful news. Their first time in Australia. We should start planning the birthday bash. Maybe have a Sargam programme in her honour. We can sing her favourite songs. I will speak to the group today.'

I could not bring myself to share his enthusiasm, infectious though it was. My mother would guess within seconds of arriving that there was something wrong and she would not rest until she had uncovered the truth.

Something had to be done. Telling Naina about Jake had backfired. I had waited several days for her to get back to me. But she didn't call and didn't answer the phone when I did. I had left two messages on her voicemail. Now, the only person who could help me was the one I had meant to call first. She would be back from her holiday by now. And I knew she would have all the answers.



I decided to call Annalise Gallagher.

Anne answered on the first ring.

'Anjeelee!' she exclaimed on hearing my voice. 'How come you're ringing me so early in the morning?'

'Anne, I need to speak to you. Are you free this evening for a quick coffee after work?'

'For you, anytime', she laughed. 'Is everything okay?'

'I don't know. But I do know that you can help.'

We spoke for a few more minutes and then I hung up.



Anne walked into the coffee shop ten minutes late, looking apologetic and a bit rushed.

'Sorry. Silly meeting ran on forever. Couldn't escape. Shall we order?'

We ordered an extra hot flat white with two sugars for me and a weak cappuccino for Anne.

Once our drinks arrived, Anne took a quick gulp and pushed back her cup. 'What's the matter? You don't look too well.'

'Yes, I want to tell you something.'

She waited. I waited. Then at last, 'I slept with another man.'

She was silent. No exclamations. No hysterics. Around us, life went on as normal. People placed their orders, friends greeted each other, food was served, bills were paid. Anne and I remained isolated in our own

bubble, two friends locked in a battle of confession and reaction.

'Do you regret it?' she asked finally, throwing me off guard. It wasn't a question I was expecting.

I thought for a few moments before replying. 'I regret that I cheated on my husband. I regret that I will end up hurting him. But I don't regret what happened. I don't know how to explain it.'

'I imagine Ravi doesn't know?'

'No. It's not that I haven't wanted to tell him. Every time I make up my mind, I find myself losing courage within seconds.'

There was sadness and compassion in her cornflower blue eyes. 'Are you still with this other man? Is the affair over?'

'It wasn't an affair. Not really. We slept together once. But, I think, somewhere along the way, I fell in love with him.'

'Do you want to leave Ravi?'

'No!'

'Why not? You just said you're in love with this other man.'

Tears spilled out of my eyes and began rolling down my cheeks. Anne leaned forward, pulled a couple of tissues from a box and handed them to me. 'Oh, darling. Don't cry. I'm just trying to understand. I want to help you. But you need to understand yourself first.'

'I don't know anything anymore. I'm so sick of thinking.'

'Let's get down to the basics. You can only answer 'yes' or 'no'. Do you want to save your marriage?'

'Yes.'

'Are you prepared to give up this other man?'

'Yes.'

'Even though you know you're in love with him?'

'Yes.'

Anne sighed. 'It looks like you know all the answers already. You just haven't looked deep enough for them.' She thought for a few minutes. 'I've read somewhere that love, lust and relationship are three elements of marriage. It's possible to have one, two or all three factors. It appears that while you may be in love with this other guy, you are willing, and actually eager, to build a relationship with Ravi. I guess the love you want to feel for your husband will develop over time if you both give it a try. But I need to understand one thing. Why are you so determined to continue with Ravi?'

I reached out and held her hand. 'I cannot say my marriage has failed when it was never really given a chance to succeed. Had we tried hard to make things work and then given up, it would all make sense. But in our case, Ravi and I have barely had time together to build our marriage and see it grow. We haven't nurtured it. How then can I say it has failed?'

Anne squeezed my hand and nodded. 'True. What do you want to do?'

'I want to tell Ravi. He deserves to know.'

'Why? Have you considered not telling him? If you're prepared to work at your marriage, why not let what happened die a natural death?'

I was shocked. I had never considered not telling Ravi. If I hide this from him, the very foundation of my marriage will be a lie.

'Is that what you are recommending? That I keep my silence?'

'No, I'm not. But it is a question you need to consider. If only to get to the heart of the matter.'

'I need to tell him, Anne. Please help me. You have known him much longer than I have. You will know what to do. Please tell me.'

'Let me think.' She ordered another round of coffees for us and stared for a long time at the floor.

'He will be puzzled. That's the first thing he will feel. After the initial rage, that is', Anne said. 'Knowing Ravi, he will analyse the whole thing, trying to figure out why you did what you did.'

Was this my cue to give a justification to Anne about what had happened with Jake? But she continued speaking.

'He will not understand your actions. Not at first. His pride won't let him.'

'I am prepared to face his anger', I said, a pleading note creeping into my voice. 'But do you think he will come around some day? Forgive me eventually?'

'That I can't answer', she said, a little sadly. 'No matter how well you know another human being, they can always prove you wrong. When was the last time someone you thought you knew did something that surprised you?'

I was silenced by the memory of Naina.

Anne pushed her cup away and gently took both my hands in her own.

'Tell me something. What would you do if you knew for certain that he would never forgive you? Would you still tell him?'

I didn't hesitate even for a second. 'Yes', I said, simply. 'I would still tell him.'

She smiled.

'Then I wish you luck. Don't waste any more time. You must tell him straightaway.'

We pushed back our chairs, stood up and embraced.

It had been Anne to the rescue once more. Some things never change.

2nd April

Ravi has been behaving strangely. I cannot put a finger on it. Occasionally I catch him looking at me with an odd expression on his face. He has become quieter and more reflective than before.

Last night, I decided to tell him after dinner. I prepared one of his favourite dishes, *rajma* and rice, hoping it would soften his mood. But it made no difference. Ravi's mood remained solemn and thoughtful through the entire evening.

As soon as he finished his last mouthful, he gulped down a glass of water and stood up to carry his plate to the kitchen. He then walked to the bathroom to wash his hands and I waited until he got back.

'Ravi, I ... I need to talk to you', I said slowly. My throat hurt.

'What about?' There was a strange look in his eyes. I couldn't explain it. He didn't look angry. Simply grim.

'Come, sit down. Shall I make you some tea?'

'No, no tea.' He sat down on the opposite sofa.

'Ravi, this is not easy for me. But I need to tell you something.'

'Isn't it about time?' he asked.

The question exploded into the room like a bomb. I felt the room spin and I grasped the armrest for support. What on earth could he be talking about? The terror in my eyes must have been obvious because after staring at me for a few seconds, Ravi looked away, shaking his head. 'Why?' he asked, quietly.

I felt tears sting my eyelashes. Not in a million years had I imagined it

would be like this. He had found out before I could tell him. But how? Who could have told him? Only two people knew. Naina and Anne. It couldn't be Naina. I had told her over two weeks ago. Why would she be spilling the beans now after having kept silent for so long? Which left only one other person. Only one other person in the entire world who could have betrayed me. Anne. I felt sick in the pit of my stomach.

'I trusted you', he said. We sat across from each other, two frozen statues, our eyes locked, our hearts separated by a chasm so wide, I feared we could never fill it.

My face crumpled and I began crying. Soft sobs. I hid my face in my hands.

'Ravi, please forgive me. I am so sorry. More sorry than you will ever know. I don't know why I did it. It was just one night with him. One beastly night.' The words tumbled out of my mouth and there was no stopping them. 'It's over now. One mad moment. But I was lonely. So lonely. I missed you so much. All the time. But you ... you were never there. Please forgive me Ravi. Please don't leave me. It will never happen again.'

As I sobbed into my hands, I heard the terrible silence. Ominous. Long. Cold.

Something was wrong. Very wrong. With a terrible sense of foreboding, I looked up. Ravi was sitting upright and shock was written all over his face. He had gone white. My eyes widened in horror as I realised my mistake. Ravi had not known. But ... but what had he meant when he asked me why I had done it?

'Anjali,' he said, finally and his voice was fractured, broken, lost. 'What is all this?'

The tears had dried on my cheeks. Terror grabbed my throat in a vice-like grip. I sprang forward and threw myself at his knees, crouching on the soft carpet, looking up at him. 'Oh my God, Ravi. Oh my God. You asked me. You knew. Didn't you?' I was begging him to say yes.

His lower lip trembled. 'No, Anjali. I didn't. I was talking about the pills. I discovered them the other day at the bottom of your drawer. I had been looking for something I had lost. And I realised you had lied to me about stopping the pills. Or at least you had made me believe you were stopping them. I wondered why. Why, when you have wanted a baby for so long, would you continue with the pill? But now I know why', he said, bitterly. 'You don't want a baby with me, Anjali, because you are sleeping with another man.'

I shook my head. This couldn't be happening.

'Ravi, that is not true. I am not seeing him. I told you it was one stupid mistake. I told you it's over.'

'Ah, one mistake.' He sneered. 'Just one. That's all. How very wise of you to hold back. Not go back for more.' He laughed an empty, wild laugh and suddenly caught my hands and squeezed them hard until I screamed in pain. He pulled me towards him, until my face was inches away from his. 'I don't want to know who he is. But I want to know if you did it in our house. In my bed. Tell me, Anjali. Did you? DID YOU?'

I was sobbing now. Hysterically. 'No. No, Ravi. It was nothing like that.'

He pushed me away with such force that I reeled backwards and fell against the sofa. 'You third grade woman. You are nothing but a whore. Seeking cheap thrills. It's just as well you were taking the pill. No child deserves a mother like you. Get out of my sight. You sicken me!'

He stormed into our bedroom and slammed the door. I curled up on the carpet, my knees pulled close to my chest. I wept until I was nothing but an empty, trembling shell of a woman. I don't know how long I lay there. It felt like hours. Somewhere, near the crack of dawn, I pulled myself up and stumbled towards our room. As I neared, I heard Ravi crying. I had never known Ravi to cry. Not once in all the time we had been married. I held up my hand to knock but I couldn't. I slid down to the floor against the door. The silence of the early morning was punctured by the sounds of weeping, as both Ravi and I, on either sides of the door, wept for a marriage that had died.



I slept in the guest bedroom until 7 am, when the sun's rays, streaming through the blinds, woke me up. I sat up with a headache. The house felt empty. I sensed that Ravi was not around. Filled with panic, I jumped out of bed and ran first to our bedroom. The door was wide open. The room was empty. With a sense of foreboding, I looked into his wardrobe. Several shirts were missing. I looked around for other clues. His toothbrush was gone from the bathroom. He had left! A sob rose in my throat as I ran blindly into the lounge room. I saw a white sheet of paper propped against the fruit bowl. I picked it up with trembling fingers and read his neat writing: 'I can't stay here. Will be at Rishi's for a few days until I figure things out. Don't try to contact me.'

I began crying.

It was exactly what I deserved.



In a fit of rage and bitterness, I wrote my resignation letter this morning, giving 4 weeks' notice. I wondered if Jake would put up a fight. He had been watching me with a worried frown sometimes, and making sure he kept a physical distance between us.

He looked at me sadly when I handed him the thin, sealed envelope and guessed its contents straight away.

'You want to leave', he said, flatly. It was a statement, not a question.

'Yes', I said, looking at the floor. I could not meet his eyes.

'Angie, look at me. Please. Tell me why you're doing this. Haven't I done everything to assure you I won't be making things difficult for you? I care about you deeply. And yet, now that you've made it clear you don't want to take what we shared any further, have I forced you to change your mind? Why then are you running away from me?'

I finally looked up at him and my heart ached on seeing the sadness in his eyes. 'I'm not running away from you, Jake. I'm running away from the person I become when I'm close to you. I cannot think straight when you're around. We need to put some distance between us. I cannot give up on my marriage. I never wanted to give up on my marriage. But then I met you. And well ... things happened.'

He took a step towards me and reached out. Involuntarily, I moved away. I didn't want him to touch me. 'Please don't, Jake. I am trying to be strong. If you ever cared about me, even the slightest, you will help me by ... by ...'

'By what? Pretending I never loved you?'

My eyes filled up, but I remained silent.

'Angie, I won't stop you from doing whatever it is that you want to do. There's only one thing I want to know, though. Did you ever love me? What we shared that night, did that mean anything to you at all? Did I mean anything to you at all?'

I couldn't hold back my tears any longer. They spilled out and I made no effort to wipe them. Jake didn't either. He simply stood there looking at me, his eyes troubled. 'Jake, you know the answer to that very well. You knew it from the beginning.'

'I don't know, Angie. I need you to tell me.'

I don't know how long we stood there, staring at each other. Neither of us moved. Finally, I wiped my tears with the back of my hand. Looking him straight in the eye, I tried to memorise every detail of his face. The light stubble. The scar on his forehead. The blonde curls. The blue eyes. Whenever I'll look back on this moment in the years to come, I want to be able to remember every single thing about him. 'I loved you very much, Jake', I said, so softly that he had to lean forward to hear me. I love him even now. But I will never tell him that.

We smiled at each other sadly. There was nothing more to be said.

Forcing myself to tear my gaze away from his face, I left the room and went to my desk. For the rest of the day, I kept to myself and Jake, sensing it was all over, stayed in his office until all of us had gone home.

5th April

Anne was deeply shocked when I told her. We met up for coffee after work. 'He moved out?' she asked, sounding bewildered.

'Yes. That was expected.'

'No, I didn't think he would. Oh, I knew he would be mad. Devastated. But I didn't think he would move out.'

Anne was looking at me, deep concern etched on her face. 'What are you going to do now? Where to from here?'

I gave her question careful thought. 'You know, Anne, a year ago if someone had told me that Ravi would leave me, I would have wanted to die. A part of me still feels like that. But more than anything else, I feel relieved that he knows. It was him not knowing that was killing me.'

'What if he never returns? If he wants a divorce?' asked Anne, sadly, and I knew she was remembering the end of her own marriage.

'Then I will have to live with the knowledge for the rest of my life that it was me who wrecked my own marriage. No one else was responsible.'

'Are you sure?'

'What do you mean?' I stared at Anne.

She smiled back. 'Anjeelee, there are so many layers to a marriage. So many things that are only known to the couple involved. But in most cases, it does take two to tango. Unless the person who errs is so deeply vicious that he or she would hurt people merely for the sake of hurting. You are not like that. There must have been some reason, however

small, however unjustifiable, for you to have done what you did.'

I wanted to hug her. But I also wanted to set one thing straight.

'Anne, I have always believed in the power of choice. At every crossroad, we have a choice. I made the wrong one. I cannot justify it by saying I had enough reason.'

'You did it because something propelled you towards it. You didn't wake up one morning thinking of ways to hurt Ravi, did you?'

I sighed.

'Anne, this man ... he ... I met him ...'

She held up her hand, cutting me off mid-sentence. 'No, I don't want to know. You will only hate me some day if you tell me now. Don't say anything. Now is not the moment.'

I nodded. It made sense.

'Are you going to call Ravi?' she asked.

'No. He told me not to.'

'Don't be silly. Of course he would say that. But you can't not call him.'

'Anne, I know him. He won't want to hear my voice.'

'It doesn't matter. He needs to know that you want him back, want to set things right. He needs to know you are sorry.'

After some thought, I agreed.

She smiled. 'Promise me you won't spend all your time crying. And that you will call me if you feel like doing anything silly?'

'Like what?'

She shrugged. 'Oh I don't know. Just don't do anything ... silly.'

I smiled through tears. 'I won't throw myself off the balcony. Or swallow sleeping pills.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

We hugged each other and I felt the warmth of our friendship engulf me in a warm glow. Who would have thought this was possible? We had been married to the same man, quarrelled and argued with and loved him ... and finally moved away from him.

And we are friends. I know we will always be.

6th April

My parents were shocked when they heard that Ravi had moved out. Aai began crying and Baba took the phone from her.

'Anju, what is all this? What has happened?' he asked.

'Baba, I ... we ... Ravi and I have been having some problems. He ... he has moved out temporarily. It's not serious. Please, I don't want you to worry. We will work it out.'

'Moved out? What are you saying? Why would he move out if it's not serious? Anju, are you hiding anything from us?'

'No, Baba. He and I had a fight. And ... he will come back. But I need to give him space. Please don't worry.'

'Give him space? All this modern thinking. I just cannot understand it. How come you didn't tell us before that you were having problems? His parents were there all these months. Did you tell them things were not okay between you and Ravi? They would have helped.'

Baba was so angry he would not listen to anything I had to say.

'I just cannot understand it', he said and hung up. I wept for a long time afterwards. My parents were ashamed of me. And they didn't know half the story. What would they do if they learned the truth?

10th April

The Sargam group knew something was wrong. News of Ravi having moved in with Rishi had travelled quickly. Within two days, every member of the group had called me asking if I needed any help. No one asked when Ravi would move back in. I guess they were too frightened to find out what the answer would be.

Vibha arrived on my doorstep this morning, carrying a bunch of flowers, a bottle of wine and a tiny box of scented candles. 'Something to cheer you up', she grinned. She looked at me carefully. My hair was a mess and although it was eleven in the morning, I was still in my nightie.

'I can tell you've been crying', she said in a matter-of-fact voice. She pushed aside the magazines on the dining table and placed the wine and flowers in the space created. This was typical Vibha. She seldom has time or patience for flowery talk. Placing her hands on her hips, she surveyed the room. Her eyes rested on the transparent vase in which the water had turned a murky brown. The flowers had been dead for a week.

She pursed her lips. 'Look, Anju. I will toss out these flowers and put the kettle on. Let's grab some tea first and later this evening, we can open the wine. Go have a shower.'

She was going to be at my place until evening? I didn't want her here. I wanted to sit in a darkened room and cry for the rest of my life. I was in no mood for company. Yet, I didn't want to hurt Vibha's feelings.

By the time I came out, wearing a crumpled but clean, pink *kurti* and jeans, my hair still wet but smelling fresh, I felt like a new woman. Vibha had thrown away the wilted flowers and washed the dishes that

had piled up in the kitchen sink over the last few days. There were two cups of steaming hot tea on the dining table.

'C'mon missy. That was one long shower. Come sit. We have to do some serious talking.'

I took a sip of the tea.

'When are Aunty and Uncle arriving?' she asked.

'Around 11 am on the 30th.'

'Hmm. How are you going to pick them up?'

I hadn't thought about it. There was no way I was going to drive to the airport by myself. I didn't know the way there and I wasn't confident enough yet to drive such long distances.

'I don't know. Taxi maybe?'

'It will cost you nearly a hundred dollars. Let's go together. I'll drive.'

'No, Vibha. You can't just drop everything and come. It's a working day.'

'Oh shush. Working day *ko maro goli!* (To hell with the working day!).'

In the end, I was grateful she stayed most of the day. There wasn't an opportunity to be depressed. We cooked together and ate *dal*, rice, yoghurt and pickle for lunch and then watched a movie.

'Are you still going ahead with your mother's 50th birthday party?' she asked after the movie finished.

'I don't know, Vibha. I think I will cancel it. I'm not in the mood for it and I can't see Aai wanting to celebrate, knowing Ravi and I are having problems.'

She looked thoughtful. 'Don't cancel it just yet. Wait a bit. Who knows what will happen in the next few weeks? It would be a shame to cancel

it. Let's wait and watch.'

There was silence for a few minutes as we both mulled over our thoughts. Then Vibha brought up another issue.

'The Sargam group was wondering if we should keep practising for the party. Shall I tell them to continue as normal until you tell them otherwise?'

What a mess. Ravi and I had been looking forward to this party. And so were my parents and our friends. 'I'm just not in the mood for this party. I will cancel my song.'

I had no desire to sing. Originally, Ravi and I were going to sing our favourite duet: '*Tere mere milan ki ye raina*'. It didn't seem right to sing it alone, by myself.

Vibha squeezed my hand. 'Let's not do anything just yet, Anju. Let's just wait. It's only a tiff. I'm sure all couples argue. Ravi will be back soon and then we will all be sorry we cancelled the party.'

I was sorely tempted to tell her that it was not a little tiff. It was a lot more. The big D word was looming over our marriage. But I remained silent.

As she was about to leave the house, I leaned forward and hugged her. 'Thanks Vibha', I said.

'For what?'

'For everything. For not asking. For not wanting to know. For just being there for me.'

'*Theek hai, theek hai* (Okay, okay). No need to get all sentimental. Take care and call me if you need anything.' She kissed my cheek, grabbed her handbag and left.

11th April

I imagine noises all the time. The empty apartment freaks me out. Although I have often been alone when Ravi travelled, this new emptiness seems sinister. I have got into the habit of placing a rolling pin under my pillow just before I go to bed. I don't know if it would be enough if I'm threatened by a knife-wielding villain, but it gives me some comfort.

Earlier tonight, I was about to crawl into bed when the phone began ringing. A call at this time of the night could only mean India. I had spoken to Aai this morning, which meant this could only be Ravi's parents calling.

I was tempted to let the answering machine pick it up but answered, reluctantly, on the fifth ring.

'Anjali?' Mumma's husky voice travelled over the hundreds of miles that separated us.

'Mumma, hello. How are you?'

'Aga Anjali. What has happened? What is this I hear from Ravi?'

I had no idea how much Ravi had told his parents.

'Yes', I mumbled, not knowing what else to say.

'What yes? When did this happen? Ravi won't tell me anything, just that he has moved out. Has he lost his mind? We have hardly gone away from Australia and you kids end up doing all this nonsense.'

I waited. When Mumma was on one of her tirades, it was best to let her get everything out of her system. She continued after pausing briefly to catch her breath.

'I asked Ravi when he is moving back in. He said he doesn't think he will. I cannot believe this, Anjali. Are you both thinking of divorce? Because if you are, let me tell you now, Papa will have a heart attack.'

That annoyed me. Everything was always a veiled threat. I was tempted to tell her that Papa had survived Ravi's divorce with Anne but I didn't.

'Mumma, I don't know anything yet. He is not even talking to me. I tried contacting Rishi but Ravi won't come to the phone.'

'You know the problem with your generation?' Mumma asked me. 'You all don't know the meaning of marriage. In our time, we didn't throw away something because it was broken. We fixed it.'

'Where's Papa?' I asked. I needed to talk to Ravi's father. I needed to hear his calm, kind voice.

'He has gone for a walk,' she said and then in a softer tone, added 'I will ask him to call you when he returns. Okay, Anjali. I will keep the phone. Call me sometimes.'

I hung up and felt a heavy gloom settle upon me.

How could so much have changed in such a short time?

17th April

'Angie, you've forgotten me. No phone call. No contact. I tried calling a few times. But it always went to voice mail.' It was Daniela, my ex-colleague from Stunning Roofs. She had called me a few days ago to invite me to her hen's night. I wasn't in the mood to go partying with a bunch of women I didn't know, but hearing the excitement in Daniela's voice reminded me that I was being petty and selfish. Just because my life was in shambles, it didn't give me the right to hurt my friend. And I knew Daniela would be disappointed if I didn't go. Daniela held a special place in my heart. She had been my first workplace friend in Australia. I asked her how everyone was doing in the office. Did they miss me at all? 'Oh, darling, of course we do. I miss you the most.' We had chatted for a few more minutes and Daniela had updated me on the latest happenings in her life. The wedding was going to be after six weeks and she and her fiancé had been saving up towards buying a house for the past few

months. She planned on having two kids in the first three years of marriage and would be a stay-at-home mum until the kids went to university. I smiled on hearing this. Good old Daniela.

'You're going to have so much fun at my hen's night, Angie. I can't wait to see you. It's been so long,' she'd said. She made me promise that I would arrive on time.

'I will. I won't know anyone there except you but I promise to have a good time.'

She had laughed and said in a mock-stern voice: 'you better have a good time, missy, or you'll have me to deal with.'



Daniela's hen's night celebration was being held at an old-fashioned but posh hotel in the city. She and a few friends had booked rooms there for the night. They would be drinking until late, she'd said, and none of them wanted to risk driving and being pulled up by the cops.

'Why don't you spend the night with us too?' she had asked, but I had drawn the line there. The idea of getting drunk with a bunch of women I didn't know was very far from my idea of fun. Especially in my current frame of mind.

Also, after the night in Port Douglas, I have decided to stay away from alcohol. I'm not blaming the drink for what happened. I guess it would have happened anyway. The drink had only served to give my conscience a blurred edge that night.

Despite my plans to arrive on time, I was late getting to the train station this evening. As luck would have it, the trains were running behind schedule due to track work and by the time I hopped off at Central Station, it was well past 7 pm. Daniela and her friends were already onto their second round of drinks when I arrived, flustered and out of breath. They were all dressed in short, cocktail dresses. I wondered how they

didn't freeze into icicles. It was so cold, I could barely stop shivering. In my formal, black pants and long sleeve top, I felt overdressed. Daniela looked pretty in a short, tight black dress and silver stilettos. She had a bright pink satin sash with the words 'Bride to be' slung diagonally across her left shoulder.

'Angie! You're here at last!' she squealed on seeing me, and leaned forward to give me a warm hug. 'What took you so long?' She then introduced me to all her friends who nodded half-heartedly in my direction before resuming their chatter.

I felt out of place for most of the evening. No one bothered to talk to me. Daniela called out to me every now and then across the table. She winked and waved and tried to include me in the group. But as she was seated at the opposite end of the table, it was impossible for us to have a proper conversation. The other women near me giggled over jokes I didn't really understand, and after a while, pretending to laugh along became rather tiring.

After dinner, there was a lull in the conversation and a tall, thin girl called Penny suggested it was time to play some games. 'C'mon, let's start with "Never Have I Ever". It'll be fun.' I had no idea what this game was but everyone else tittered and cheered. Seeing my confused expression, Penny took pity on me and explained the game: everyone was given a glass of champagne. Each girl had to take turns at standing up and making a claim. 'What that means is, you should name one thing you have never done', said Penny, her eyes twinkling. Those from the rest of the group who had actually done that thing at some point in their lives would then take a sip of the champagne. The game sounded harmless enough. Reluctantly, I accepted the glass half-filled with champagne from Daniela. The game began in earnest. I had been expecting questions like 'never have I ever been on an African safari' or 'never have I ever lied to my boyfriend'. But it turned out to be completely different. I listened, taken aback, as the girls went a bit mad.

'Never have I ever slept with my boyfriend's brother.'

'Never have I ever done it on the kitchen bench top.'

'Never have I ever faked an orgasm.'

I began feeling uncomfortable. This was not my scene. I wanted to get away. Before I could do anything, one young woman raised her glass and said loudly: 'Never have I ever slept with my boss.'

'Oooh!' they all squealed and looked around to see who would sip first. My hand, holding the glass, trembled. For one mad moment, I was tempted to throw away all caution and take a sip of the champagne. I didn't know any of these girls. They were all strangers to me. What could be the harm in confessing something to a group of strangers? Daniela didn't know who Jake was, and I knew she wouldn't really care. But, at the last minute, I faltered and the moment passed.

Unable to bear it any longer, I stood up, hugged Daniela and told her I had a headache. She looked disappointed that I wanted to leave so early. 'But the fun is only starting!' she exclaimed. I shook my head and smiled. It was late. I needed to leave. She kissed me on both cheeks and told me she would send out an invite to her wedding soon. I waved to the rest of the group but I doubt anyone noticed. They were all rather drunk by then.

On the train ride home, I thought about the game we had just played. What a buzz it would have created if I had confessed to sleeping with my boss. I leaned my head against the window and stared out into the darkness. Involuntarily, my thoughts turned to Jake. I remembered his twinkling eyes, the way he gave a lopsided grin every time I corrected his spellings or grammar and felt a wave of sadness. In another life, had I been free to love him, I would have enjoyed loving and being loved by Jake very much, indeed.

30th April

This morning, just as Vibha and I were about to leave for the airport, the phone rang.

It was Anne. 'Hi. Do you have some time to talk?' she asked.

'No, I can't talk right now. I'm just leaving for the airport.'

'Oh, of course. Look, I just wanted to let you know I am meeting Ravi today. We are having lunch at the seafood restaurant in Pymont.'

I was surprised. 'Really?'

'Yes. He needs some sense drummed into him. He has had quite a lot of time to give vent to his rage and should be calm by now and ready to listen to my words of wisdom. I want to remind him of a few things that I remember from our marriage. Things he had done and said. He is acting all pious and aggrieved now. Blaming you for your marriage crumbling. I can tell he has forgotten he was married before. So obviously he needs to be reminded.'

'Oh my God. What are you going to say to him?'

'Lots of things. He deserves to hear it all. Leave it to me. He and I need to settle some old debts.' With that, she blew me a kiss and rang off.



During the drive to the airport, I was silent, pensive and lost in thought. A lot of things were playing on my mind. My life was a mess. I was estranged from my husband. Naina had ended our friendship. My parents and in-laws were upset by everything that was happening. Could it get any worse?

Vibha changed gears and glanced at me. 'Anju, I've been meaning to ask you something.'

'Hmmm?'

'Naina has been acting a bit strange at the song rehearsals. She is thinking of cancelling her solo piece. Apparently, the rehearsals are taking up too much of her time. She went all stiff and funny when I told her how disappointed you will be. Is everything okay between you two?'

I knew it was only a matter of time before everyone guessed Naina and I were not talking. I was surprised it had taken so long.

'We're not talking.'

'Why?'

I hesitated. I couldn't mention Jake. The less people knew about what had happened, the better.

'We ... had a falling out.'

Vibha frowned as she navigated the traffic. I knew she wouldn't probe the matter further. And she didn't.

'I've never had much patience with Naina. We never really got along.'

'Really? You seem friendly enough to each other.'

'Oh, we're friendly. We're in the same group after all. But I don't socialise with her outside the Sargam catch-ups.'

'You don't like her?'

'I don't trust her.'

'Oh.'

'I can't understand how her mind works. She says one thing, but inside she's feeling something else altogether. With her, what you see is not what you get. I cannot be with people like that.'

I understood now why Vibha had never shown interest in spending girly time with Naina and me.

'She doesn't like Ravi much', I said, carefully.

Vibha raised an eyebrow and turned to give me a quick look. 'I see.'

'Naina told me Ravi dumped Anne after getting his passport but—'

'What? She told you that?' Vibha sounded annoyed.

'Yes. Why?'

'What a bitch! See what I mean? She's nothing but a troublemaker. Naina knows very well that it was just a vague rumour going around at the time Ravi and Anne separated. A few nasty people from Ravi's batch at uni spread the word that Ravi had married Anne to get Australian citizenship. But that was not true. I know Ravi. He's a good man. He would never do something so cold blooded. Oh, it might have been one of the reasons he married her. But it certainly wasn't the reason they broke up. I know they worked hard at their marriage. They wanted it to last. Naina knows all that. Just because Ravi didn't respond to her advances and ...'

'What?'

'Oh? Madam didn't tell you that bit, did she? Told you everything else, most of it false, but not about what she was up to.'

'Don't tell me she flirted with Ravi?' It all made sense to me now. Of course, that's what Naina would have done.

Vibha sighed, hit the indicator and turned right. 'Yes, she did. Typical! She began a silly flirting game with Ravi. She thought she was being subtle, but the whole Sargam group knew. Fluttering her eyelashes. Chatting him up. She made me sick. Poor Ashok! But I was mad at him too, for putting up with her.'

'And I guess Ravi didn't fall for her charms, right? That's probably why she never had anything good to say about him.'

'Yeah! Ravi being Ravi, he paid her no attention. He wasn't interested in beginning a new romance. And certainly not with Madam Naina of all people. That annoyed her to no end. I mean, all men are supposed to swoon at her feet, right? When Ravi refused to be captivated by her

allure, she turned nasty. I'm surprised she didn't try to poison your marriage.'

I thought about all the times Naina had urged me to have an affair or at least flirt with other men, and suddenly felt sad.

Vibha reached out her left hand and squeezed mine. 'Don't dwell on it, Anju. We put up with Naina because of Ashok.

He's a gem of a guy. And as for Ravi, I adore him. He is a good man at heart. I hope he comes to his senses soon and comes back to you.'

I spent the rest of the journey feeling deflated. My biggest friendship had turned out to be a lie.



Aai and Baba's flight was delayed by an hour. Fortunately, Vibha had checked before we left and we'd timed ourselves accordingly.

They looked pale and worried when I finally saw them.

I felt both apprehensive and comforted on seeing them. I had been highly strung ever since Ravi walked out and found myself close to tears on seeing their dear, familiar faces.

'Why didn't you tell me before?' Aai asked, looking bewildered.

I had promised myself that I would take things calmly and talk reasonably to my parents about what had happened.

But something in me snapped on hearing that question. I had talked and explained so many things about my marriage so many times over the past few days that I was now exhausted. Mentally, physically, spiritually.

'I don't know, okay?' I said, rather too loudly. 'I don't know why I didn't tell you. I don't know why all this is happening. I'm sick of everything. Sick. Sick. Sick!'

Baba stood a few steps away from us, watching me in silence. He looked older and frailer than when I last saw him. 'Anju, your mother is only trying to help. We are both concerned about you. Maybe I can speak to Ravi? Make him see sense?'

That was the last thing I wanted. If Ravi told my parents the truth, it would kill them.

'No, Baba, it's alright. I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. But I don't want you talking to Ravi. At least not yet. It's all too raw and new. We will work things out.'

This was all such a mess. We were having Aai's 50th birthday celebration in a few weeks. And there would be no Ravi by my side.

Later in the evening, once Aai and Baba had unpacked, I cuddled up to Aai on the sofa, my head resting on her shoulder. She smelled of sandalwood powder, a fragrance I associate with her since my childhood.

She placed her hand on my head and massaged it lightly. 'You are a good girl, Anju. Even as a little girl, you never gave me any trouble. Never demanded anything. Never asked for anything.'

Hot tears sprang to my eyes without warning and began rolling down my cheeks. Oh, Aai darling, if only you knew. I hadn't been a good girl at all. Far from it. I had done so much wrong, hurt the one person I had promised to love for the rest of my life. I felt the slim, tenuous thread that held me to my mother and knew it would snap forever once she discovered the truth. The knowledge that her faith in my goodness and innocence was soon going to be shattered made these last few moments doubly poignant.

I began sobbing and clung to her, just as I used to when frightened by a nightmare as a child. She caressed my head and patted my forehead. I was grateful that she didn't ask any questions. We sat like that, our arms around each other, for a long time, until my tears finally dried up.

3rd May

Jake and I were standing in his office with the door firmly shut. It was my last day at Ellis World Travels. I waited to see if being so close to him still had any effect on me. It did. I still found him devastatingly handsome. I knew then that even though over time I would eventually get over him, I would never forget how he had once made me feel. He gave me self-confidence and self-esteem at a time when I had lost both. He had made me laugh, given me his time and attention and never once demanded more than what I could give him. But what was most important, something I will never forget for as long as I live, was that he had made me feel attractive and desired. And for that, if not for anything else, I will always cherish his memory.

'Angie, I know it didn't work out between us. But can we still be friends?' He looked like a little, lost boy and I wanted to wipe away the sad look from his face.

'No, Jake. Maybe it's best to let bygones be bygones. We come from different worlds. Let's just leave it at that.'

We looked at each other for a long time.

'Goodbye, Angie, I will never forget you.' He wasn't certain whether to hug me, kiss me or hold out his hand. In the end, he simply stood there, looking lost.

The seconds ticked by and I waited, wanting to savour my last few moments with him. Finally, with a sigh, I stretched up and gently straightened his tie, which always looked slightly askew. I had wanted to do that since the first day I set eyes on him at the interview. Then I turned and walked out of Ellis World Travels.

4th May

I had been waiting eagerly to hear from Anne. What had she said to Ravi? What mood was he in? Was he still angry? I had tried calling her a

couple of times yesterday, but both times it had gone to voice mail. I hadn't left a message.

By the time she called me, I was a trembling bundle of nerves.

'Anne!' I exclaimed, when I heard her voice on the phone. 'What took you so long? I've been waiting for your call!'

'Sorry it's taken so long, Anjeelee. Honestly, that husband of yours. He's hard work.'

'How is he?'

'He's alright. We spoke for a long time. Have been talking for the past couple of days.'

'What did you say to him?'

'Oh, I said a lot. But before I spoke of your marriage to him, I reminded him of ours. We broke up because we had different expectations from each other. He wanted me to be a dutiful wife, who said yes when he said yes, and no when he said no. I reminded him of what had happened when I refused to do things his way all the time. We used to eat out several times a week, because I was too tired to cook after a whole day at the office. I visited my parents on the Central Coast whenever I wanted. He didn't dictate how often I went or spoke to them. Not like "You can call India only on Saturdays, Anjeelee".'

She paused and I waited, anxious to hear more. 'He argued and said I would sing a different tune if I knew the truth about you and him. What is the truth, I demanded. But he wouldn't tell me. It was not his story to tell, he said. That's when I told him I knew what the truth was. That you had spoken to me. He went a bit ballistic then. Asked me if I was condoning the fact that his wife had slept with another man.'

I drew in a sharp breath. This was terrible.

But Anne went on.

'Anjeelee, I spoke to him for over an hour each time. I told him to shut up and listen. That he was not to interrupt me. I reminded him of the part he played in what ultimately happened in your marriage. If he had been around more, not been so obsessed with his job, given you his time and attention, the end would have been different.'

'What did he say? Do you think he will come back?'

She sighed. 'I can't tell you that. I don't know. The last thing he said to me was "How strange, Anne. You are teaching me things about my own wife". I don't know what he will do. He didn't sound happy, but at the end, he didn't sound angry either. I tried my best. I don't know if that's enough, though.'

I wanted to hug her. 'Oh Anne, I love you. Thank you. Thank you so much.' She was such a generous soul.

'I love you too, you silly girl.'

9th May

The Sargam group met up today at Sonali's place for a practice session. Despite the fact that I have lost complete interest in planning Aai's birthday, the group is determined to make it a success.

'Anjali, think about it. You and Ravi wanted to do this. You even told your mother you would be doing it. Why spoil everything now?' asked Sonali, when she called me this morning. Because my husband has left me and I'm in no mood to celebrate anything. I didn't say that, though. She was right. It was Aai's milestone birthday. She deserves something special. Forcing myself to whip up some enthusiasm, I called up the community centre and booked their hall. The hall isn't too big, has a decent-sized stage and will be enough for the few families I'll be inviting. I then called up an Indian restaurant Vibha had recommended ('they make the best *hara-bhara kebabs!*') and fixed a menu for the day. Chicken *chettinad*, *rogan josh* and *navratan korma*. For starters, there would be *samosas* and the *kebabs*.

Aai heard me on the phone and later asked me why I was going to so much trouble. 'Anju, there's no need. I know how upset you are at the moment. It's like any other birthday, anyway. I'll be very happy even if we spend it at home, just you, me and Baba.'

I hugged her, feeling an ache in my chest. She hadn't asked for much from life. Giving her a party for her 50th was the least I could do.

Naina didn't come to the Sargam catch-up this evening. 'She's got a cold', said Ashok, to no one in particular. I knew that wasn't true. Naina was avoiding me.

I had been wondering if Rishi would turn up. What would he say to me if he did come? Was Ravi still at his place? There had been no contact from Ravi ever since he left. On the couple of occasions that I had called, Rishi had sounded awkward and told me Ravi was not prepared to come to the phone. When the doorbell rang, and Rishi entered, giving me a sheepish look, I felt oddly happy. He is the only link to my husband. The only person who knows how Ravi is doing.

I went up to him as he began removing his guitar. 'Hi, Rishi. *Kaise ho?* (how are you?)'

'Hey, Anjali. How are you doing?'

I shrugged. 'Okay.' I waited. I couldn't bring myself to ask him directly about Ravi. It would have been too humiliating. But Rishi sensed my thoughts straight away. Leaning close and lowering his voice so that none of the others could hear him, he said: 'He's doing alright. Doesn't talk to me much. Goes to work in the morning and comes back late. Eats out every day. He has lost a lot of weight. But still stubborn as hell. I've tried talking to him, tried asking what happened. But he won't say.'

My mood, after listening to Rishi, plummeted. I sat in a corner, next to Aai and Baba and listened listlessly to the others practising. With no Naina or Ravi around, and me looking half-comatose, Vibha was the only singer left. Ashok joined her on a couple of occasions, but everyone laughed so hard at his off-key trills that he finally gave up.

'Madam, enough sitting around moping', Vibha, finally, said to me. 'My throat is hurting after all that singing. C'mon. Come here and sing your song.'

'No. Not today, Vibha. I'm not up to it.'

'I know. And that's precisely why you *should* sing. It will help get you into the right mood. Get up. Get up.' She leaned down and pulled me up from the lounge.

I sang the usual: '*Tere mere milan ki ye raina*'. My voice faltered every time I came to the bits that Ravi would normally sing. But I forced myself to finish the song. I felt overwhelmed by old memories. Aai guessed what I was going through and subtly shook her head, warning me silently not to get emotional in front of everyone. She kept nodding, encouraging me to keep at it until the end. When I finished, I simply stood there, as though in a trance. Finally, Vibha came over and hugged me. 'Good girl', she whispered in my ear. I smiled at her a little sadly and wondered when things would get better. I don't know how long I can carry on like this without having a breakdown.

15th May

'Anju, ever since we've come here, I haven't seen any attempt from you to contact Ravi', Baba said to me this morning as we all sat in the balcony, having tea. Aai gave him a warning look, but he ignored it. 'It's not good. You need to at least try to get him back.'

I reminded Baba that the last time I had tried calling Ravi, he had refused to come to the phone.

'Yes, but that was quite a while ago. This is ridiculous. One of you needs to come to your senses. If he is not going to do anything, you need to.' Other than asking me a few times about what exactly had happened between Ravi and me, my parents had not demanded further explanations. I had told them each time that Ravi and I had fallen out over a few things and that I wasn't prepared to talk about it yet. They had

seemed okay with this response. Until today. Baba was determined to put an end to everyone's misery, once and for all.

'I don't normally interfere in my children's lives', he said. That was true. Even when we were growing up, it had always been Aai who did everything for us. Baba had been on the periphery of our childhood, more a shadowy figure. 'But I'm finding it difficult to just wait around endlessly for Ravi to turn up. You, after all, have some responsibility too, to make things better.'

'Baba, I agree with you. But you don't know Ravi very well. Once he has made up his mind about something, it's hard to make him change it.'

'So, you're just going to accept that and do nothing?'

'I don't know what to do.'

'That's not an acceptable answer. Write him a letter. Or call him. But do something.'

I knew I couldn't argue with Baba. Not when he was in such a mood. 'Alright, Baba. I will do what you say.' He smiled at me. As I got up and left the balcony, I heard Aai reprimand him. '*Kay ho*, why did you have to be so hard on her? She would have eventually realised for herself that something needs to be done.'

'No, Padma. She needs to realise *now* that something needs to be done. We only have today in our hands. Who knows what will happen tomorrow?'

His words rang in my ears throughout the day.

16th May

'Hello, Rishi. It's me, Anjali.' After much thinking, I had finally decided to try calling Ravi again. Baba's words had troubled me, making me see that if I want my marriage to survive, then I have to try harder.

'Hi, Anjali. I was just thinking about you. How are the preparations for aunty's party coming along? Do you need any help?'

I shook my head, and then realised he couldn't see me. 'No. It's under control. Just come early on the day, so you can set up the instruments with the others.' There was a pause. Neither of us knew what to say next. 'Rishi?'

'Anjali, he's here, in the study. Do you want me to tell him you're on the phone?'

'Yes, please, Rishi. Thank you. Oh, and maybe you can add that I've called about Aai's birthday party.' I was hoping that he would come to the phone out of respect for my mother's feelings. The party, after all, had originally, been his idea.

The wait seemed endless. Finally, I heard a rattling sound and Rishi came back on the line. He sounded awkward and apologetic. 'Anjali, I'm really sorry. He won't come to the phone. I tried many times but he keeps repeating that he has nothing to say to you. I'm sorry.'

'Don't be sorry, Rishi. You did the best you could. Thank you for looking after him.' I hung up.

I knew then, with a sinking feeling, that it is the end of my marriage.

22nd May

Aai walked into my bedroom this morning and found me sobbing into my pillow.

Everything was looking hopeless. Ravi hadn't come back after his talk with Anne. My marriage was over. I was certain of it. I couldn't bear looking at Aai and Baba's hopeful faces every time the doorbell or phone rang. I knew they were hoping it was Ravi.

Aai put her arms around me and rocked me as I wept and ranted at fate.

My life was ruined, I kept repeating and she looked alarmed at how dejected I sounded. Up until then, having seen how deeply upset they were by my ruined marriage, I had been the one comforting and assuring them that things would look up soon. Ravi would be back. But seeing me in my raw, tortured state brought about a shift. She now became the comforter, just as she had been when I was growing up. During our childhood, whenever we had been ill or in trouble of some kind, Baba would always be the one to crumble. Aai would inevitably take control and go about setting things right. She was just as frightened as he was, but she never let us see that.

She now wiped my tears, and holding my face in her hands, she looked deep into my eyes.

'My darling child, I know you haven't told me the full story. And I don't want to know it either. Not until you are ready to tell me. I may not know what exactly happened, but I know the kind of person you are. I gave birth to you, raised you and I know you better than you know yourself. If the reason for your marriage breaking is something you have done, I have enough faith in you to know you will do everything to set it right. I don't expect my children to never make mistakes. But I do expect them to learn from those mistakes and not make the same one twice. You, out of all my children, were the only one always willing to take ownership for what you did. Have faith in yourself, *beta*. Baba and I love you very much.'

23rd May

It's finally time for Aai's birthday celebration.

I woke up this morning with a heavy sadness weighing me down. Today was meant to be a happy occasion. My mother had turned fifty. Had I been feeling normal, I would have played a few cheerful film songs and got everyone into the right mood. But I was dejected.

Baba looked pensive when I handed him a cup of tea. 'Anju *beta*, I know

what you are going through. I haven't said this very often, but I hope you know how proud of you I am. In spite of everything that's happened, you have shown tremendous courage in going ahead with this party. I know you are putting up a brave front only so Aai can have a lovely birthday.' I smiled at him, recognising how difficult it would have been for him to say all this. He has never been the expressive kind. For a moment, I felt guilty on remembering how close I had come to cancelling the party. I was glad now that I hadn't.

I waited all morning for a miracle to happen and for Ravi to magically turn up on the doorstep. Our phone hadn't stopped ringing. Vibha called to ask if we needed a lift. She would be happy to stop by our place on her way to the party. I told her that since the hall wasn't too far from where we lived, I would drive. I planned on going an hour earlier anyway, just to make sure all arrangements were in place before the guests arrived. Ashok called next to find out if we needed help with anything. He didn't mention Naina and I didn't ask about her either. Each time the phone rang, my heart skipped a beat. Would it be Ravi this time? But I should have known better. It is silly to keep wishing for something that seems impossible in the first place.



I wore a peacock blue and pink *salwaar khameez* to the party. Aai had asked me if I'd like her to braid my hair, but I refused. I put on minimal make up and she smiled on seeing me apply lipstick. 'No orange peels?' she asked and we both laughed. I knew she was making an effort to keep the mood upbeat and lively.

The guests began trickling in at 7 pm. Vibha stood by my side greeting everyone and she made sure each person was comfortably seated. My eyes scanned the room to make sure things were moving along as planned. There were tall jugs of Coke and Lemonade on each table. A couple of waitresses walked around carrying large platters of entrees.

All our friends had arrived. The guest list included Daniela and her fiancé, Sang-Hwa (our neighbour) and her family, Mrs Prasad (yet

another neighbour), who arrived with both her sons and daughters-in-law and Ravi's aunt Renuka *maushi's* childhood friend Meena *maushi*, who came all the way from Canberra along with her husband and two daughters. There were approximately 25 guests in total.

Naina had walked in, looking pale and sullen, dressed in a black and gold *saree*. She avoided all eye contact with me. Ashok whispered something in her ear, and after a moment's hesitation, she walked up to Aai and wished her. I felt a brief twinge of sadness at the loss of our friendship. We had shared a beautiful camaraderie once. I did consider letting bygones be bygones and taking the initiative to put things right but some tiny streak of stubbornness stopped me at the last minute. She was the one who had broken all ties, after all.

I walked around greeting everyone. The evening was going well. Most people had refrained from asking me about Ravi and the latest developments in our marriage. Daniela didn't have a clue about anything that had happened, and looked confused when I told her Ravi wasn't around. She had never met him and had been looking forward to being introduced. 'A lot has happened, Daniela. He's not here. But I can't explain now. I'll call you tomorrow for a chat.' To her credit, she didn't push the matter further.

Aai looked pretty in her olive-green *kanjeevaram saree*. She had fresh flowers in her hair and was basking in all the attention.

After about an hour had passed and the guests had finished the entrées, the Sargam group members walked towards the stage. It was time for our music programme. The instruments had been tuned earlier and Ashok, Tushar and Rishi took up their designated positions.

My song was last on the list, straight after a duet by Naina and Ashok. I was surprised that Naina had agreed to sing, but judging by Ashok's stern expression and his constant whispering to his wife, perhaps she had been given little choice. They had chosen a song where the male was expected to hum a few lines every now and then which was good since Ashok is not really a singer. Without Ravi, there were only female singers left and it had limited the kind of songs we could sing today.

'And now my friends,' announced Vibha, speaking into the mike, 'Anjali Jathar brings you the evergreen "*Tere mere milan ki ye raina.*"'

Loud applause. I stood up with a heavy heart. Why hadn't I been more firm with the group and insisted that I wouldn't sing? It was too late now. All eyes had turned towards me. I climbed the stairs to the stage feeling numb. This had been our song, Ravi's and mine. Today I would sing it alone.

I smiled at my friends, both those on stage and those seated in the audience. They nodded encouragingly. Rishi strummed the opening tune. Ashok gave me my cue with a thumbs-up. I faltered as I sang the first few lines hesitantly. The room fell silent. My voice trembled.

At the far end of the room, I saw a door open. Ravi walked in.

I wondered if I was imagining things. The room began spinning. I saw him walk slowly towards Aai. She was staring at him as though seeing a ghost. He bent down and touched her feet, then moved sideways to do the same to Baba.

I blinked and forced myself to return to the present moment but my thoughts kept tumbling in different directions. What did Ravi turning up like this out of the blue mean? Was he there simply out of respect for my mother's milestone birthday celebration? Or did his arrival bring with it the end of our estrangement? I could not guess his feelings or what he was thinking. His face was a solemn mask and his lips were drawn together in a stern, rigid line. My heart began beating wildly and I tried to curb my excitement. Who knew how the evening would end? For all I knew, he would wish Aai, greet some of his friends and walk out again.

Aai was pointing at the stage as if telling him where to find me. I had forgotten to sing. Ashok, Tushar and Rishi who had also seen their friend enter the room kept playing the same bit again and again, hoping I would pick up the song at some point.

It took me a few seconds to figure out which part of the song they were playing and then I picked up from where I had left off. But it was all too

much for me. Seeing Ravi and noticing his new gaunt look brought back memories of my first few months in Australia. If only I could put back the clock and start my marriage all over again. My voice trembled so much that I could hardly sing a complete line at a time. Ashok and Tushar looked troubled and Rishi made eyes at Ravi, trying to get his attention.

There was huge confusion. Finally just as I was about give up and walk away, Ravi began striding towards the stage. I watched him and it all appeared to be happening in slow motion. What was he doing? I was beginning to feel dizzy. Within a few seconds, he was standing by my side.

The guests look confused. But when they recognised who was standing beside me, they clapped and cheered loudly.

Our friends on stage played the song once again from the beginning. Ravi took the mike gently from my hand and began singing. *Tere mere milan ki ye raina*. The meaning of the words washed over me like a giant wave. *This night of our union*. I began crying openly, not caring that everyone could see me. When it was my turn to sing, I opened my mouth but no sound emerged. Just like the first time I had sung with him.

After the slightest hesitation, he put his arm around me and squeezed my shoulder. In that moment, I knew without the shadow of a doubt, that he had decided to come back. That was all it took to give me back some of my confidence. My husband was next to me. Everything would be alright.

We sang together and our voices blended and became one. My tears fell like rain.

The song ended with loud applause that went on forever.

24th May (well past midnight):

'If it hadn't been for Anne, do you think you would have come back?'

Ravi and I were in our bedroom. We were both sitting on the carpet, leaning against the wall and facing each other. The evening had been a huge success. Everyone had come up to Ravi and me after our song and hugged us, saying it was so wonderful to see us together. After the party had ended, Ravi had walked with Aai, Baba and me to our car, but seemed unsure about what to do next. He just stood there, looking tense. I felt my heart constrict. Please God. Please let him come home with us. I stared at him, frightened. What was he going to do? After a moment's hesitation, Aai reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Ravi *beta*, please come home.' He looked at her for a long moment ... a moment in which I felt myself reach new depths of despair ... and then, slowly, he held out his hand and asked me for the car key.

It was nearly 11.30 pm by the time we got home.

We sat opposite each other in our room and although there was awkwardness in the air, we both made an effort to talk. Aai and Baba had retired to their room after telling us they had enjoyed the evening tremendously but were now very tired and would see us in the morning.

Ravi hesitated on hearing my question. 'No, I probably wouldn't have come back. But Anne is such a straight talker. She always has been. Shoots straight from the hip. I had never seen her so angry. Not even when we had been married. She was hopping mad that day. And would not let me talk.'

'Did you agree with what she said?'

'Some of it. Most of it, actually. But it wasn't easy for me. She went on and on. Pointed out all my faults. Told me where I had gone wrong, how I had neglected you ever since you came to Australia, how my work had blinded me to everything else. I hadn't realised this before, Anjali, but I'm pretty certain now that Anne actually hates me. She must. She sounded so bitter and furious.'

'You hadn't realised this before, Ravi, because it isn't true. She sounded furious because she couldn't bear to see our marriage end. Anne cares about you deeply. Even now. But, equally, if not more, she cares about

me. She told me never to give up. That things would turn out alright.'

'Yes.'

'Ravi, I want to tell you something.'

'I know. I don't really want to hear it. But ... go on.'

'I'm sorry about what happened. Deeply, terribly sorry. I won't give you excuses. I won't say it happened because you were working or travelling or simply never there. We all have choices in life. Everything we say or do is a choice. I made the wrong one. All I can say is that it will not happen again. My future is with you. I want us to grow old together.'

'Anjali, this is very hard for me. I'm trying to forget what happened. There are days when I am tortured by images of you with someone else. I know I played a huge part in how things turned out. But, couldn't you have told me that you were so deeply unhappy?'

I thought about what he had just said. I had often complained and argued about his working hours and his constant travelling. But had I ever sat him down, looked him in the eye and said 'Ravi, we have a problem'? Or 'Ravi, I think we should divorce. This is not working out'. I don't think I had. Would things have worked out differently had I taken a more proactive stance towards setting things right, instead of waiting for him to read my mind and sense my unhappiness? I couldn't think of how to respond to his question and just stared at him.

He shook his head. 'I don't want us to point fingers at each other. A lot has happened and we now need to decide how we want to move forward. I want to try and make things work. It might be a slow and bumpy ride. But if we hold on tight, I guess, we won't fall off.'

'Yes.'

'It's the trust that I'm worried about. I'm willing to give our marriage a second chance. But I don't know if I can trust you again. At least not so soon. Not while the memory of what happened is still so fresh.'

'I'm sorry.' I felt my lower lip tremble. This was what I had been afraid of. That no matter how well we patched things together, the cracks would always be there.

'Anne suggested we should go to a marriage counsellor. I'm really not in favour of all that. But if that's what it takes to help us re-build our faith in each other, I'm willing to give it a go. What do you think?'

I didn't know anymore what to think. I was so glad to have him home that I would have willingly, unquestioningly tried whatever it took to make things better. I smiled a watery smile. 'I don't mind trying it out either, Ravi.'

There was a heavy silence. Finally, I mustered up enough courage to ask him the one question I had been aching to ask. 'What made you decide to come back?'

Ravi looked at me for a long moment. His eyes held a tenderness I had never seen before. 'It was something Anne told me that day. She said, "Ravi, Anjali has a great capacity for love. I have seen glimpses of it in my own friendship with her. You never gave her love a chance to blossom. If you allow her to love you, Ravi, she will love you like no other woman ever has or ever will."'

It was then that I broke down and cried. He moved closer and pulled me into his arms. 'Some things never change, do they? You still cry so easily. It's the first thing I remember about you.'

I smiled at him through my tears.

'C'mon. We need to call Anne', he said. 'I had promised to let her know how things turn out and she had told me to call even if it's late.' He kissed me gently on my lips.

'But, it's past midnight,' I said.

'She won't mind.'

He dialled her number, and put it on speaker as it began ringing.

'Hello?'

'Anne. It's me, Ravi.'

'How did it go?'

'She's here. Beside me. You're on speaker. Here, you can talk to her.'

I leaned forward. 'Anne?' My voice shook.

'Hey, Anjeelee.'

'Thank you, Anne. What would I have done without you, my friend?'

'I know. It's a scary thought.'

We laughed.

'Do you remember what I had told you before?' she said, softly.

'Yes. That everything would turn out alright.'

'Bingo!'

'I couldn't ever ask for a finer friend. You've always been there for me. And I'll never be able to thank you enough.'

'I'm glad things have worked out for you guys. And hey Ravi, look after my friend, okay? She's a bit nutty, but her heart is in the right place. Now, off you go. I'm sure you've other things to do than sit there talking to me.'

'Bye, Anne. Thanks for everything', said Ravi, leaning forward.

'See you soon, Anne', I added.

'Bye, Ravi and Anjeelee. Be good.' There was a click as she hung up.

We turned towards each other and I moved into the circle of his arms. We kissed. A slow, lingering kiss.



I don't know how our story will end. Ravi's and mine. Will our marriage last over the long haul? Will we someday look back on all that has happened and rejoice that we survived in spite of it all? Who can predict what tomorrow holds? All we have is today. The past will someday be a distant memory. And the future is yet to be lived.

As I rested my head against Ravi's chest, an old half-forgotten memory came rushing back to me. I had been seventeen when I made the decision. *I would only ever marry for true love.* It's the dream I've always had. To find my one true love. Now that life has offered me a second chance to set things right, I can only hope to one day find that love with Ravi.

Some dreams, like mine, are work in progress. They need a little nudge to wake them from their slumber. A gentle reminder every now and then. Not all dreams get fulfilled. But I have a good feeling about mine. I look forward to seeing it come true some day.

~ ~ ~ *The Beginning* ~ ~ ~

Acknowledgements

Three years in the making, ***The Diary of an Immigrant Bride*** has been my labour of love. Writing this book has been an amazing emotional journey, and I couldn't have done it without the love, support and encouragement of my family, friends and colleagues, to whom I owe heartfelt thanks and gratitude.

I would especially like to thank:

- My wonderful children Gaurav, Inika and Samiya, my devoted cheerleaders, for giving me the space to write.
- My mother Neena Dhume Rangnekar for her unwavering faith in my ability to tell a story.
- Komal S. Kumar and Stephen Rayer who helped me brainstorm ideas and offered wonderful feedback on my early draft. Thanks guys.
- Pooja Chugh and Sneha Ravichandran for their insightful suggestions.
- My editor Niyati Joshi for labouring through minute details and endless Skype calls.
- Sarah Shrubbs for her brilliant advice on narrative arc and characterisation.
- Renu Balakrishnan for her sagacious guidance. Thank you for reading the first draft and helping me see the characters in a new light.
- Last but not least, my pillar of strength, my husband Aashish. Thank you for giving me wings and encouraging me to always

follow my dreams.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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What happens if a woman meets her soul mate after marriage... and it's not her husband?

1998 Australia. Anjali Jathar is looking forward to life as an immigrant bride following her arranged marriage to ambitious divorcee Ravi. Settling in, she explores not just a new culture but also her newfound freedom.

But life is less than perfect. Ravi's constant travel and preoccupation with work leave Anjali feeling increasingly unloved and lonely.

Enter Jake Ellis. Charmed by Anjali's exoticism, he finds himself gradually falling in love with her. And so begins an emotionally intoxicating roller-coaster ride.

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