

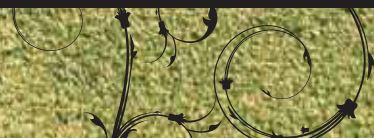


LOVE ACROSS BORDERS

INDIREADS SHORT STORY ANTHOLOGY

STORIES OF LOVE, CONNECTION AND FRIENDSHIP
THAT TRANSCEND THE PHYSICAL DIVIDE

Indireads



Love Across Borders

LOVE, CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS THE
INDIA-PAKISTAN BORDER

Naheed Hassan and Sabahat Muhammad



STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT

It is wonderful to see an effort that harnesses the power of words, stories and contemporary writings to create positive change in society across two countries. Efforts like these help us all create a better future, in which we learn to respect, understand and empathize with each other. I wish the team well, and I hope it succeeds in its mission.

Javed Akhtar
Poet and scriptwriter

Today more than ever before, it is critical that our two nations understand, listen, empathize and connect with ‘the other’. We know that across the globe, young people are at the forefront of driving real change; the appeal of initiatives like Love Across Borders is that it draws in, and engages, young people across the borders. I am confident that the project will play at least a small role in helping us move towards our common objective of a better tomorrow.

Shabana Azmi
Actor and social activist

Indians and Pakistanis don’t always need to agree with each other. But they need to learn to see each other as fully fleshed out human beings, not as cardboard cutouts. Love Across Borders by Indireads is an important step toward that goal.

Sadanand Dhume
American Enterprise Institute
Author of ‘My Friend the Fanatic: Travels with a Radical Islamist’

The common experience of life across a partitioned South Asia lies scattered throughout its literature. We do not have enough platforms to present and celebrate these writings, and Love Across Borders is a commendable effort to bring the contemporary writings from the region together, and renew the memories of a shared life and worldview.

Musharraf Ali Farooqi
Author of ‘Between Clay and Dust’

The border between India and Pakistan is sealed tight against people. I grew up half an hour's drive away, and I've crossed it on days when I've only seen four or five other people at immigration. But stories can travel more easily. They are reminders that it isn't the width of an ocean between us, or some interstellar void, but rather a line so narrow that if it were water, it would be less than a stream.

Mohsin Hamid

Author of 'Moth Smoke' and 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist'

Naysayers have long proclaimed that Pakistanis and Indians have nothing in common but hostility towards each other. They may wish this was so but it is not fact. Despite wars and borders and a line of control, we still share expressions of hope and fear, love and sorrow, music and poetry, melodrama and cricket, and much more. Even die-hards will struggle to deny the enduring commonality of our peoples after reading the stories in this anthology.

Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy

Professor, nuclear physicist, essayist and defense analyst

Romance is the beggar that appears at reality's door at unexpected hours. We must give it the gift of our attention. For that reason, I welcome the publication of *Love Across Borders*. The reality at the moment, as far as India and Pakistan are concerned, is of intransigent borders and mutual accusations of killings. In the stories in these pages, those shouts are replaced by whispers. This, too, is welcome. Other stories, other lives. The grave complications of living and loving. We will all be happier if the borders are breached by trembling souls.

Amitava Kumar

Author of 'Husband of a Fanatic'

A wonderful set of perceptions, ideas, feelings, showing the truth behind the headlines in South Asia. These stories describe, above all, the power of love, of wonder, informed by the past, but reaching for the future. Indeed, Love Across Borders provides us a vision of that future, and it's a future governed by the heart.

Ambassador Cameron Munter

Professor, International Relations, Pomona College
Former US Ambassador to Pakistan

This is a heart-warming initiative that resonates with the poignancy of cross-border relations. At the human level, Love Across Borders distills the essence of the emotionally charged India-Pakistan relationship; it also delegitimizes the otherization narrative so often manufactured by the votaries of hate.

Ambassador Sherry Rehman

President and Chair, Jinnah Institute
Former Pakistani Ambassador to the US

There's far too much suspicion and rhetoric between Indians and Pakistanis - and too few efforts to bridge the divide. Smart, modern projects like Love Across Borders by Indireads can have a real impact and start meaningful conversations.

Sree Sreenivasan

Co-founder, SAJA, South Asian Journalists Association

Version 1.0

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ABOUT INDIREADS

Indireads aims to revolutionize the popular fiction genre in South Asia. As a channel for South Asian writers to engage readers at home and abroad, we showcase vibrant narratives that describe the lives, constraints, hopes and aspirations of modern South Asian men and women.

The books available on Indireads are exclusive to Indireads.

Indireads' books are written and customized for delivery in electronic format, and are only published online.

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to the Peacemakers

Foreword

As a newspaper publisher, I accept that words are powerful tools that are used to understand, inform and debate. Words effect change—they shift perceptions, opinions and mindsets. For two nations existing side-by-side, but in virtual isolation from each other, with a media that is focused largely on internal audiences, there are limited opportunities for a new mechanism for dialogue across the border. Differences are magnified and things are often viewed through a lens of mistrust.

With modern digital media a new paradigm is possible, as borders are rendered increasingly obsolete. Technologies and social networks today make new connections possible, with our own imaginations constituting the only barrier to acceptance. Love Across Borders is an innovative initiative by Indireads to harness the power of words and use fiction and storytelling to open pathways of understanding between ordinary men and women on both sides of the border.

This initiative serves a strategically critical function. While governments, media and businesses in South Asia are working—sometimes together and at other times with dissonance—to open new pathways of dialogue and engagement, real change will occur only when people begin to view, understand and relate to people on the other side of the divide as human beings, with their own emotions, fears and sensibilities. Love Across Borders is an important step in reinforcing a foundation for better understanding, relationships and connections enabling these two major South Asian nations divided by a border to hopefully co-exist and prosper side-by-side.

Hameed Haroon
CEO, The Dawn Media Group

Introduction

THE MOTIVATION

Born in the middle of bloodshed, Pakistan and India have been uncomfortable neighbors for the past sixty-odd years. Generations have come and gone but the hurt, anger and acrimony of the past refuses to die down. Even today, most narratives—fictional and non-fictional—about India and Pakistan seem to revolve around the partition and subsequent wars between the two countries.

Granted, such narratives are historically important, but we need to move beyond them and into the present. We are all aware of the huge costs—economic, military, social and human—that our countries pay because of this strained relationship. If this relationship is ever to improve, it will happen when people begin to see each other as fully functioning human beings, invested with emotions, feelings and sentiments.

Love Across Borders is a small step in that direction. It is a collection of short stories, original works of fiction by Indian and Pakistani writers that aim to create new narratives about modern-day India and Pakistan; narratives of love, friendship, connection and relationships between ordinary people. We hope to celebrate the similarities between our nations, creating common threads with which the seeds of peace can be sown. Several of our stories are collaborations between writers from across the border, proving that no task is impossible when the collective energies of people across the divide are harnessed.

We welcome you to read through the selection of stories we have curated for you, and let the spirit of love stay with you long after you have put the book down.

Naheed Hassan and Sabahat Muhammad

That 70s Babe

MAMUN M. ADIL

I think I fell in love with her the first time I saw her. And that doesn't happen to me too often, let me tell you. But there was something about her—that lilting voice, those mischievous eyes and that dazzling smile—that made me fall in love with her immediately.

Of course, there were many people who ran her down—namely, my best friends. As we sat in one of the many cafés in Saddar that Karachi could boast of back in the 70s, they would say things like “She’s too thin!” (You know what *desi* men are like, they like their women buxom), that she couldn't speak Urdu properly, especially for a Muslim girl, and that she tried very hard to be like someone else we knew.

But my love was true and my babe and I would spend many evenings together. Sometimes she'd run on the beach wearing a swimsuit, publicly. Yes, she was daring all right. And she'd smoke. It was a habit I hated; I was always worried about her health. But she didn't care. She loved shocking people.

Sometimes she would wear tight jumpsuits and dance the night away. She even openly slept with other men, right in front of my eyes, sharing an after-sex cigarette with one of them. And yet I forgave her. Because I knew that this was just a passing phase. This was just rebellion. It was the 70s after all, and the flower power of the 60s had come to India a decade later.

I also knew her better than she did. I came to realize that she was traditional in some ways. She, like most *desi* women, wanted a man to cook for, to clean for, to take care of. I could almost hear her saying in that seductive voice of hers, “This is the way it should be—women should watch their men eat the meal that they have cooked for them.”

For her, those honest admissions were few and far between. I knew that she wanted to run away from the world she had chosen to live in. And I

would have been there for her every step of the way, to help take her there if she had let me. But she never saw me clearly. I sometimes think that she didn't even know I existed, although at that time I thought it was impossible. As I got to know her better, I realized that my loneliness matched hers more than she would have liked to admit.

But she just saw me as one of her many admirers. And I don't blame her. I wasn't tall, or handsome like the men she got involved with and nor could I give her the luxuries she was used to. Let's face it—I was a nobody. Once I went to see her in Bombay—that's what Mumbai was called then—and visited her flat in Juhu, but it didn't bring us any closer.

As time went on, I discovered that she was seeing a married man. He loved her, but I think he was using her. She didn't care. I wrote to her. Countless letters, saying, Baby, please. He's not worth your time. He may be an intellectual, but he won't love you the way I do. But I might as well not have sent her those letters. She never answered them. Maybe she forgot? Or maybe she didn't realize how much the time I had spent with her meant to me.

I chalked it up to the obvious cliché—I was Pakistani and she was Indian—and never would the twain meet. Getting to India once was difficult enough, and we were hardly Shoaib and Sania. So as time went on, I came to terms with the fact that we were never meant to be.

My love didn't wane over the years. I heard that she left India for the US in the 80s, returning much later. Her beauty was gone and a haunting, almost eerie, pain had replaced the mischief in her eyes. She had gained weight, but that didn't matter, not to me.

I, by that time, had made something of myself. Life had been good to me; I was an investment banker, married with children, but the emptiness remained. I still caught glimpses of her whenever I could; glimpses of the past. Of her in a white dress and a pink hat; in a yellow sari; in a black dress that showed off her curves, inviting me to let the night go by without worrying about what may come.

She continued to smoke and drink, I think. It didn't help matters. I felt like shaking her and telling her to stop the insanity. But the distance between

our worlds had grown. I could have gone to see her, but I was told that she had become a recluse. She had let life slip by her. And I was too much of a coward to tell my wife that my heart didn't belong to her; that it belonged in India. The India we could have called home had it not been for 1947. Oh well.

The final blow came in 2005. I heard it on the television. She was dead. My babe was dead. She had been dead for two days before her body was found. How could this be? How could I have let this happen? I blamed myself. I could do nothing else. I couldn't rush to Santa Cruz Cemetery where she was buried, what would my wife say?

So instead, I locked myself in my room, feigning a headache and asked not to be disturbed. A song played in my mind: *Tum saath ho jab apne, duniya ko bhula denge...hum maut ko jeene ke, andaaz sikha denge.*

A tear slid down my cheek.

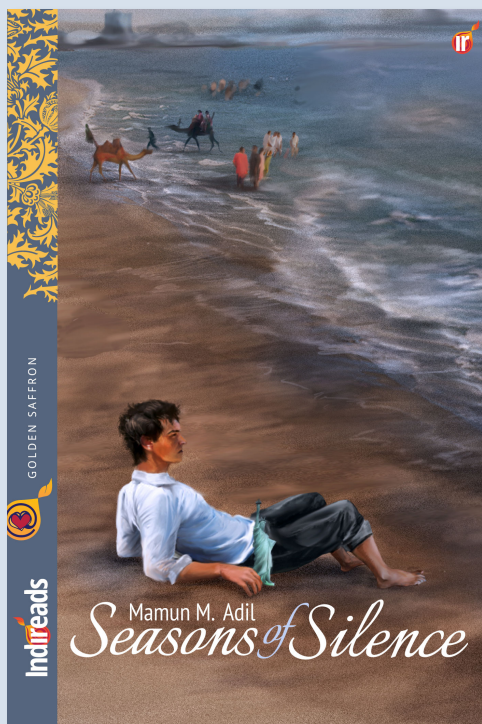
Goodbye, Parveen, I said. Not just to her, but to my youth.



ABOUT MAMUN M. ADIL

An intrepid traveller, Mamun M. Adil (@mamunadil) was born in Egypt and has lived in Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Oman, the UAE and the US. With a bachelor's degree in media studies and journalism from Queens College, City University of New York, Mamun has been working for the Business Development and Research Department of The Dawn Media Group in Karachi since 2004, and continues to contribute to DAWN and several magazines in Pakistan. He has also been working on Cloud89, a weekly radio show on CityFM89 for the last six years. He has helped with the production of several books including those detailing Karachi's history for the Jewel in the Crown: Karachi under the Raj (1843-1947) Exhibition at the Mohatta Palace Museum.

Mamun's interests include colonial architecture, pre-Partition history and pop culture, and his obsessions include Hindi films. His first novella, [Seasons of Silence](#), has been published by Indireads, and is available for sale on Indireads' website.



Seasons of Silence

by Mamun M. Adil

Nadeem is back in Karachi, but is haunted by memories of the life and woman he left behind in New York City.

Available on www.indireads.com

Serendipity

YAMINI VASUDEVAN

“Can I share this table with you? The rest are all taken.”

The gentle voice makes me look up. I am not disappointed. She is as good-looking as she sounds. She seems to be in her late twenties. Soft brown hair falls in waves around her shoulders; her eyes are large, dark and alluring, and despite the scarf wrapped around her neck and the jacket, I can make out the slim waist and shapely curves. I am more than happy to have her for company. As I move my laptop to make some room on the small table, I say, “Please do. I was getting bored here on my own anyway.” She smiles as she sits down.

The waitress comes over with a latte. As she sips her coffee, she asks, “So, what do you do?”

I waver between telling her the truth and inventing a fantasy, and then say, “I am a writer, a novelist, in fact.” Her lips curve in a smile—women always fancy writers.

“Really?” she says, sounding excited. “But you look so young.” I dip my head in acknowledgement of her compliment. “And what are you writing about?” she adds. I take off my glasses and polish them with the tail of my shirt.

“I am actually looking for a good story. Do you have one to tell me?” I say.

I am not lying. My agent has been pushing me for another piece and I need to come up with something real quick. There is a pause; she seems to be thinking. Then, “I could tell you a good story, but you must promise to give me credit for it when it’s published,” she says.

“Sure,” I say. She leans back, plays with the tassels on the edge of her shawl, and begins.

I saw him for the first time at Changi Airport in Singapore, at the check-in counter next to mine. He was tall, good-looking, and wore his jeans and black t-shirt with style. But that's not why I turned to look at him. It was his voice that attracted me. Deep and rich it was, a man's voice, but not one of those I-am-a-hunk types. It was a cultured man's voice, with all the polite inflections that one would expect from a person who was brought up in a household that valued politeness.

"Please ma'am," he was saying, "I am willing to pay extra but it is very important that I take everything with me." He had a strong American accent.

The woman at the counter frowned and replied, "I am sorry, sir. The plane is full, and as our sign says we can't take any extra baggage on this flight. Even if you are willing to pay." She stressed the last word in a way that indicated it was meant to be a reprimand.

I was never the helping kind but something prompted me to say, "I can take the extra baggage—I have some kilos left." He turned to look at me. Dark brown eyes met mine. My heart skipped a beat.

"Would you?" he asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

"Yeah...sure," I replied and explained the situation to the staff at my counter. She checked something on her computer, and then quickly checked in a small box along with my suitcase. Without words being exchanged, we walked together.

"Let's go for coffee," he suggested. I nodded happily, and my steps had an added spring to them.

"So, where are you from?" I asked him.

“From New York. Been there since I was young. Oh, I am Riyaz, by the way,” he said as he stretched out his hand. Riyaz. He was Muslim. My response was delayed by a second or two.

“I’m Neha. I am working here, in Singapore.”

He smiled as he took my hand and shook it. But I was torn. Here was an attractive young man, but it had all ended well before it began. “And what do you do, Neha?” he asked.

“Oh, I work for CNBC,” I replied, but my smile was tight.

“Are you upset that I am Muslim?” he asked, making me jump as much for the question as for the sudden manner in which he posed it.

“No, no,” I replied. “Why should I be?” But some part of me felt like this coffee ‘date’ was a bad idea.

He regarded me with a steady gaze, and said, “Well, I am originally from Pakistan—on top of being Muslim—so if you want to bring the knives out now would be a good time.” We looked at each other for a couple of seconds, and then burst out laughing.

We were to board the same flight, heading to Bombay. I was going there for a friend’s wedding, and then to Bangalore for a few days to spend some time with my sister. “Why are you going to Bombay?” I asked.

“I am going there for some business meetings. I work in finance. Also, I have a good friend living there and this is a good way to catch up,” came the reply.

“Girlfriend?” the word was out before I knew it. There was a surprised pause and then he smiled.

“No, I am single,” he said, and his face lit up with a cheeky smile.

For the next hour or so, we talked, laughed and shared a companionable silence. I felt completely at ease in his presence, almost as if I had met an old friend. When we boarded the flight, I was disappointed to realize that we were sitting several rows apart. “I wish we were sitting together,” I said as I stowed my bag away and sat down. He didn’t say anything, just walked

away—I wondered if he found my comment too flirty or if he was just pushed ahead by the tide of passengers.

The plane took off. I was leafing through the in-flight magazine when the person sitting next to me got up, and Riyaz sat in his place. I was so happy I reached over and hugged him—and when I felt his arms go around me, I knew the feeling was mutual.

By the time we landed at Bombay, he was absolutely sure that he wanted to take it forward. I was hesitant—a Muslim, a Pakistani at that—my family wouldn't agree, but even if they did, how would it work? I argued that even a cricket match might cause rifts between us. But he was adamant—he was more American than Pakistani (“Cricket? I watch basketball and hockey!”) and he insisted that politics could be ignored. He told me to think about it, and to call him if I changed my mind. Before we parted ways, he slipped me his business card with a local number scribbled on the back.

Over the next two days, I could think of little else. I smiled and talked to everyone at the wedding, but my mind was elsewhere. I wondered if the rift between our countries was so big that we couldn't build a life over the chasm. I wondered if I was being a silly romantic, falling for the grand idea of love beyond borders. I told myself that I didn't even know this guy—what if he turned out to be a psycho or a serial killer? I tossed and turned at night, and had to use an extra coat of concealer to hide the dark tinge under my eyes the next morning.

By the time the wedding festivities were concluded, I'd made up my mind. I called my sister and told her I would be coming a couple of days later than planned. I told her not to worry, and made up some story about meeting a long-lost friend. She knew I was lying, but also knew that it would be better to get the truth out of me face-to-face than on the phone. I hung up the phone and called Riyaz.

“Neha! Please tell me this is not goodbye,” he said when he heard my voice.

“No, I want to come meet you—where are you?” I asked. “I am staying at the Taj. But I am stuck in meetings all day. Tell me where you are staying, I will come pick you up.” I gave him my address; he told me he had a car

with a driver, so it wouldn't be a problem. I was staying with a friend—so there was enough to keep me distracted while I waited.

We were watching a movie when the call came—there had been a bomb explosion at a train station. We quickly turned on the news, and watched horrified as the Taj went up in flames. I felt myself go numb when I heard about gunmen and bullets. There was no call from Riyaz. I wondered if he was hurt, or killed. And then I wondered if he was one of the terrorists. My shock was misunderstood as stemming from the horrors of the evening. I called my sister and told her I would be getting back to the safe confines of Singapore as soon as possible. She agreed that it was the best thing to do. I tried the number Riyaz had given me—a recorded voice said it couldn't be reached.

There is a lull in the conversation. I don't know what to say. She probably married someone else since then, and carries the lost chance of love in her heart—a little secret hidden away from the world.

“Don't you think that is one amazing story?” she says.

I nod and refrain from saying that I wished for a better ending. Her phone rings. She picks up, listens and says, “I am at Starbucks. Come on over.”

“My husband,” she says as she hangs up, “I would like you to meet him.”

I am a little bit uncomfortable, but have no choice other than to oblige.

A tall man walks towards us. Neha gets up and hugs him. He turns to me and holds out his hand. “Nice to meet you. I am Riyaz.”

My stunned expression must have conveyed that I knew more about him than he would have expected. “He is a writer—a novelist. He was looking for a story, so I told him ours,” Neha explains.

“Oh, yeah? Did you tell him about how I chased you all the way to Singapore and hounded the CNBC office till I found you?” he asks.

“I didn’t, but you just did,” she laughs.

We exchange numbers and the promise of keeping in touch before the couple head off. I open up a new Word document—looks like I can give my agent something after all. I type my dedication on the first page.

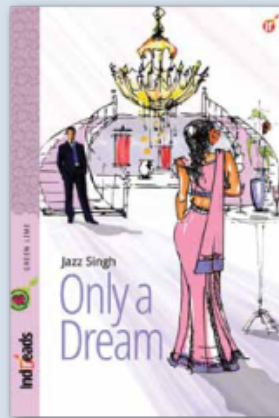
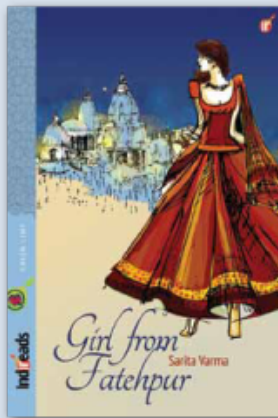
“To Neha and Riyaz, for proving to me that politics can be ignored.”



ABOUT YAMINI VASUDEVAN

A writer and editor, Yamini has worked with some of the biggest names in the publishing world— Harper's Bazaar (Singapore), The Singapore Women's Weekly (Singapore), and The Hindu Business Line (India). She has also co-authored 'Singapore Indian Entrepreneurs: Dreams to Reality'. Her writing spans political and historical narratives and analysis, qualitative business issues, travel and lifestyle.

Fiction is a long-standing love, and she has recently penned a couple of short stories and a full-length romance novel. Yamini has also published several fiction and non-fiction pieces for children. You can read her published works at yamini16.wordpress.com.



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One Stupid Comment

SHUCHI KALRA & SABAHAAT MUHAMMAD

Jahaan was tired. The peace negotiations had been going on for hours now, and all the talking was making her jaw ache. Such petty things to be discussing—*who cares about a tree here, or a mountain there? We came to end the war, can't we just agree on that and be done with it? Go back to our respective corners and...*

Her gaze fell on Aryan. His smooth skin was deeply tanned from years spent in the sun. *Probably as tough as an elephant's, too.* Looking at his aquiline profile, she wasn't so sure that she wanted to retreat. The deep orange strip down the back of his jacket denoted rank: the chieftain's son, perhaps? Well, she was no less than a princess herself. It was only a matter of time before her father handed over the reins of the tribe in her sure hands. It's too bad, she thought, that he was the enemy.

A tribe elder said something mundane and she saw Aryan's eyes roll; she realized he wanted this over with as much as she did.

Aryan had sensed her watching him. Like her, he was deeply aware of her in the cramped tent. Every once in a while, he had let his gaze linger on her porcelain skin and those emerald eyes that made the rich silk of her green robes pale in comparison.

They were the only two of their age at the negotiations—representatives of the next generation—and he was curious about her. As curious as he was about the magnificent white stallion tethered right outside the tent. When the group eventually broke for refreshments, Aryan got up to get a better look at the animal.

In the year 2130, horses were rare—almost extinct, in fact—and he had never seen one outside of his grandfather's picture books. How would it feel to touch it, ride it, feel its pulse throbbing as it took off with the speed of...?

“Have you ever seen one before?”

Aryan whipped his head around at the soft statement. Jahaan was standing right behind him, watching him. “No.” His words were clipped. He was curious about her, yes, but had no reason to be *friendly*.

“Would you like to take a ride?” Jahaan’s question took him by surprise. It was an odd gesture of conciliation between tribes that had been enemies for centuries.

Damn, is she reading my mind? “Ummm...” *This wasn’t the time for ifs and buts. What if she changed her mind?* “Okay.” *How difficult can it be, he thought, to ride one of these things?*

Less than two minutes later, he was sitting behind a beautiful, intriguing woman on an animal that, just a day ago, was a silly fantasy. Aryan gritted his teeth in pain as his butt repeatedly smacked down on the horse’s back. He forced his mind away from the torturous rhythm of the ride, and shouted against the wind.

“Where did you get this?”

“The horse?” Jahaan turned her head slightly to look back at Aryan. “I don’t know—we’ve had him since I was born.”

“Won’t they be angry at you? For taking the *enemy* out on a horse?”

Jahaan gave a short laugh. “By sunrise, we’ll be allies—we are here to negotiate *peace*, after all, aren’t we?”

“My grandfather said we were allies thirty years ago. It took one man’s stupid comments to break the alliance then...”

“Are you planning on saying something stupid?” She was mocking, confident, a wry smile pulling at the corner of her mouth.

He narrowed his eyes at her as her silky hair stroked softly against his face, and he turned his head to dislodge the strands. “Not *planning* on it, no...wha—” Jahaan had moved her head at the same time, trying to get her hair under control. Her hand jerked on the reins just as a snake slithered onto the path before them. The white horse reared in panic, almost throwing his ride. Jahaan pulled at his mouth, but he sensed her fear at almost being thrown, and ignored her command. The horse’s sleek skin stretched over

bunched muscles as he turned from the path they were on, and launched himself away from the canyon where the camp was set up.

“What the hell happened?” Aryan’s words were snatched away by the wind, but Jahaan heard them. Struggling to control the wayward animal, she yelled back.

“Just hold on. Whatever you do, don’t let go!”

The stallion had run for hours, or it had seemed that way. Jahaan had dropped the reins after the first minute and just clutched at his mane, letting him ride out his fear. Aryan, by that time, was deeply regretting the ride, but like Jahaan, he had just held on and waited for the mad dash to end.

As their eyes adjusted to the darkness, Jahaan slipped off the horse. It was damp and frothing slightly at the mouth and obviously needed a rest. Aryan awkwardly followed. He forced himself to remain calm as he looked around. He had no idea how far the horse had run. More troubling than the darkness, though, as he patted his pockets for matches, was the silence.

“Where the fuck are we?” Jahaan’s whisper floated from across the trembling horse. “Can you see anything?”

“Just enough.” Aryan found the matches, and casually tore a strip of fabric off his shirt. Cautiously feeling along the ground with his feet, he found a small, rotted branch of wood. He wrapped the fabric around it, adding some sand to slow down the burning, then held up his makeshift torch to get a good look.

It was a dark, dark night without a moon, but the yellow flame bounced off the black salt of the desert, and Jahaan drew in a sharp breath of fear.

“Are we on the Kutchee Rann?”

“You stupid...” Aryan caught himself before he went any further, but Jahaan glared at him.

“You think this is my fault? I couldn’t control the horse!”

“Exactly! You couldn’t control it. I thought you knew how to ride.”

“I *do* know how to ride, which is why we’re still alive, you pompous *jat*.” The ancient word caught him a bit by surprise, and as he opened his mouth to lambast her, the torch flickered wildly, and Jahaan looked at him with a tinge of panic.

“If that goes out...” *People didn’t come back from the Kutchee Rann.* “We’ll never find the way back in the dark.”

He kept his voice calm, assured. “We’ll sleep here and wait for light. The sun will rise.”

He swept the torch around, looking for something that could pass as shelter. The desert was notoriously cold at night.

He heard her take a deep breath. “We should dig a hole, to sleep in. We’ll stay warm that way,” she finally offered.

He nodded. “We will get out. We have a horse, a huge advantage over...others...who may have gotten lost here.”

They had been walking, slowly, Jahaan leading the horse, in search for a soft bed, and something that would buffer them from the cold. She stumbled, unable to see where she was stepping, and let out a sharp cry as she fell. Aryan swept the torch towards her, and the light fell on a crumbling stone wall. Jahaan had stumbled into some ruins, barely standing, but there was a wall, and a few pillars, enough of a structure to give them the illusion of shelter. The torch created a warm ring of light, and, tethering the horse to one of the stones, Jahaan and Aryan searched for a soft spot under the wall, where they could dig a hole large enough for them to snuggle into.

They had to use their hands to dig. The horse stood idly by, unconcerned by the humans’ frantic movements. The torch had, mercifully, survived the wild flickering, but was burning down the stick at an alarming rate, prompting the two to speed up their actions.

“Fuck.” Aryan had scraped his hand against something sharp, breaking skin as he pulled away. Salt from the earth stung the wound, and he sat back for a moment. Jahaan was down in the hole, already almost three feet deep, and she saw the sharp edge that had wounded Aryan sticking out of the ground. It was metal, which seemed odd to her. *Metal, on the salt plains?* This place was a wasteland, a desolate tract of land that was rumored to be an endless desert without signs of any life, pitted with deep pockets of quicksand and natural traps that meant that humans rarely found their way out. As a result, humans *never* ventured in.

She started digging around the edge, smoothing away the sand as she found straight edges of what was clearly a box. Aryan silently joined her, ignoring the sting of sand and salt against his hand.

The box was huge. The two struggled together to pull it out of the sand and into the hole they had dug. It was buried deep within a nest of wooden planks, and they were both panting with exertion by the time they lifted it out of its cocoon.

It was beautifully engraved but rusted and weathered.

“It’s beautiful.” Jahaan reached out to stroke the ornate edge of the box.

“It looks like it was...deliberately buried.”

“Hidden, do you think?”

“Wait—the planks! We can light a fire, and figure out what this is.” He scrambled out of the hole, and Jahaan grabbed a handful of the crumbling planks and passed them up to him. Within a few minutes, the flickering torch settled as the fire found new material to burn.

Jahaan was already examining the box, but there seemed to be no lock, no visible way to open it. Frowning, Aryan rested his hand on a corner, and pushed down. Jahaan jumped as a small handle popped out in front of her.

“What on earth?”

“Pull it.” The handle came away in her hand. Aryan took it from her, turned it around and pushed it back into the slot it had come out of. The box split in two.

“How did you know how to do that?”

“You grew up riding horses, I grew up reading books.”

They both looked down at the scrolls of paper that had slipped out of the open box. There were pictures, stacked neatly just below the scrolls, and what looked like a stamp.

“I read too—just never heard or read of a box like this.”

Aryan frowned. “I read about a box *just* like this; it had something to do with an important event...” He pulled open a scroll, and suddenly sat down with a thud. “*The Kutch Treaty...*” His voice was a mere whisper.

Jahaan saw the familiar crescent and star that was their tribe’s symbol on the paper. Right next to it was an ornate blue wheel, Aryan’s tribe...

“What was the Kutch Treaty?”

Aryan smoothed his hand over the textured paper, his brain feverish with the idea that he held the original treaty in his hand. Could this be a way forward out of the desolation in which they lived? How, he wondered, how was this in such good condition?

“It was the beginning of the end. A treaty to unite our tribes forever.”

“The beginning of the end?”

“Something happened—it’s not recorded what, exactly. But that was the beginning of a war that lasted almost twenty years, and ended with something called a nuclear disaster. It’s the reason we live in tents...” He pulled up the pictures and fanned them out in front of Jahaan.

Important men and women posed in front of awesome concrete structures. Shaking hands and smiling, people posed against lushly green, decadent buildings, under the shade of tall trees and bright flowers; she found images of long cars and sleek planes, technologies and a way of living that hadn’t existed in this land for almost a hundred years, but she had read about in the books she read.

When the sun rose, the young couple was already astride the horse. The metal box sat awkwardly between them. Jahaan had scouted the land earlier, and in the stillness of the desert, the tracks of their journey into the Kutchee Rann were clearly visible.

Hungry, thirsty and hot, they slowly followed the tracks with a new sense of peace and complicity settling between them. The box held precious secrets—knowledge that had been buried for so long, but could surely help them build a new country.

“Can you imagine working together, living together, like they said in the Treaty?”

“We worked together last night, Jahaan. If we hadn’t, we may have been much worse for the wear this morning.”

“Hmmm. Let’s hope the elders see it the same way.”

Aryan agreed. He had been surprised at how much they had in common. He had been brought up to believe that the Druks were their mortal enemy. Before this wild night, he would have been too afraid to be alone with her, sure she would slit his throat at the slightest provocation.

It took the young couple a whole day to return to the camp. Darkness had fallen, and Jahaan was letting the horse make essential decisions about the way back. They had travelled in comfortable camaraderie, but had begun to droop with fatigue as the landscape finally changed from barren desert to rocks, mountains and sparse trees.

From the distance, the couple heard raised voices, and an eerie tension gripped their bodies. A soft glow of light indicated that they were close a few stone throws away from the camp; too far to hear voices, surely? Jahaan felt Aryan grip her tightly as she spurred the horse onwards.

They reached the bluff above the shared campgrounds just as the sound of gunfire filled the air. Shocked, Jahaan pulled up the horse, and twisted to look up at Aryan. His face was taut, and he was looking straight ahead. He lifted his arm and pointed. A few meters ahead of them, half way down the steep slopes of the valley, several men were wrestling on a narrow crag. Each tribe had stationed lookouts along the valley wall, but the men seemed to have forgotten their posts.

Climbing off the horse, Aryan crept towards the edge of the cliff and looked down into the valley. He felt Jahaan crawl up next to him. The box lay between them.

In the canyon below, the campgrounds resembled a wasteland. Bodies were strewn across the canyon floor, and dust swirled where men still fought. The peace talks were clearly over—in less than a day, the hopes and efforts of six long months of preparation lay in ashes. Despair gripped the two youngsters watching from the cliff, but they were helplessly stuck on their perch. Neither of them had the will to join the fight and it never occurred to them to turn on each other.

“We should be down there,” Jahaan whispered, reluctantly. “My father...”

“Mine, too.” He looked uncertain. “Should we?”

She was silent for a moment, then she shook her head, sadly. “Look at that frenzy—they’re killing each other based on the color of their clothes. No one is going to stop and listen to us if we try and *reason* with them. We’ll have to wait it out.”

It took hours for the dust to settle. In the light of yet another early dawn, Aryan and Jahaan watched as random figures scattered in all directions. Leaving behind a trail of bodies, the survivors had turned their backs on hopes of any lasting peace. The death toll of this particular day would not be forgotten. For all they knew, that toll included their parents and loved ones.

Putting her hand on the box, Jahaan looked up at the sky. Rays of pale peach light cut through the dark blue of the heavens. It carried the promise of a beautiful new day.

She turned her emerald eyes to Aryan. “I wonder.” His hand came up to touch hers in mute understanding. “What stupid comment crushed the Kutch Treaty so completely, so devastatingly, that a century later, we’re still at war?”



ABOUT SHUCHI KALRA

Writing has been Shuchi's passion for as long as she can remember, although she adopted it as a profession only in 2005. She now freelances with popular magazines and businesses, and also writes a monthly travel column for Investors India. Her works have appeared in Good Housekeeping, Home Review, Parent & Child, Vista, Women's Era, and Time 'N' Style, among many others.

A firm believer in the intense power of words, Shuchi hopes to use her writing skills to make a positive difference to the world. Her collaborative short story, 'One Stupid Comment', is just a small step in that direction. She also believes that literature and art are threads that bind cultures and unite humanity.

Shuchi is the owner of Pixie Dust Writing Studio, a quaint little editing firm that services a global clientele, and the Indian Freelance Writers Blog. Pay her a visit at www.shuchikalra.com.

ABOUT SABAHAT MUHAMMAD

Sabahat Muhammad is a Karachi-based graphic designer, writer and editor. A graduate of the Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture, she has been an active player in the communication industry since 1995, and has worked as a Visualizer at Creative Unit (design house for Dawn) and as a Creative Consultant for Newsline. As Principal of iMedia, she helped bring Newsline online in 2009, was the lead designer for the KaraFilm Festival from 2005 to 2008 and has most recently created a portal of Arif Hasan's works spanning thirty years of research. She is a senior editor at Indireads.

Anjum

ANDY PAULA

“Hi, which number?” I say, wanting to press the lift button for the bride.

No reply. She looks at me and through me. I rephrase. “*Kaun se floor pe jana hai?*”

This time she looks up shyly and smiles. “*Ji?*”

I smile too, “*Kiss manzil par jayengi aap?*”

“*Saatwein.*”

I’m going up to the seventh floor too. We travel in silence with the occasional smile when our eyes meet. We reach our floor, get out of the lift and turn in different directions. I open the lock and the interlock and am about to step in, when I remember and turn to say bye. She is still struggling with the interlock. Her hands are full of the red and white bangles of a bride, her heavy brocade dupatta keeps wanting to slide off her slim frame and two thick black locks have escaped from her bun and are hanging over her eyes.

“*Nahin khul raha?*” I state the obvious, and immediately feel stupid. She shakes a helpless head.

“*Ek minute, mujhe dijiye,*” I take her keys and unlock her door as if it were my own. She gives me a grateful smile and invites me in for tea. Some other time, I tell her.

“*Aapka naam kya hai? Nayi shaadi hui hai?*”

She blushes as she nods. “Anjum.”

Lovely name, I tell her. She blushes some more and doesn’t ask mine. “*Mera naam Vandana hai. Vandana Solanki,*” I offer, surprising even myself. I tell her I’m newly married too and have come here just last month. She smiles, almost in relief. “Ok, bye,” I turn to step into my house.

“Bye,” says Anjum and nods to indicate a ‘see you’.

Inside, the house is breezy; I love the French windows that open out to the greenery so rare in Bombay. I like to sit on the window, my feet dangling outside where the flower pots are kept on the slim grill, and sip my morning and evening tea. The vast green expanse below with the Ganesha temple at its centre soothes my soul, makes me feel connected.

Ganesh Puja is just round the corner, maybe I won't miss Nagpur if they have celebrations here, I think.

I never wanted to marry in Bombay; it is notorious for being cold. I think I never wanted to *marry*, my tutorial centre was flourishing, and I had money, friends and peace of mind. What did I need a man for? Anyway most of them drink, beat their wives and force them to bear children. Couldn't imagine myself being a doormat. But then here I am, much-married and still doubting the wisdom of it. I've been here just under a month and the only person who I have exchanged two words with is Anjum. When Kirti calls me the next time, I can tell her I've made friends. It's only a little lie after all. My sister wants to know everything that's happening here. *She* should've been married and living in Bombay instead of me; she likes all the glamour and the *taam jhaam*.

I, on the other hand, miss the tutorial business that I had set up with such difficulty and that was doing so well. Why are marriages so important in our country? If you are not married, they look at you as if there's something terribly wrong. I know what you'll say. That's what *Aayi* and *Kakaji* also said, and everybody who heard about my marriage to Vineet. That he's a good guy and earns well. And he only has an elder sister who is like a mother to him; their parents passed away some years ago so there won't be any *saas-sasur ki kich kich*. This is hypocrisy to the core; first they teach you to respect parents and then they are happy that their son-in-law doesn't have his!

Vineet leaves for work at eight in the morning and returns by nine. The days are longer than I like—how much can I read? I hate watching TV; those regressive serials get my goat. He is an AUTOCAD engineer,

whatever that means. I think they're into designing; he said something about the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, which he had helped design. I'm not sure about that, though. Yes, he was in Dubai before marriage, but c'mon, Burj Khalifa! That's too prestigious an assignment, and honestly, he doesn't look that sharp to me. Anyway, not that I'm telling anyone about my suspicion; they'll only preach and say I should worship my husband.

I worship only Ganapati bappa.

The *kuda-wala* comes after eight. Normally Usha, the cleaner, keeps the bag outside when she is leaving, but today she has called in sick.

Anjum is putting her garbage out when I open my door. I smile hesitantly at her. She invites me for tea, but I shake my head and retreat into my house. I have only just met her and drinking tea at her place smacks too much of friendship.

I don't see her for the next few days and decide to be more friendly when I see her next. Which is why I venture out and say hello the next time I see her opening her door. She is wearing a pretty rose-pink *salwar-kameez*. "That's lovely," I find myself saying, "where did you get it from?"

She looks down and touches her top. "*Yeh Lahore se hai. Aap ko aisa joda chahiye?*"

I nod and then it hits me. Wait a minute, did she say *Lahore*? My head starts spinning. She's a Pakistani? I conceal my surprise. *Ganesh*, was it not bad enough that you got me married in Bombay. But to give me Pakistani neighbours is more than I can tolerate. I have nothing against any individual but all those terrifying stories about the bloodshed and the gore. What were they doing in India, I mean, was it easy for them to be here? I can't believe it, a Paki in my building...on my floor.

I stare at her as she smiles happily and invites me in for tea again. I don't remember what I say to get out of it.

After the initial shock, I begin to think that perhaps I am being too quick to judge. What a shame if even an educated person like me behaves irrationally. Didn't I always talk of world-vision in the motivation sessions I held for the senior students? I decide to open lines of communication and see what happens. But for some reason though, I don't tell Vineet that our neighbours are Pakistani. It is my secret.

The next time I see Anjum she invites me for tea as usual. This time I agree and quickly go inside to grab my keys and join her in 701. Her house is spotlessly clean and a subtle *keora* essence pervades the room. I look around curiously, trying to see differences and find none. There's a maroon sofa and matching curtains; a tall brass flower-vase in one corner with colourful artificial flowers; and a beautiful carpet that I suspect is not Indian. A large framed poster-size photograph of the couple adorns one wall—they look happy together.

This girl works at supersonic speed; tea is ready even before I can take in the details. I compliment her on her house and on her speed. She beams.

"Kya ban raha hai, badi achchi khushboo aa rahi hai?" I ask.

"Gosht bana rahi hoon, aaj Shahaab ka budday hai." I can't imagine making mutton at eight in the morning even for my own birthday, forget Vineet's. This girl could sure teach me a thing or two!

"When is the party?" I ask.

"Koi party nahin hai, magar ab aap aur bhaiya aayenge dinner par."

I am amazed at her simplicity. With my mathematician's practicality, would I invite anyone for dinner just a few days after meeting them? Not in this lifetime. My friends tell me I am too practical, *'itna bhi achcha nahi hota hai.'* They still hold it against me that when Vineet had come to meet me once before marriage, a surprise visit, I had refused to meet him because I had classes scheduled. How could I have told forty students that their tuition was cancelled because the teacher was going out! And what would I have

told their parents? They kept a tab of each penny they paid for the tutorial. Only fair, I had said. My friends find this cold; I tell them they are romantic fools and it was because of them that our government offices worked like they did.

I think of refusing her spontaneous invitation, but then think—it's not like I am doing anything else tonight? And it will be a nice change. So I ask what else she is cooking for dinner? Does she need any help? She responds to the first question with a smile. "You'll know when you come tonight." For the second question, she laughs. "*Arrey sirf char logon ka hi toh khana banna hai, mere mayke mein toh humara chalees logon ka ghar hai, Lahore mein.*"

This time, the mention of Lahore piques my interest rather than mistrust. I want to stay back and learn more. About where she comes from, how she grew up. FORTY people in *one* house she says? How big must the house be?

"It's a *haveli*," she says. Nobody marries and moves out; all the children grow up together; you can't tell who is whose child; everyone is equally loved, equally reprimanded; nobody gets any preferential treatment. I try to understand the equation—yes that's my math's teacher's brain doing overtime—but the number of *khalas* and *appis* she mentions leaves me confused. I like things in neat slots.

Is the carpet from Lahore, I ask. Yes, she nods proudly. Some *mamu* who lives in Kuwait gave it to her as a wedding present. The only brother my mother has is a good-for-nothing wastrel wheedling money from his unsuspecting sister. *Aayi* never seems to see through his antics; she pampers him to this day. Perhaps because she didn't have a son. *Kakaji* is too simple to say anything, even if it happens right under his nose. We call our father *Kakaji*, though it actually means uncle. An older cousin who lived with us when Kirti and I were small used to call our father *Kakaji*; we just picked it up. I wonder if our father ever missed being called father. He never complained, so I'll never know.

Anjum regales me with more stories about her family; I am fascinated. I love her lacy *salwars* I tell her, and she promises to get me some. There she goes again! How can she be so generous to a mere acquaintance? My own fixed ideas about family and people look a little tainted, even to my own

eyes. In Nagpur we were familiar with our Marathi neighbours, but here, in Bombay, with somebody not even from the same country...Suddenly it is too much for one day—culture shock perhaps. I return home promising to see her for dinner.

I let myself into 702, my hom...house. It is breezy inside. The white lace curtains are flying. We don't have any wedding pictures on our walls.

“How can you be so stupid?” Vineet has returned after nine and is more grouchy than usual. The local trains do it to you, I don't really blame him.

“She is very sweet, I couldn't say no.”

“Hello, this is not your Nagpur where everybody is sweet, this is *Bombay!* I'm so tired and now I've got to dress up and meet new people!”

“Ok, you go for your shower, I'll make dinner,” I say. I hadn't cooked thinking we were going to Anjum's.

I am very angry and feel like a fool at the same time. What do I have to occupy myself with for the whole day? This man won't let me give tuitions, he is tired every day of his life, never takes me out and leaves me alone at home the whole day, every day. And now he shouts at me. Does he care about how I spend the whole day, what I read, who I call? Selfish brute! Hot tears roll from my eyes. Damn! I'm no weakling, I had five people working under me, I was respected and loved—and look at me now.

I wipe my tears, pick up the box of sweets I'd bought for Anjum and Shahaab and ring their doorbell. Anjum opens the door. She looks lovely in a turquoise silk suit and big matching *kundan* earrings.

“*Arrey bhaiya kahan hain?*”

He is too tired to come, I tell her. She looks at me for a meaningful moment, and I feel my tears threaten again, but she helps me retain my dignity with a “*koi baat nahin, aap ghar jao, main dus minute mein aati hoon.*”

I protest feebly but am no match for her. As I turn to leave, she asks me if we'll eat meat cooked in their house. I turn beet-root red as I nod. Our doorbell rings in ten minutes and the smiling couple is at the door. Vineet is hospitable and invites them in, he even wishes Shahaab happy birthday as Anjum bustles ahead of me into the kitchen while I follow as if it were her house. She places a huge tray on the counter and as she uncovers various bowls our house fills with the aroma of *biryani, gosht and seviyaan*.

I hug Anjum and howl.

Afterwards, I can't believe I let my guard down like that. It's something about Anjum—something that I can't explain though. Vineet was visibly shocked and quite embarrassed. After they left he was tender with me for the first time. I let myself be held and felt a flicker of something new and warm.

The next morning, after my howling fiasco, Anjum came over in the morning and sat me down to explain how hard Vineet works, and why it was important that we keep a peaceful home. Anjum is the wisest bride I have ever met. She also told me how I should always be nicely dressed and smelling good when he returns from work, how men stray if their wives don't look pretty or if they nag too much. I took her teaching to heart and made an effort to make Vineet love me. And if he was tired, I loved myself.

Our days shift into an easy rhythm. We spend our mornings together, talking, laughing, shopping and cooking. I begin to see Bombay with her wide-open eyes and begin to like the craziness of it, the freedom of the trains and the variety of its shops. For her everything is new and she is eager to learn it all from me.

I meet Shahaab and learn that he is from Gorakhpur and has family ties in Pakistan—hence the marriage with Anjum. How he got a bride from beyond the border, and then managed to get her across, is still a mystery to me. But I have the decency not to pry. He smiles at her and she looks back adoringly. I look at them, curious but no longer clueless. Vineet and I are getting along better, although we have miles to go before we reach this altitude. I even told him Anjum was from Pakistan and, apart from a ‘hmm that explains the food’, didn’t get much of a response. His rating went up a little that day. We’ve even gone out as couples together once or twice and I can see him warming up to Anjum like almost everyone around her does. Like I say, that’s just Anjum.

I have my head down and almost walk into Shahaab at the grocers’. He gives me a familiar smile. Who said Bombay was cold?

“Where’s Anjum?” I ask. I need to see her and tell her my news.

“She’s cleaning the house. My brothers are coming from Gorakhpur today,” he says.

“How much more will she clean?” I laugh.

He laughs along, “You know her by now, and then she has to cook a hundred things,” he says fondly.

“Let me go and meet her now, before she gets busy with her guests,” I say.

“*Devar aa rahe hain aaj*,” I say as she opens the door.

“Shahaab *miley the kya neeche?*” she smiles.

“No, you are busy, I won’t sit,” I say.

“Arrey sit, ya,” she imitates me and laughs. She’s one of my best students. There’s a long way to go but her interest in learning English is admirable. She keeps my morale boosted by saying I speak excellent English and she

wants to be like me. I've never told her how often I wish I were like her; I'd be a happier person. But I must say, I am learning more every day.

The 'brothers' who were coming were village-brothers, no blood relations, and yet, the enthusiasm, the preparation, the *warmth* that I see in Anjum makes me question myself on a human scale. I think I'll give myself a five. I haven't even called my own sister to my new home, fearing she would sense we were not the lovey-dovey couple that I'd portrayed Vineet and I to be. Maybe a four. I also wouldn't cook for my husband's birthday at eight in the morning.

"I've got to tell you something," I say as I follow her to the kitchen.

"I also," she says, "but you first."

"We are moving to Kuwait," I say quietly. I expect her to cry, ask me to stay, not leave her alone in Bombay. "I feel like going back to Nagpur ya," I whine. "Let Vineet go to Kuwait if he's so mad about money."

"No, Vandu, you will go with *bhaiya*," she admonishes, "what will he do without you?" I hadn't thought of that. I feel ashamed.

"Kuwait *mein mere mamu rehte hain*, I'll give you his number. *Mami* is very good, she'll take care of you," she says decisively.

"Like you take care of me here," I smile through misty eyes. "The carpet-*mamu*?" I ask.

She laughs, "You remember?"

I nod with pride.

"Ok, I'll tell him to buy you a carpet," she says like she's consoling an errant child. And then hugs me as I go off on a crying spree again. It is all too much for me. It seems so unfair. I have just opened my heart and mind and now I am being asked to learn all over again.

Some time later, red-nosed but happier I am ready to leave. "*Arrey*, what did you want to tell me?" I remember as I am stepping out of the house. She blushes and caresses her tummy. I shriek and hug her. "Anjum! You didn't tell me!" She turns red and hides her face in my shirt.

Ganapati Bappa Morya, we can hear the chant till our seventh floor. The Ganesh Puja festivities have started.

Kuwait turned out to be good for Vineet's career; he was happier than he was in Bombay. Consequently, he was better at home too. His work hours were less demanding; the company shuttle picked and dropped him home; and our quality of life improved. I soon got used to Thursday being a half-day and Friday our new Sunday. The neighbourhood school selected me as the head of their Mathematics department, and earning in *dinars* felt satisfying. The loud *azaan* five times a day, rattling at first, soon became a part of me.

And I conceived my first child in Fintas, Kuwait, with maternal advice from Anjum's *mami*.

When Ganesh was three we decided to move back to India. We wanted him to grow up in his own country and imbibe his own culture. We had made enough money to buy a house and Vineet had been offered a lucrative position. During the move, Anjum was not far from my mind, even though over time we had lost touch. The initial calls had become infrequent. Anjum was not an email person and after the first few mails routed through Shahaab, I'd gradually given up. Life had been busy with my job and then Ganesh, and those carefree days of *gupshup* over *chai* remained somewhere in the distant past.

The decision to move back to Bombay, the task of shutting shop in Kuwait, and travel back to the homeland all passed in a haze. Underlying the exhaustion was the satisfaction that we were doing the right thing. We spent the first week in Vineet's friend's house. His wife cooked us delicious

meals, helped me buy things for our flat and after the men left for work, looked after Ganesh as I collapsed on the bed exhausted.

The first weekend, they helped us move into our rented accommodation and helped in setting up the place. I thanked and hugged them, remembering a time when someone else had made my homecoming easy for me. Anjum had changed me, opened me up to be able to accept help from others and to give in return.

I thought of her often. I had taken her address and number from her *mami* and planned to get in touch with her. But somehow the days slipped away and, for some reason or the other, I kept putting it off. Perhaps I was afraid that she had changed, or that she would find me changed, and things would be different from the memories I held so dear.

Slowly, we settled into our new environment. Vineet was enjoying his position of power in the office. I was looking for a school for Ganesh where I could also teach and we were settling down well. Most importantly, Ganesh found many playmates his age and did not seem to miss Kuwait.

And now it really was time to go and find the person who had made this city feel like home to me. So one fine day, I found myself clutching Ganesh's hand looking up at the building that Anjum lived in. I went in and found the elevator door open and a little boy standing inside.

“*Kaun sa floor, aunty?*” I looked down at the little boy and smiled.

“Third please.” I notice the third floor indicator was already red. “*Aap bhi third floor?*” I ask him. He shakes his head vigorously, smiling at Ganesh.

In no time, we have reached. The friendly, little boy skids out of the lift, presses the doorbell at 301 about half a dozen times and says, “Aunty, *aaiye na hamare ghar.*” We can hear his mother's exasperated tone from inside as she approaches to let him in, “*Sammarrrr!*”

She opens the door as the tornado rushes past her, almost toppling her small frame, shouting, “*Ammi, aunty aayi hain.*” I look straight into Anjum's eyes, and without a word, we hug each other. “Vandu!” she cries tears of joy holding me. “Where did you disappear?”

I laugh and cry together. “Anjum, perfect English!”

She scoops Ganesh into her arms and drags me into her three-bedroom *haveli* that smells of *biryani* and *murgi ka saalan*. It is spotlessly clean with the same beautiful carpet on the floor that I remember. Her first-born Zoya comes and takes Ganesh away , and he laughs delightedly as she tickles him. Samar points to a picture of us on the wall; Anjum and Shahaab's huge wedding portrait has been joined by numerous other family photos, but we have pride of place. She makes *chai* and takes my phone from me when Vineet calls to insist we have dinner with them that night. I sip my tea and am content to listen to her stories as our children play close by.

Anjum, our star, is back in our life.

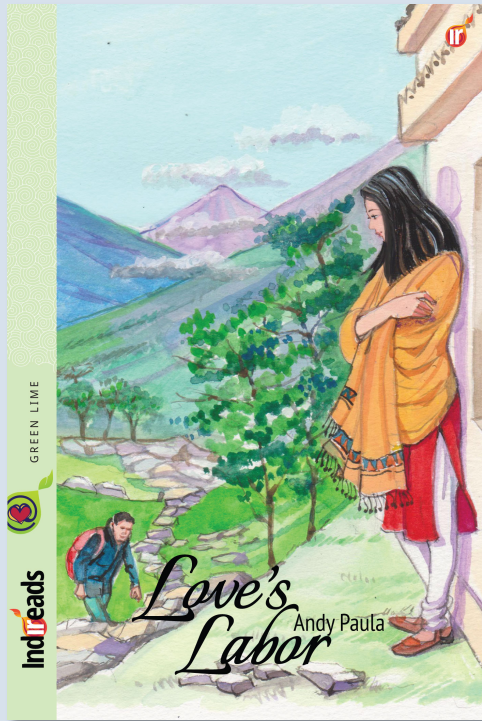


ABOUT ANDY PAULA

Andy Paula is a world citizen who is equally at home in India, UK or Kuwait. As a child she had more friends from other communities than from her own. The erudite Indian family she hails from ensured that she had a secular upbringing and respected differences. A hitherto unknown aspect of her family was revealed to her when her famously progressive grandmother told a young Andy that she could marry anybody she wanted except Christians or Muslims. Having studied in Christian missionary schools all her life and enjoyed biryani with friends every Eid, this was a rude blow to her value system. In a household that encouraged intelligent discussion, this declaration by the matriarch remained an unbendable statute. “I was so embarrassed that I became uneasy with my Catholic & Muslim friends, assailed by guilt, fearing the aftermath of the discovery that my family was not as modern as they portrayed themselves to be.”

A silent crusader of oneness, Andy’s evolution was at university when she was pursuing her masters in English. Her horizons broadened as she found like-minded youth who were passionate about secularism and world peace. Together they formed a society under her leadership that warranted that their contemporaries broke free from the limiting beliefs handed down by their ancestors.

The Love Across Borders concept resonated with Andy’s principles so deeply that she sent in her contribution, Anjum, the very same day.



Love's Labor

by Andy Paula

Will caste and community keep Pia and Sathya apart, or will they find a way to overcome it all?

Available on www.indireads.com

Dressed to Kill

PARUL TYAGI

This was Sejal's second visit to the majestic and mystical Chandni Chowk. For all North Indian brides, it was obligatory to shop here at least once. And a Delhi bride could very possibly be booked under the criminal section of the Trousseau Act if she did not venture here. Sejal had no intention of not complying with tradition. She had been here exactly thirty-two days earlier, and she had counted the days till she would come here again.

Today was the day she was going to get her bridal dress—a red and green outfit that she had dreamt of all her life. As she alighted from the rickety rickshaw she was greeted with the seductive smell of freshly coiled *jalebis*. Another mandate for all brides, like the visit to Chandni Chowk, was to remain on a strict diet, till literally, the day before the wedding when female relatives would shove *motichoor ladoos* into the bride's mouth saying “*kha le beta, kha le.*”

Avoiding even looking at the *jalebis* swimming cheerfully in the big *kadhai* of oil, Sejal held her mother's hand and made her way to the Novelty Emporium where her wedding *lehanga* awaited her.

“*Namaskar Pandit-ji.*” She greeted the seventy-year-old bespectacled shop owner who sat behind the counter, counting fresh notes.

“*Namaskar, namaskar.* I was waiting for you,” he greeted them warmly.

“*Pandit-ji*, this girl has not slept for two nights now. I cannot tell you how excited she is!” said Mrs. Rupa Shah, shaking her head at her excited daughter.

“I understand, Madam-*ji*. I have dressed many brides in my forty years here and I see the same excitement in each one of them.”

He waved them over to a plush sofa. They sat and were served colas. Sejal could barely sit still; she rubbed her hands and fidgeted like a child and her mother looked at her indulgently.

Twice they were asked if they would like another drink, some water? Who was interested but? All Sejal wanted was that they reveal her dream dress. She would try it on, click a few pictures, share a sob moment with her mother and head happily back with it, to the parking lot, two kilometers away, where they'd had to park their car.

Finally it arrived! A young boy reverently carrying a red-and-yellow *bandhini* printed box walked in, with coy smile on his face. He too, played up the moment of anticipation, by walking at a stately but excruciatingly slow pace.

"Here it is," remarked *Pandit-ji* unnecessarily. The atmosphere was charged with expectation, anxiety, and hope. In a moment Sejal was going to lay her eyes on the her dream wedding dress, a creation with gold *zari*-work that she had selected from the bridal wear collection of a top designer and spent five hours with the *Master-ji* in this very shop, explaining exactly how she wanted each peacock and curlicue while critically comparing the design to the photograph on her phone screen.

"Ok, now close your eyes," said Rupa, "I'll tell you when to open them."

"No way Mummy," Sehal didn't want to miss a second of the unveiling.

The boy carefully put the box on the wide wooden table, specifically designed to showcase the finished dreams that *Pandit-ji* crafted for his brides. He switched on the specially placed light above the table and placed a small stool in front of the full-length mirror where Sejal could model the *lehanga*. When the finished outfit appeared from under the wraps of a shimmery gold cloth, it was the most magnificent work of art Sejal had ever laid eyes on. There it was, her wedding dress, which she had taken such pains to get exactly right.

"Go try it on *bitiya*." *Pandit-ji* pointed to the dressing room next to his counter.

“I don’t think it’s even required! I love it and I am sure it fits me perfectly,” Sejal said, without lifting her eyes from the gem in front of her. It was difficult to determine whether her eyes sparkled more or her gold-worked *lehanga*.

“*Arre*, why won’t you try? Have I come all the way just to pick it? Stop staring at it and go and try it on,” her mother insisted.

“Ma, stop playing my puppeteer! Today is Monday. Come Sunday, I’ll be gone and you can’t boss me around then,” Sejal chuckled.

Carefully, she lifted her *lehanga* blouse and skirt and went to follow her mother’s orders.

Pandit-ji looked satisfied at having fulfilled the dreams of yet another bride.

Just then another mother-daughter couple entered the Emporium.

“Salaam *Pandit-ji*,” said the younger woman. She was almost an exact replica of Sejal, tall and slim with the same long dark hair.

Pandit-ji got up, and with the same measure of warmth he had accorded Sejal, he greeted the lovely bride-to-be.

“Welcome Saleema *bitiya*. How are you doing?”

“I can’t put it into words! My stomach is churning and it feels as if all your Indian butterflies have joined their Pakistani peers inside it,” Saleema said, putting her hand nervously on her stomach.

Pandit-ji gave her a gentle pat on the head.

“*Madam Hassan ka box leke aao*,” he called for the boy to repeat his processional act of carrying the box that contained a young bride’s most prized possession.

Saleema was *Pandit-ji’s* customer from the other side of the border. His grandfather had dressed her grandmother and his father had dressed her mother. Like Sejal, this was also Saleema’s final visit to the shop. Here with her mother, she was going back home the next day on the afternoon flight.

Saleema had broadly explained what she wanted to the *Master-ji* on her first visit and the rest of the communication had been via email. She had sent

Pandit-ji the exact color, exact motifs and the exact neckline cut that she wanted and couldn't wait to see the outcome.

As Saleema's *lehanga* was unwrapped, Rupa also decided to peek and see what exactly these people from faraway lands were getting. *Pandit-ji* carefully lifted the *lehanga* and put it on a similar table in front of Saleema and her mother.

There was absolute quiet, like the silence before a storm. There were none of the happy bride responses that *Pandit-ji* was accustomed to. No outbursts of excited happiness, no shrieks of joy. Nothing.

"What is it Saleema *beti*? *Sub theek hae naa*," *Pandit-ji* dared to cut through the stillness.

Saleema looked up at him, her eyes brimming with tears. She managed to speak.

"But...this is not...*Pandit-ji* this is not the color I sent you," she burst out.

A minor earthquake was no doubt recorded in both countries.

With trembling fingers, Saleema opened the pictures she had sent, which were saved on her phone. As he looked through the pictures, *Pandit-ji* tried his best to explain to the distraught bride that he had come as close to the color as it was possible to, considering the difference in laptop screen pixels, but Saleema could not take it in.

Saleema's mother tried to calm her, telling her to look on the bright side, to look at how beautiful the outfit was, and that Saleema should trust in the expertise of *Pandit-ji*. For Saleema though, a major disaster had occurred. Her heart was broken and there was no way anyone else could understand what it meant, to not have the exact replica of the wedding dress she had carried around in her imagination for months.

After a few tense moments of argument and counter-argument she folded onto the sofa with her head bent low.

Pandit-ji stood by the rejected *lehanga*, shaking his head as if he couldn't quite believe it. "For the first time in my forty years, I have disappointed a bride."

“Don’t say that *Pandit-ji*. Give her time. She will be fine.” Saleema’s mother fanned her daughter with her *dupatta*.

“Just look here,” came a voice from behind them.

Pandit-ji and Saleema’s mother turned around.

“Aunty, please ask her to look at me,” Sejal said, gesturing towards Saleema, who was still sitting in a dejected slump.

Saleema turned slowly.

She was awed at the sight of the beautiful girl, dressed in a beautiful *lehanga*, perfect to the hilt, with gorgeously intricate details. Sejal had taken help from Zuber *chacha*, *Pandit-ji*’s right hand craftsman, to wrap the *dupatta* around her head just like she had seen Pakistan brides do, from pictures on the Internet.

Mesmerized Saleema stood up and walked towards Sejal.

“You like it?” Sejal asked Saleema.

“I love it. This is beautiful,” she replied, unable to take her eyes off Sejal’s exquisite outfit.

“You take it,” Sejal said decisively.

Her words caused Rupa to cry out in protest. She had witnessed Saleema’s utter breakdown after seeing her *lehanga* and had been grateful that her own daughter had managed to get a masterpiece.

“Take it? Have you lost it Sejal? This is no time to joke,” Rupa said testily.

“I am not joking, Mummy. When I came out from the fitting-room, I heard the entire conversation between Saleema and *Pandit-ji*. Trust me,” Sejal said, turning to Saleema, “there is no-one who understands what you are going through better than I.”

A tear slid from Saleema’s eye. Sejal gently wiped it away.

“I hear you have to fly back tomorrow and there is no way you can stay. Really, take my *lehanga* and I know that *Pandit-ji* is here to make another one

for me in time. Maybe by Saturday evening?” Sejal asked, now looking in *Pandit-ji’s* direction.

Beaming widely, he nodded.

“Yes, *beta*. I promise to make you exactly this in six days. I’ll stake the entire experience and reputation of my forefathers to deliver this time.”

Sejal beamed back at him.

“Don’t think too much, Saleema. Just say yes,” she said softly.

“When is your wedding?” Saleema asked.

“Same day as yours. You don’t have to worry. We will both wear wedding outfits that we love. And now we will be wearing exactly the same ones,” said Sejal smiling.

“Oh, Sejal. You don’t know what this means to me. I absolutely love what you are wearing. I can’t believe you’re being so generous.” Saleema said, hugging Sejal. “I have no words, really.”

Rupa had collapsed in disbelief. As Saleema now went in to try the *lehanga*, for the *Master-ji* to make the final fitting, Sejal tried to explain the reason behind her gesture to Rupa.

She finally gave up trying. “Imagine me in her shoes, Mummy and then you’ll understand. And if you still don’t—well I give up,” she retorted with finality.

Next Sunday: Wedding Day.

Once Saleema was ready she sent her picture to Sejal’s WhatsApp inbox.

“I owe you my happiness for today Sejal...actually—Angel. You know what we are?”

Sejal smiled at the image she received. She looked at herself in the mirror and couldn’t help but smile at how similar they both looked. She got her cousin to click her picture and sent the image back with the query, “What?”

“Soul-Sisters,” came the reply.

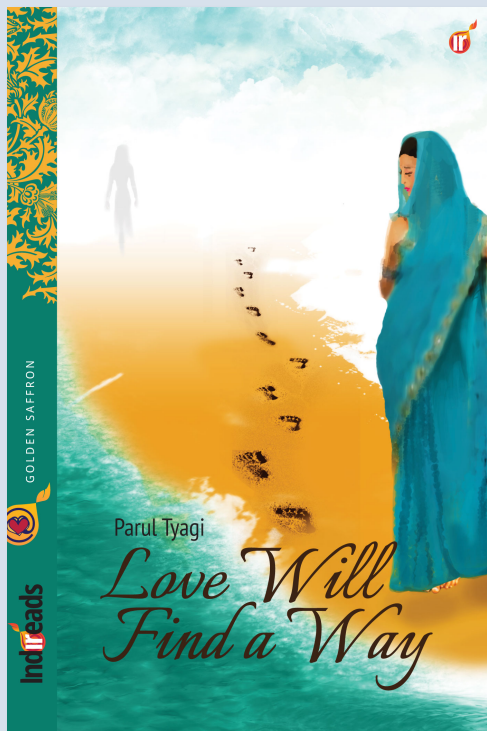


ABOUT PARUL TYAGI

Parul Tyagi is the author of Love Will Find a Way (Indireads) and has to her credit several short stories published across online literary journals and paperback anthologies. A compulsive blogger, among serious interests like food, films and travel is her interest in politics.

For some strange reason she has been fascinated by the very thought of having Pakistani friends. And as they say, when you want something with all your heart, the world conspires to make it happen. When she got her first friend request from a co-author at Indireads on Facebook, she used it as an opportunity to peep into that other world she always considered inaccessible. With time, she learned that there exist a set of similar, equally compassionate and relatable people on the other side. Being a contributor to this anthology is her first step towards paying tribute to the common history of her nation and its neighbor.

As a mother of two, she believes that if her words can pave a way to how the future turns out for children on both sides of the border, she would have justified her creativity and education. Her blog: www.parulandmore.blogspot.com. Follow her on facebook/[parulyagipage](https://www.facebook.com/parulyagipage) or twitter/[@tyagiparul](https://twitter.com/tyagiparul)



Love Will Find a Way

by Parul Tyagi

A few words on a piece of paper are about to shatter Meeta's happy little life...

Available on www.indireads.com

Best Friends Forever

NAHEED HASSAN AND SHWETA GANESH KUMAR

Tara rubbed her smarting eyes as she stared at the comment under the photograph. There they were, the ‘Siamese twins’, as the teacher had called them, third row from the bottom in the class photo posted on her old Alma Mater’s page on Facebook.

‘18 years ago! I feel ancient!’, ‘*she*’ had commented.

‘Saira! My Saira. After so many years! I’ve found you!’

The words thrummed loudly in Tara’s head. With shaking fingers, she sent off a friend request to ‘Saira Ahmed’. Tara looked at her peacefully sleeping husband and three-year-old son, wondering whether her heart was beating loud enough to wake them. She looked back at her screen. ‘Would Saira reply?’

Saira put her head in her hands. She was having a truly bad day. It had started in the morning with her mother at the breakfast table. Her mother had been stiff and uneasy, which was a sure-fire giveaway that something unpleasant was afoot.

“Saira *beta*, we have to talk. Your *Tayya-ji* called. A number of people have approached him with good proposals. It is time you think of the future.”

She had been blunt in her response.

“I hope you told him not to bother, *Ami*. You know how I feel about him and the family. None of them did anything for us when *Abu* died, despite

knowing all about our financial difficulties and now, when I have a good job and am doing well, suddenly they are worried about my future.” Her tone hid none of the bitterness she felt. “They can rot in hell for all I care.”

She had stormed out of the house without eating breakfast and had felt guilty ever since. Her gentle, sweet, forgiving mother must have felt terrible all morning. And while she hated every member of her extended family, Saira loved her mother fiercely and only wanted the best for her. She deserved nothing less. After *Abu's* untimely death, she had worked night and day to provide for them both. And Saira could never forget how helpless they had been, how hard her mother had worked and how much she had wanted to be able to help her.

Unable to do anything else, she had fuelled all her energy into her studies, excelling in them and propelling herself into the country's best business school on a fully paid scholarship. In her spare time, she had given tuitions to the neighborhood kids and, by the time she was twenty, had made enough money to buy a tiny second-hand car for the both of them.

After graduation, she had her pick of jobs and had chosen a well-known multinational that was known to train and develop their management staff. She had thrived in the supportive atmosphere, had been promoted twice already and had built a name and reputation for hard work, dedication and commitment. No one worked as hard and as long as she did.

She opened her laptop and started it up. Her Facebook page opened up first and, compelled by habit, she glanced at it, intending to move onto the file she had to work on. She had a friend request. From a Tara Menon, accompanied by a smiling picture of a face she had once known as well as her own, and that had not changed much despite the intervening years.

Saira sagged back in the chair as a flood of memories washed over her. Tara, her best friend and neighbor in Kuwait. How wonderful those days had been, when *Abu* was still alive, when *Ami* had been a pampered housewife and she herself had been free, with nothing to worry about and nothing to fear.

She sat up and clicked on ‘Confirm Friend’ and watched the status change to ‘Friends’.

She typed a quick note with fingers that flew over the keyboard.

Tara dearest,

Can't believe it's you after all these years. How are you? You look just the same. It's like going back in time. How are your parents? What are you doing? Write and tell me all. Will be waiting to hear from you.

Hugs,

Saira

She hit 'Send' and sat up straight, a smile playing on her lips. The day suddenly looked so much brighter because Tara, her dear Tara, was in it.

"Wait, wait! I'm coming!" Tara yelled. She took the lunch-box the maid had carefully wrapped in a plastic bag and rushed towards the main door, where her husband and son were waiting impatiently.

"Here," she said, handing it over to her husband who was looking at his watch. "*Chapati* and last night's chicken curry."

She bent down and gave her son a kiss. "*Amma* will be there at twelve-thirty, okay baby?"

"When is that?" he asked, his puckered brow betraying his worry.

"Don't worry. Your teacher will tell you," she said, ruffling his hair with affection. Raghu would drop him at his school, before heading to work. As she saw her little one walk away, holding on tightly to his father's hand, her heart twisted as it always did.

Tara shut the door and leaned against it. Time would move slowly till noon, when she would get ready to go and pick up her son.

She wished she could go to work. But now with her son, it just was not the right time to start. When was it ever the right time to start?

She had graduated with honors in English Literature from one of the best colleges in her district and had won a scholarship for post-graduation studies

that she had aced. She had just started on her doctoral studies when Raghav's family had come by with a proposal.

He was tall, good-looking and soft-spoken. Just a science graduate, but already making his way up the ladder within a pharmaceutical firm. She had liked him and the idea of getting out of her small hometown to the bigger city of Kochi had appealed to her. After all, she could always complete her doctorate after the wedding.

'And then I would work for two years before starting a family... all planned out. Such grand plans. Man proposes and God...'
Tara thought with a tinge of bitterness, as she settled down with her laptop. She had time to browse before she headed into the kitchen.

As was her habit, she opened up Facebook. Her heart started beating a little faster as she noticed the little red notification by her inbox.

She clicked on it, one too many times to get to the message, and then read it as fast as she could. It sounded like the same old Saira. She remembered how they had met, within the first week of her moving to Kuwait, and how their friendship had lasted till Tara's family's move back to India. Saira had come to drop her off at the airport and they had clung together, each promising to be best friends forever and to never forget. And she never had—in her heart anyway. With a broad smile, she started typing.

Dearest Saira,

I cannot believe that I've actually found you after all these years. So sweet of you to say that I look the same! That's probably because you can't see me from neck down. Being a wife and a mother has certainly taken a toll! Ha ha!

My parents are fine. They are at our ancestral home, where I lived till I got married. Achan and Amma will be thrilled when I tell them that I found you. I stay in Kochi, a couple of hours away, with my husband Raghav and three-year old son, Vasudev. I'm a full-time mother.

How are Uncle and Aunty? Do pass on my regards and love to them. And tell me, how are you? I saw from your profile that you are already in a very senior

position at your firm! I am so proud of you, Saira! Tell me, how do you manage work and home?

Waiting to hear from you, dearest,

Hugs and love,

Tara

Saira sat in her room and opened up her laptop. The rest of her day at office had been tolerable and at home, as expected, her mother had been subdued, but trying to act normal. She had wanted to be cheerful, but she was tired and dinner had been a silent affair.

Now in the safe haven of her room, she wanted to browse the Net, relax and shoot off a couple of pending emails.

Facebook opened up again and she saw Tara's picture smiling brightly at her as well as the little red tab telling her she had replied to her message. She decided to snoop around a little before replying. Tara's photo count stood at five hundred and eighty. Wow! Who had that kind of time?

She opened up the photo albums. Tara was everywhere. With her *Achan* and *Amma* at her graduation. Surrounded by family at her wedding. Pictures of her laughing with her husband, followed by pictures of an adorable baby. The last post was the three of them, looking like a picture-perfect family. All that was left was for Tara to look glowingly pregnant with another child. Perhaps she was pregnant, a nasty little thought came from nowhere, she certainly had put on enough weight.

Saira brushed the unkind thought away. This was Tara. Her best friend—and who was she kidding—her only friend. The one she had shared everything with, including her fear that she was dying when she had her first period at age twelve. Sweet, gentle Tara.

But that had been years ago. And her life couldn't be as perfect as it looked on Facebook, could it?

She sat down to write, somehow the words coming slowly—passing through her Facebook filter—‘don’t give too much away, put your best foot forward and, of course, happy photos always’.

Dear Tara,

So lovely to be back in touch. Yes, I am at a very senior position at my firm—but have really slogged to get here. Have also managed to make Ami comfortable in her old age, God knows she has worked hard enough—but that hasn’t been easy either.

Your husband looks very nice—and competent. I am sure he is doing well and you guys look very comfortably off. Lucky you. I never thought you would be the one of the two of us to become Mrs. Housewife—with baby in tow. You were always the smarter one. But things change, I guess.

Everything changed for us when Abu died. Anyways, that’s a long story and things are much better now—thanks to my job. I really love it. I get to travel around, always in business class, and stay in five-star hotels and I get to boss models and directors around as the picky client. I love it. The challenge and the excitement. Perhaps we can meet up one of these days when I am on a shoot somewhere. Would love to see you again.

Saira

She clicked ‘Send’ and then closed the computer down. Lucky Tara. Settled with a handsome husband and a baby. She had never had to struggle or see poverty up close. And both her parents were still with her. When they were younger, she had been convinced that she would be the one married first, with a baby and a family of her own, while Tara would work. She really had been the smarter one. But life had a funny way of working out. It had all turned upside down.

‘Mrs. Housewife.’

The words flickered in front of Tara’s eyes yet again. She shook her head as if to clear it and tried to go to sleep.

It had been two days since Saira's reply and Tara could not shake off the vague feeling of worthlessness that had enveloped her.

'Five-star hotels. Business Class. Travel.'

Tara turned to the other side restlessly. Saira was living her dream. And she, Tara, had become somebody she had never imagined she would turn into. What must Saira think of her? That she didn't even have it in her to hold a job? She probably thought that her old friend did not amount to much in the end. She turned restlessly. No, Saira would never think that. But even if she did, she wasn't entirely wrong, was she?

Tara gave up trying to sleep and sat up in bed. It was past two. She had to wake up by six-thirty to finish making breakfast, before she woke up Raghu and Vasu. She looked at them sleeping peacefully.

What would Raghu think if he knew there were days when she wished she could turn back time? If only she had told him she wanted to complete her doctorate before getting married. If only she had worked for a couple of years. If only she had not gotten pregnant a few months after the wedding.

Her son murmured in his sleep, as if disturbed by his mother's thoughts. Tara swallowed the usual lump the 'if-onlys' brought on. She curled up next to him and sniffed the back of his neck, inhaling his precious little boy scent. She was grateful for what she had. She repeated the thought like a mantra to keep her regret-filled thoughts at bay and slowly slipped away into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next day Tara sat down to type out her carefully thought out reply to Saira.

Dear Saira,

I'm so sorry to hear about Uncle. And I'm sorry that I could not be with you and Aunty at what must have been the most difficult phase in your life. But do know that you were never far from my thoughts.

It is good to know that you managed to work away your difficulties and get to such a senior position. You seem to have such an exciting life.

I would love to meet you at some point. But I don't travel much. I'm pretty much homebound since Vasu. Maybe when he is grown up...But Saira, all you mentioned was work? Isn't there a special someone in your life? Do write when you get time. I know how busy your life can be with work and everything else.

*Hugs,
Tara*

Tara pressed 'Send' and leaned back. Saira was right. Things had changed. Now with so many things other than just distances separating them, were they still the friends they used to be? Or had that relationship changed as well, nudged by the hands of time and fate?

"Ami, please try and understand—it's a really fabulous opportunity for me," Saira tried to get through to her mother for the umpteenth time. True the opportunity was good, a two-year contract in Johannesburg as senior marketing manager. She had been working towards a foreign posting for a while now and this was a great opportunity. But she did feel guilty about leaving her mother alone, especially when her health wasn't that great.

"But, *beta*, there are such stories about South Africa, and especially Johannesburg. And you a single woman, all by yourself there. I don't know, Saira, I don't think you should go." Her mother reiterated her fears once again.

Saira hunched impatiently. "Ami, there is no way I am passing up on this opportunity and marrying some poor sod and settling down into comfortable domesticity like you want. I am going to Jo'burg and, if you want, you can come with me."

She walked out, slamming the door behind her. Tears smarted in her eyes. She was so sick of it all, having to work like a dog at the office only to come home and find it wasn't good enough. Her mother wanted her to be someone else entirely. Her perfect daughter would probably be someone just like Tara.

She thought about Tara's response. A 'special someone'—yeah right! There was no time in her life for a special someone. Tara's message had been in her inbox for a week now. This was the perfect time to respond. She opened up the computer and sat down purposefully to write.

Hi Tara,

Too bad you don't travel. I am sure your husband must go on business trips. Put your foot down and fly with him next time. As for me, there is a new and exciting development in my life. I am off to Johannesburg to head the food products marketing division. It's a really important assignment that practically ensures a top slot for me back in Pakistan when it is over. And who knows, I may meet someone special, or maybe several someones while I am out there...

The move happens two weeks from now and I need to hand over stuff here and settle into my new position there, so not sure if I will be able to communicate much for the next few months.

Take care and love to your little Vasu.

Saira

She pressed 'Send' and shut her computer. Time to leave the past behind and move on to bigger and better things.

Tara sat in front of her computer tiredly—it had been a long day. She clicked on messages and there it was—a message from Saira. She hesitated before opening it. It had been six months since they had last written to each other. Since then, she occasionally saw a status update or a picture of Saira at a safari or a hotel, looking like she was having the time of her life. She had also found an occasional 'Like' or a comment by her on her photos of Vasu. But they hadn't bothered to reconnect. Till now. Oh well, it was probably another update on her achievements or something—might as well get it over with.

Dear Tara,

Am at Dubai airport after an overnight flight from Jo'burg, waiting for my flight to Karachi. Am going back because Ami had a stroke. Am so scared. Don't know what I'll find when I get back. She's all I have. Can't stop thinking of how sad she was when I left. And for what—a job?

It may be too late, but I just want to let you know that I never forgot you. I lost you and Abu at the same time, and I never wanted to feel like that ever again. But life does go on... and you did come back.

I don't know if you'll forgive me for pushing you away. But at this moment I realize how short life is and how precious our connections are. You and Ami are the only ones who were always there for me and put up with me. Anyway. Sorry for all the drama. Flight's been announced. Got to go now. Please pray for Ami.

Love,

Saira

PS: I am sure you're a great mother by the way. You were born to be one.

Tara sat, holding her heart. Slowly her fingers moved to the keyboard. 'Saira,' she thought, 'my Saira, I have found you again.'



ABOUT SHWETA GANESH KUMAR

Shweta Ganesh Kumar is the bestselling author of ‘Coming Up on the Show’ and ‘Between the Headlines’, two novels on the Indian broadcast news industry. She has a monthly travel column called ‘Trippin With Shweta’ in Travel and Flavours Magazine.

A major chunk of Shweta’s childhood was spent in Muscat, in the Sultanate of Oman. Some of her closest friends, in the apartment building where she lived with her parents, were from Pakistan. Having left Muscat in an age before Facebook and other social networking sites, Shweta was unable to stay in touch with her childhood friends and still wonders where they are now. While collaborating on ‘Best Friends Forever’ with Naheed Hassan, it was this emotion she tapped into.

Shweta currently lives in El Salvador with her husband and one-year-old daughter. Her latest book, ‘A Newlywed’s Adventures in Married Land,’ is now available worldwide via Indireads.

You can read more about her life and work at www.shwetaganeshkumar.com

ABOUT NAHEED HASSAN

Naheed Hassan is a writer, editor and the founder of Indireads. Although she has been trained as an economist, her first love is words and stories. She has been a voracious reader her whole life and believes she is privileged beyond belief to work with new and aspiring authors, helping them bring their dreams to life. Love Across Borders has been a labor of love for her, and she believes strongly that fiction has the power to intrigue, interest and engage people, and that words effect change long after and beyond the end of a story. She hopes that this collection of short stories, written by passionate authors using their words for peace, will transcend borders and divides, touching hearts and imaginations.

Naheed is a social entrepreneur and has led initiatives in development and disaster relief. She holds a MPA in international development from Harvard, an MBA from the Institute of Business Administration and a BSc in economics from the University of London.

Lost and Found

NIDHI SHENDURNIKAR TERE

Dilip did not know how to use Facebook. His grandchildren mocked him for not keeping pace with time and technology. Reluctantly, he opened an account and despite his initial fear and apprehension, was hooked instantly.

Retired, he now spent the better part of his day surfing the net, connecting and chatting with an ever-increasing circle of friends. Within a few months he had found far-flung cousins and had established contact with long-lost friends. But there was one who eluded him and each day, as soon as he logged in, he would trawl different networks looking for this one particular friend.

“Who are you looking for *Dada-ji*?” asked his teenage grandson Rohan.

“A friend.”

And the search continued.

Dilip sat in the garden with his cup of tea and thought back to his college days in the US. Although forty years had passed, if he closed his eyes, he could recall them clearly. He could see himself, on his first day on the campus of the University of Iowa, surrounded by blond Americans, feeling awkward, alone and very far from home. He had been delighted to catch sight of a familiar face and immediately approached him.

“Hi, I’m Dilip.” And in a bid to place the tall, clear-cut features looking back at him, “which part of India are you from?”

“Pervez. And actually, I’m from Pakistan,” came the reply. “I guess we used to be part of India once,” he added with a smile.

Dilip stepped back. It was 1971 and the two countries were on the brink of war. He was not sure how he could be friends with the enemy. Alone and in a minority of one, he found himself feeling more Indian than ever before.

However, on the small campus they were fated to meet every day in classes and at the cafeteria; they even ended up in the same dorm. In one class they ended up working in the same group, making interaction unavoidable. The South Asians, a small minority and all homesick, banded into a tight-knit group, and none became closer than Pervez and Dilip.

The two became inseparable; studying hard, partying hard, wooing long-legged girls in short skirts, experimenting with the 'happy' drugs so freely available on American campuses in the 70's. Their dinner parties were legendary, Pervez would produce blisteringly hot curries and rich, cardamom scented *biryani*, while Dilip, the Hindi film aficionado, provided soulful music.

And when their money ran out, which was usually towards the middle of the month, it was Dilip's *daal* and rice that they would survive on till the next money order came, along with letters from their families. They would both call home once a month and over the years, their families grew used to hearing the other on the phone. Not once during the four years did they go home. It simply wasn't done back then. And neither they, nor their families, could afford it. Instead, they spent their summers working to supplement the money orders, flirting with girls and singing songs in the warm summer nights.

And then, in their last summer together, the two of them bought a battered old Ford with their pooled savings and set off on a road trip across America. And America, as yet innocent of foreigners, welcomed them with open arms. Their modus operandi was to find a familiar surname in the phone directory, call and introduce themselves. More often than not, homesick Indians and Pakistanis living in small towns would invite them home, feed them and give them a place to spend the night. Dilip smiled at the memory. He would never forget that road trip.

At last, after a graduation ceremony they attended by themselves, they packed their bags and booked their tickets.

“Pervez, you better stay in touch and write. I know you—you’re useless without me. You wouldn’t even have written once to your parents if I hadn’t made you.” Dilip had known better than to trust his charming but feckless friend.

“Of course I’ll stay in touch *yaar*. And you better not forget to invite me to India.” Pervez had said as he hugged him goodbye.

The two of them had managed to keep in touch up until their professional and social lives engulfed them. Family and work got in the way of the occasional letters and calls. Dilip then moved to Delhi and eventually settled there. As the years passed, occasionally Dilip would catch himself remembering his old friend, but lacked the will or time to reconnect with him. And now, when he had all the time in the world, he did not know where to find him.

“You’re doing it again. Who do you keep looking for?” Rohan asked him one day, finding him searching again.

“A friend.”

“Where does your friend live?”

Dilip was quiet for a moment. “Somewhere in Pakistan. I am not sure though.” It sounded odd not to know where to look.

“Pakistan! You have a friend in Pakistan? Papa, Mummy did you know this? *Dada-ji* has a friend in Pakistan,” he called to his parents incredulously.

Dilip wasn’t surprised. Years of indoctrination through history books and media and the lack of personal contact had left the youth of both countries believing they could never be friends. Not much had changed since 1971.

As a child, Dilip’s son had heard stories of his father’s friend but Meeta, his daughter-in-law, was also surprised. Dilip told them about Pervez, how they became friends and then lost touch. And now that he had discovered the Internet, how he had begun searching for his long-lost friend.

“Let’s find your friend.” Rohan was enthusiastic.

“Is that possible?” After months of searching, Dilip was doubtful.

“Difficult, but nothing is impossible,” Rohan grinned with the confidence of the young.

Over the next few days, Rohan hooked Dilip up to every social networking site possible—Twitter, Google Plus, Facebook, My Space, Orkut. Dilip felt a bit overwhelmed—he didn’t know there were so many sites. But even Rohan, the social-networking expert, was having trouble finding a Pakistani who could help them connect with a bigger network. Dilip reflected a little sadly to himself on how the new generation, despite having incredible access to information and knowledge, still regarded their neighbors as aliens and had trouble connecting with them.

And then on the third day Dilip chanced upon an online group of Indians and Pakistanis. There were petitions, posts and comments on a variety of issues relating to India and Pakistan. Interested, Dilip decided to explore the group. Suddenly a message caught his eye.

‘I am Pervez Iqbal from Karachi. Looking for a long-lost friend Dilip Sharma in India. Have no idea where he is now. His family has moved from their family home in Sahranpur. We spent some wonderful days together in the US and he promised me that he would invite me to India one day. I am waiting Dilip. Get in touch with me. Your friend awaits you.’

Below these lines was a picture of the two of them during their days in the US. An old, hazy picture, that brought a flood of memories back to Dilip and a smile to his face.

“Rohan, I’ve found him. Come quickly. This is my friend,” Dilip shouted out, unable to contain his excitement.

Rohan came rushing out of his room.

“Is that him? Is that you in the picture with him? *Dada-ji*, you look so handsome!” Rohan laughed.

“Yes, that’s us,” Dilip gently touched the picture on the computer screen.

“What are you waiting for? Send him a message. Invite him like you promised you would.”

Without wasting a moment, Dilip wrote a message for his friend in the comments section.

'Dear Pervez, your long-lost friend has found you and is going to fulfill his promise very soon. We will meet again and talk of old times. India and I are waiting for you. See you soon, my dearest friend. Dilip.'

Six months later when Pervez visited India, he didn't need to look for a familiar name in a phone book. He had an address and a place to stay that felt remarkably like his own.



ABOUT NIDHI SHENDURNIKAR TERE

Nidhi Shendurnikar Tere has a masters degree in journalism and communication studies (MCS) and a bachelors degree in political science from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Gujarat. She was awarded the Mohanlal Mehta Sopan Gold Medal and Shri Goverdhandas Chunilal Shah Gold Medal for Excellence for her masters degree. Currently, she is a doctoral research fellow of the University Grants Commission (UGC) with the department of political science at M. S. U.

She is currently pursuing a Ph.D in the ‘Role of the Press and New Media in India-Pakistan Conflict Mediation’.

Her publications and presentations include research papers on gender and mainstream Hindi cinema, new media and modern Indian democracy, to name a few. She has also served as editor for ‘Souvenir’ – Yugaantar – National Youth Conference on Youth for Socio-Political Changes in India. She is a visiting lecturer for political science and communication research at M. S. U. This is her first fictional short story.



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Twelve Months

PERVIN SAKET

There are a hundred and forty eight ways to woo a woman. Not one of them involves a monkey and a banana.

And yet Shambu stood beside the cage, nervously offering the yellow fruit through the bars, hissing at her through his smile, “Click, click!”

He continued leaning as she fidgeted with the camera. “Come on! The monkey doesn’t know where the banana stops and my fingers begin!”

“This says don’t feed the animals.” Munira looked around. “Stop it, they’ll see you.”

“I’m not feeding. This is just offering.” But Shambu already felt foolish and flushed. If only she would click once he could end this ridiculous charade. Click woman, click. Blurred, shaky, out-of-focus, no flash, anything. Just end it.

In his mind, the scene had been heroic. He was supposed to be the poor but rakish youth, charming in his disregard for rules, coaxing the older, upper-class widow to leave behind her bland frowns and reach her bangle-less wrists toward his sprightly, promising fingers.

She slipped the camera into her bag and shuffled ahead. This was a bad sign. The woman usually fished out her camera at the smallest pretence, capturing random images. Had she decided that he was pushing too much? He dropped the banana and followed, his Bollywood montage shattered. Maybe in Pakistani films the widows were different.

This was Munira’s fifth visit to India since she got married and her third since Salim died. She did not have to come back really, since there wasn’t much waiting for her here and her presence didn’t seem to matter to anyone else. Salim’s parents had distanced themselves years ago on hearing their

son's strange announcement. Salim had been happy to discard what he called 'their middle class anxiety' and set up house with her in Rawalpindi.

Yet, every summer break, once she completed marking the undergraduate history papers, Munira found her way back to Hyderabad, to the house where in the middle of dinner, suddenly, shockingly, her husband had a heart attack. She was scheduled to join him in another week; a teacher's strike had postponed exams. Though she rushed to Hyderabad, the family could not wait; they went ahead with the burial, presenting her with a garlanded photograph later.

She took back the photograph and the plate in which he was supposed to have had his last meal, embraced his mother at the airport, promising to return, not knowing that it wasn't really expected of her at all. So every May when she called them with her arrival date and flight time, they sent Shambu to receive her and planned sightseeing tours to Golconda, Shamirpet Lake and Chowmahalla Palace, hoping the overeager driver would compensate for their detached hospitality. Munira didn't really mind. As long as in the evenings, she could sit in the kitchen, memorizing the walls Salim had known, inhaling the aromas that had wafted around him, she really didn't mind.

And now Shambu was walking towards her holding cups of *chai* and pink candyfloss.

She took the *chai* and raised her eyebrows at the florescent sugar.

"Shambu, this is for children."

"I'll eat it."

This was supposed to be endearing, he thought. A grown man in sensible shoes with a sticky, sweet, pink moustache. In his mind, the image was cute but she wasn't smiling. First the banana and now this candy; maybe she thought he was weird with food.

"We should be like children sometimes, you know," he explained to redeem himself.

"Why are children always supposed to be sweet and innocent? They can be cruel too."

Shambu probably knew more about this than her, what with the two adolescents whom he ferried to All Saints High School every day, but he didn't say anything. Once, they had spent the ride home digging their heels into his backrest, pushing to see if he would object. He hadn't said a word. Another time, just after he had cleaned the car and dropped them to school, he found the backseat littered with peanut skins, all arranged to make a smiley face.

But still he said, "They laugh. At least they laugh. Maybe that is worth all the trouble they cause."

He wouldn't have dared this kind of familiarity with the rest of the family but he reasoned that since Munira hardly seemed to register him, he couldn't really offend her. In the house, he sat on the floor or stood on the veranda if he was offered tea. With her, he could dare to plonk on the same wooden bench, his buttocks at the same level as hers, even daringly close to hers.

A few hours earlier, driving out of Himayat Sagar, they had completed the itinerary for the day. But the trip had been shorter than expected and he did not want to her return to the cold house and their curious stares. Hence this strange detour to the zoo. He lied about the exotic animals so passionately, that eventually she gave in and they stood behind a line of schoolgirls to buy tickets.

He often told himself not to think of the quietly bold woman, the educated, petite, pixie-like widow who was left in his care once a year. After all, he had served the woman's husband. Shambu had been much younger then, a mere errand boy, but the family had paid for his driving lessons and he soon took over his aging father's place at the wheel of the Honda Civic. Now Shambu had a bride-to-be waiting in Lucknow; they were to be married in December after which she would join him as nanny for the child that the youngest daughter-in-law was expecting.

And yet, on the hard bench of the zoo, Shambu found his gaze drawn towards Munira's eyelashes. The way she constantly adjusted her headscarf, the way her loneliness spread around her like an aura, like a shield, refusing

to allow anyone access. Would she ever move on? But then she'd never return, would she?

He shook away these conflicting thoughts and focused on the tea. It was very hot.

“It’s very hot, no?”

She nodded and said, “Yes” and gently blew on the tea before taking a tentative sip.

The sun emerged softly from behind a cloud and lit up the bench. Munira looked so beautiful then, her cheekbones highlighted, her earlobes translucent, her earrings glinting, that Shambu had to look away. Though he had witnessed her serene, easy dignity in the face of tragedy, he felt protective towards her. Like her detached wisdom would enable her to negotiate with the world but somehow she needed him to save her from herself.

Of course, they were all daydreams. He had a girl waiting for him, then maybe a couple of children. They might even move into the quarters that were being constructed at the back of the house. All the pieces of the equation were arranged in perfect harmony, yet Shambu, restless Shambu, starry-eyed Shambu, prying, inflamed Shambu, enchanted, impatient Shambu was determined to shake them.

“You don’t want children?”

She looked away. “No”

“You know, you could marry again.”

The stench of the birdcages wafted up to them. She shook her head.

“Then I wouldn’t be able to come again.”

“Here? India? Of course you could.”

“Not India. To the house, that kitchen, that veranda.”

Shambu looked up and saw her staring intently at his face. She looked away. Maybe she had just been looking through him. She seemed to do that often.

“They are nice people,” he said, not willing to offer any specifics.

“I should have come here with him. Let the exams be.”

“We all do what we can.” Shambu did not really want to discuss Salim.

“Yes, and now I’m doing the only thing that I can do,” she said, too casually to be casual.

Sambhu was suddenly impatient to leave. “So you have enough photographs now?” He indicated her camera bag.

“Only of monkeys! I don’t need a zoo to find those!”

He did not return her smile. “There are other places I could take you too.”

A few feet away, a baby lifted her frock and squatted while her mother watched. A trail of urine snaked slowly towards them.

“How about my village? I could show you the pond beside which I would sit like that.” He pointed towards the little girl and immediately regretted it. It sounded coarse even to his own ears; certainly not a topic that a professor would want to discuss.

But Munira was smirking and then giggling and then opened her mouth in full-throated laughter.

“Eeesh! Shambu! Eeesh!” Her body shook as she brought one hand up to cover her mouth.

Shambu’s eyes sparkled in delighted surprise. He reached out to take her cup, worried that she would scald her thigh with the hot tea. She held out it towards him. But when the tips of his fingers reached for her knuckles, she stopped laughing.

Slowly, they walked back towards the car. The schoolgirls were now at the tiger’s cage, their fingers pointing, voices squealing and plaits shaking animatedly as the tiger obliged with languid strolls.

They strolled along and the girls’ yelps were replaced by a hush. The tingling of their fingers was still fresh. A silence descended upon them and in the quietness Shambu offered, “We are all in our own cage also, aren’t we?”

She nodded. “Sometimes you can break out of a cage and you think you are free. But you are just in a larger cage. There’s one more door to open. And one more and one more.”

He wasn’t sure he understood but said cheerily. “At least I can open this door for you” as he held open the passenger door.

The next day, after she was given *salwar kameez* material and Hyderabadi spices to take back, after she had hugged the family and vehemently denied the need for anyone to accompany her, after Shambu had unloaded her luggage at the airport, he offered her an apology wrapped in newspaper. A diary.

“This is Salim babu’s. When he was so small.” Shambu put his hand beside his waist to denote the child Salim’s height. “I once found it while cleaning the loft.”

Munira passed her fingers over the childish scrawls, over the caricature of a woman with an exceptionally large *bindi*, over a poem about a robot. For a minute she did not speak.

“Thank you,” her voice came out hoarse and she cleared her throat. “Thank you.”

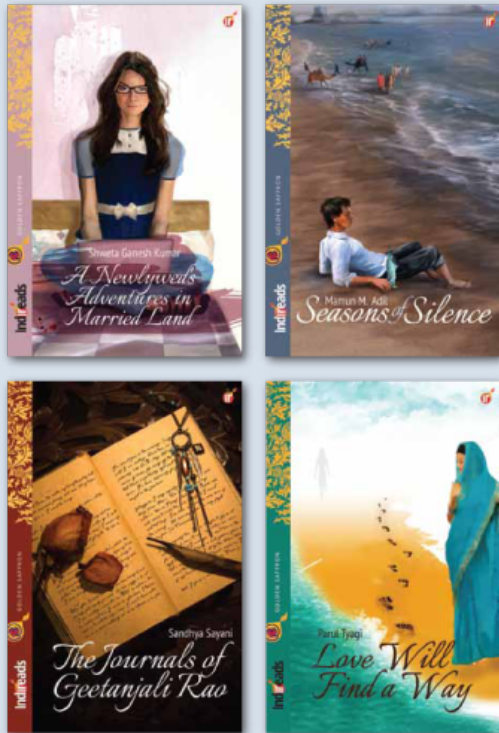
Later, as Shambu drove back in an oppressively empty car, Munira converted her currency and passed through the security scanners, clutching the book close to her. For this time, this was enough. She would wrap Salim’s words around her, his simple, alive scribbles, his forgotten, resurrected doodles, to be preserved with cloves and naphthalene balls, to be recalled on rainy evenings, to celebrate with the fragrance of the *champa* tree outside her window, to be stretched and pulled so they may suffice another twelve months.



ABOUT PERVIN SAKET

Pervin Saket writes poetry, short fiction and screenplays. She is the author of a children's series 'Adventures @ Miscellaneous Shelf Four' and of a collection of poetry 'A Tinge of Turmeric'. Her work has been featured in 'Breaking the Bow', 'Page Forty Seven', 'Kalkion', 'Kriya', 'Perspectives', 'Katha', 'Sampad', and 'Ripples', among others. Pervin conducts writing workshops for children at the British Council and also works with teachers to integrate stories within classrooms.

Pervin engages with stories that are subversive, allegorical or give voice to those silenced by history. She is particularly drawn towards the politics that underlie what is personal and private. 'Twelve Months' was written to explore a quiet love stretching across volatile borders, hoping to eventually transcend the boundaries we draw around ourselves.



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An Unlikely Romeo

M M GEORGE

Romeo. What kind of a name was that? When he had first walked into her little shop and offered her his services as cleaner, deliveryman, general dogsbody, anything, she had asked him his name.

‘Romeo,’ he had said unblinkingly, just looking at her with that passive brown gaze.

She had quelled a smirk at the sheer audacity of the name. Romeo? And this small, brown-skinned man, looking patiently at her with his ancient eyes? A more unlikely Romeo it would have been hard to find, she had thought as she handed him the mop.

But now, as she strived to shorten her stride to keep two paces behind him, the name irritated her. She couldn’t have said why, but the irritation persisted all the way to where they were going.

Nafisa had come to the UK as a young bride of seventeen. She and her family in Pakistan had been overwhelmed by her good luck at having been chosen by a *vilayati* family for their son. Simply put, she was plain looking. Her parents had despaired of ever getting her married. It was only when she reached London that she learnt that it was her cooking skills that had earned her the ‘Missus’ tag. And she was made to work hard to hold on to it.

Mazhar’s family ran a takeaway shop and they desperately needed a cook, a cheap one. UK immigration rules did not permit them to import a cheap cook from Pakistan, so they brought Nafisa instead. Nafisa cooked from morning till evening and then worked late into the night, cleaning up. For years.

Nafisa hardly ever saw Mazhar. He did the deliveries for the takeaway. She stayed in the kitchen. She knew his smell though, from the rough, awkward nightly couplings that left her sore and hurting. When he was arrested and then put away for delivering more than just *biryani* to his clients, she was not really troubled. All she thought was that she could now, perhaps, enjoy a few hours of untroubled sleep. Till the day Mazhar's father summoned her and told her to pack her things.

"Get out!" he said, tersely. She had been divorced, he told her. By then, other daughters-in-law had arrived, the wives of Mazhar's brothers. She had become dispensable, a burden, just another mouth to feed.

She wept a bit and then mused, it could only get better. After all, thanks to her marriage, she had acquired a British passport. She looked at the gold bangles on her wrists. She could buy a ticket to go back to her parents in Pakistan. But she shrugged off the thought. She would no longer be welcome there. She decided instead to set up her own shop. She pawned her bangles and rented a small poky little shop in an alley set off from the main road, as far across the city from her *ex-sasuraal* as she could possibly manage. There was just enough space at the back for her to put in a narrow sofa that could double up as her bed at night, provided the local Council did not catch on. The day her shop opened, Nafisa sent up a silent prayer to Allah.

That was when Romeo walked into her life.

Slowly, the shop had built up a reputation. At first, it was mainly local people who wanted a cheap dinner. Then Nafisa found that people were coming back for the food she cooked. Her *biryani* and *haleem* were very popular. Romeo was soon spending most of his evening on the rickety cycle he had acquired, she did not dare ask him from where.

He seldom spoke. But Nafisa could feel his eyes follow her as she bustled around the tiny shop. And she knew when the gaze changed from curiosity, the simple need to focus on another person, to something deeper. She would be flattered, she told herself, if only he weren't such a non-descript little man. But flattered she was, even if she didn't admit it. It had been years since a man had looked appreciatively at her. In fact, Romeo was probably the only

man who had looked appreciatively at her. She had never been good-looking and the years had added ballast to her figure.

One night, Nafisa closed the shop and sat on the sofa in the rear, poring over her accounts. She found numbers difficult, but once you open a shop, you have to do the accounts.

There was the sound of a scuffle outside, loud hammering on the shutter of her shop. Alarmed, she got up and opened the window to the side. There were two men. And Romeo. Wrestling with each other. Till Romeo picked up a piece of brick and aimed it at one of them. The man gave a yelp of pain and raised his face. Nafisa drew her breath in sharply. It was Masood, one of her erstwhile brothers-in-law. Romeo picked up another brick, but the two men decided they had had enough.

“*Hindustani ka bistar garam karti hai, saali haraamzaadi!*” Masood flung at her silhouette in the window as he and his companion fled. “She is flourishing on our money and whoring with an Indian!”

Nafisa put up the shutter and let Romeo in. “How did you get here?” she asked him.

He pointed to the doorway of her shop. “I sleep there,” he said. And sure enough, she saw a well-worn blanket that had been kicked aside in the scuffle. “I’ve seen them here before. It’s not safe. For you.”

“You sleep out in the cold to protect me?” she asked incredulously, but he had already moved outside and was pulling down the shutter.

Nafisa sat on the sofa, thinking deep into the night. Masood had called her a Hindustani’s whore. Did he mean Romeo was an Indian? Romeo had never given any indication of being an Indian. She shuddered. Could he be a Hindu? The thought made her queasy. He had to be a Hindu. She had never seen him perform *namaaz*. But if he was a Hindu...she shuddered again as all the stories she had heard about Hindus flooded her mind. She gazed towards the closed shutter. It held no answers for her.

Romeo hardly ever spoke. Not a word. Not when she handed him his money. Not when she handed him his meals in one of the battered

aluminium *thals* that she kept for her personal use. She supposed he spoke when he delivered the food. But she seldom heard his voice.

Till one day, he came running into the shop, terror streaking his face, pulverising it into a grotesque mask. “Please help me,” he begged. “They’re coming for me.”

Nafisa turned around from the *kadhai*, where she was stirring a *dal makhni*, to ask, “Who?” But he had already slipped behind the curtained area to the rear of the shop. There was a door to the back, and he slipped out of there. She heard the door settle back into its frame with a slight thud.

No one came in after Romeo. But he did not appear for a couple of days after that. Nafisa had to refuse all delivery orders.

Then one day, he slunk back, dirty and begrimed from wherever he’d been holed up. Nafisa studied him for a moment, then handed him a towel and pointed towards the small bathroom in the curtained off area.

When he came out, she sat him down on a chair. “What?” she asked him.

He hung his head. “I’m a *kachcha*,” he whispered. “I have no right to be in this country.”

Nafisa did not say anything. The day took on its usual hues, like countless days before it, before Romeo had run away. In the evening, when he had washed the aluminium *thal*, she asked him, “Will you marry me?”

He looked up at her in disbelief.

And that’s where they were headed. To the register office. To be married. To legalize his existence in the UK. Only Nafisa could not shake off the irritation that gripped her. She should have thought a bit more about this crazy idea. Was she actually going to marry a man called Romeo? An Indian at that? She was still trying to measure her pace to his. He might be a half-inch taller than her, she conceded, but he was not brisk. And this was adding to her infuriation now.

At the register office, she looked at the form she was to sign. The form he had already signed. She scrawled her name on it, then looked at his signature. It was neat and well formed. Her eyes widened as she took in the name he had printed below his signature. “Abdul Rasheed?” She looked at him in amazement. But the registrar was already congratulating them and she had to bite her lip.

Back in the shop, where she had taken the morning off in honour of the occasion, she looked at him. “Abdul Rasheed?” she asked.

“Now you are my wife,” he said simply, “you have the right to know.” Then the words came tumbling out. All the words that he had kept bottled up within him for decades. He told her of the early years in Sarai Meer in India’s Gangetic belt, in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Of the shabby-genteel poverty in which they had lived. Of the sudden chance to go *vilayat* if a certain sum of money could be arranged. The years of playing tag with borders. The five years spent as Alpha Romeo, a name that was slapped on him in the universal tongue that transcended languages, transcended borders, marking him as cargo. The cities he’d lived in, but never seen. The privations, the horrors of that endless journey. Losing hope, losing all sense of being a person. Till being human didn’t matter any more, all that mattered were the endless journeys with death lurking at each new border.

He talked of how he finally reached the UK, the struggle to eat, to just keep alive. The homesickness that compelled him to choose a phone call over his evening meal. And the long, one-sided calls when the other side buzzed with demands for more money, the repayment of their investment in him.

And Nafisa listened till he’d got all the words out of him. Till he was spent, done. Then she got up and wrapped her arms around him. She had never done that before to a man. “You are safe now,” she told him.

Safe in that cocoon, he smiled. He hadn’t done that in a long while. She felt the slight tremor of his smile against her breasts and murmured, “My Romeo.”



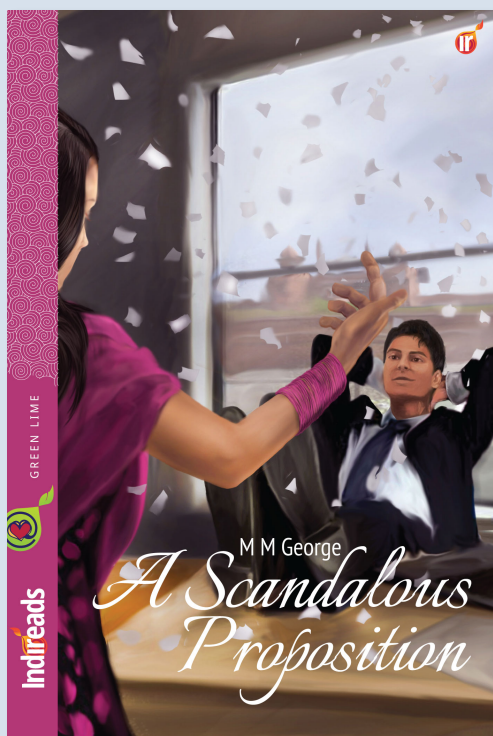
ABOUT M M GEORGE

M M George is the pen name of Mimmy Jain, whose funny bone compels her to write about her family and other animals in a blog called Living in the Happily Ever After (mimmyjain.wordpress.com).

*Mimmy is also the author of *A Scandalous Proposition*, a best-selling e-romance from Indireads. When she is not living in her head, Mimmy edits articles for academic journals and other such boring stuff. She has been a mainstream Indian journalist for the last 27 years and has worked in senior positions at publications such as *The Economic Times*, *The Times of India*, *The Financial Express* and *Mint*.*

*In this anthology, Mimmy has set aside the joker's mask to write about the futility of borders in *An Unlikely Romeo*. People draw borders, but people cannot be confined within borders. Borders lose meaning when necessity and despair draw people together. The protagonists of *An Unlikely Romeo*, Nafisa and Romeo, are survivors and, in order to survive, they have to set borders aside.*

You can find Mimmy at www.facebook.com/MimmyMGeorge.



A Scandalous Proposition

by M M George

Ranbir's shocking proposition offends Mira, but fate keeps throwing them together...

Available on www.indireads.com

The Long Interval

ZAFFAR JUNEJO

Love can be many things—ecstasy, regret, defeat, treachery. For me however, love equaled only one thing—a secret, one that was buried deep inside my heart and devoured me. I sought to tell someone, to unburden myself as an act of catharsis, but the secret continued to age within me, and with me. Until last year.

It all started when my grandson Ratan, who studies at the Imperial College in London, created a Facebook account for me. Initially, I didn't understand the point of connecting with the same people that I met every day, but over time, I became addicted.

One day I got a friend request from a person who called themselves 'Karachi University' and whose profile photo was the Karachi University logo—my alma mater. Curious, I accepted the friend request and looked through the person's Facebook profile to learn more. Unfortunately, there weren't any details on my new 'friend's' profile. Before I could search any further, the old computer I was using froze and I had to shut it down. When I tried it next, it would not restart.

Luckily, Ratu came home to stay for the weekend. As usual, he threw his bag on the floor as he entered my room, and the first thing he said was, "*Daddu*, you've been off Facebook."

"Something is wrong with the computer, it won't start," I admitted.

"Never mind," was his instant response, "that computer is prehistoric anyway. Let's use my laptop to get you back on Facebook." He winked, as he opened his laptop.

Within minutes, I was back online.

"Do I have any messages?" I asked in what I hoped was a casual manner.

"A couple."

“Who are they from?” I enquired.

“Actually, there are two messages, both from the same person. Their profile picture is a university logo.”

“What are they saying?”

“Not much, just asking about the college you went to.”

“So, have you answered them?” I was getting impatient now.

“Yeah, I told them you studied in Hyderabad and Karachi,” he said as he left the room, handing me the laptop.

While I reread the messages, another one popped up.

‘What was your department?’

And before I could respond, another one.

‘Were you a member of the Literary and Dramatic Society in 1970?’

I replied to both questions.

‘Chemistry department. Yes, I was a member of the Literary and Dramatic Society.’

I waited for a reply, but it did not come. I went back to surfing the web (that’s what the kids today call it), and didn’t realize it was evening until the cook informed me that it was time for dinner.

I entered the dining room. Ravi, my son, Lelawati, his wife and Ratu, were all waiting for me. After Ravi’s mother passed away we made it a point to have dinner together.

As I sat down, Ratu announced, “*Daddu* has fallen in love.”

“With whom?” asked Lela mischievously.

My cold gaze caused Ratu to rethink his reply. “With the computer,” he said.

“Actually, I think Ratu is hoping for a new laptop,” Ravi laughed, venturing a guess at Ratu’s real intent behind the conversation.

“Either way, a new laptop is needed. Either for the grandfather or the grandson,” added Lela. She turned to Ravi. “Why don’t you buy one and present it to Ratu as a birthday gift.”

“So, is Ratu’s laptop mine?” I asked instantly.

Everyone laughed at my spontaneous response. And from that day, Ratu’s laptop became mine.

Now that I had Ratu’s laptop, surfing the net was much faster for me and I learnt more about Facebook and how it works. The Karachi University logo had raised my interest and when I did not hear again from the person, I decided to go through their friend list. Imagine my surprise when the first person I saw was Ratu. I think maybe the person connected with me by mistake, when they were actually looking for him. This suspicion was strengthened by a strange comment by Ratu when he came home next weekend.

The first thing he asked me was how my net surfing was coming along and if I had heard from ‘the logo person’.

“No,” I complained. “The ‘logo person’ has disappeared.”

“The ‘logo person’ was in Sri Lanka,” Ratu said.

I knew that person did not have any information on their page. So Ratu and he or she must be exchanging messages. It confirmed for me that the connection with me was a mistake.

“I wonder why people connect if they don’t mean to chat,” I said, not letting on that I knew about his friendship.

“Sometimes people lose interest and desert their friends,” he said looking at me with a strange look on his face.

I did not ask him anything more. I knew Ratu very well and he was clearly hiding something. I hypothesized about the ‘logo person’. I thought maybe Ratu has met and fallen in love with a girl, and one of her grandparents was at the Karachi University at the same time as me. That would explain a lot.

Over the next few weeks, I went back to my usual activities on the Internet. And then one day, as I was chatting to an old friend, the Karachi University logo sent me another message.

'Can you name any female classmates of yours at the Literary and Dramatic Society at Karachi University?'

It seemed that this person was interested in tracing our family and history. Maybe things were getting serious with Ratu and the girl wanted to know more. I responded immediately.

'Kavita, her full name was Kavita Kundanmal.'

As I typed these words without thinking, I was amazed at how quickly it had come up as the first name I remembered; after all, it had been more than forty years since I had taken that name. And along with the name came a deluge of memories.

Kavita was Sindhi like me and joined the university in 1969. The first time I saw her, she was reading a political pamphlet on the situation in East Pakistan. The next time, she came into the student union office, and expressed her interest in joining the union. She was nominated as a Joint Cultural Secretary and was also a very active member of the Literary and Dramatic Society.

Drama and our passion for Sindhi culture were what brought us together, and our political activism cemented our bond. We spent hours talking and arguing passionately, and before we knew it, the love that we had only read about had seeped into our hearts. That first year we spent all our time together.

On the last day of university, we went to see a performance by a Sindhi theatre group. It was a one-act play based on Shah Latif's tragic romance

Momal-Rano. It was Kavita's favorite story and the performance was simply marvelous. The actors brought to life the story of Momal, princess of *Kak*, who attracted and destroyed unwary men with her incredible beauty until she meets handsome and brave Rano. Alas Rano believes she has tricked him and leaves Momal who keeps the lamps burning all night for his return. Eventually he relents, but it is too late. Momal sets herself on fire and Rano joins her, unable to live without her.

Afterwards, we went to have a cup of tea at the student canteen. She sipped the tea silently, which was unusual for her. I thought she was moved by the play and was also quiet. But then I felt there was more to her silence and asked her what was wrong. She told me quietly that her father thought that the political situation in Karachi was deteriorating rapidly, and there was an air of mistrust against the Hindu minority, particularly given the tension over East Pakistan. She told me that her father was contemplating moving to India over the next few months.

She got up, without waiting for my response, but before she left she handed me a note.

I unfolded it. A single sentence was written on it in her beautiful handwriting—*Tu Muhenjo Rano Theden*—Will you be my Rano?

Unfortunately, her father's fears were soon to be vindicated, as a wave of political disturbance erupted across the city and the country. The tension continued for a few days and entered the university as well. It was clear that the right-wing parties considered all non-Muslim students as Bengali collaborators. With the university environment getting tense day-by-day, the university announced early-holidays.

I never saw her again. I left for my village for two weeks and when I returned, the whole country was already in the grip of war. I found out that her family had left Karachi as soon as the war broke out, and the only thing left of Kavita was the paper she had given me, which I carried in my wallet. Fearing for their safety, her father had taken the entire family and left the city. I never heard from her again.

As the memories rushed over me, I felt a sea of emotions raging inside me. Impatient and curious, I wrote a message to the Karachi University logo, “Who is this—and why do you ask?”

But there was no answer.

I closed the laptop and switched on the TV. But it did little to chase away memories I had tried for so long to forget. Rano and Momal went around and around in my mind. But there was no-one lighting lamps for me and no way back to the past. My secret was my own to bear.

Ratu came over the next day, which was the weekend. I was curious about his mysterious friend who seemed to want to know more about me.

Over lunch, I asked him about his progress with his new Facebook friend.

“Nothing new,” he said and added casually, “Last week, I got a request from that ‘logo person’, and accepted it. It seems that we have a lot in common.”

I was curious and decided to fish for more information. “It seems to be something serious,” I said.

“May be, may be not,” he replied cryptically.

Lela who was silently listening to the discussion, smiled and said, “This is quite interesting!”

“What makes it interesting?” Ratu asked.

“Well...both grandfather and grandson are equally interested in the same person...”

We both laughed, and left it that.

The next day, as we finished lunch and I got up to leave, Lela followed me and told me that one of Ratu's friends was coming to see us that evening. A Facebook friend, she told me, and I interpreted Lela's underlying message. I should be well-dressed and present for dinner because Ratu's girlfriend would be visiting.

I smiled at being proven right. So, Ratu had fallen in love with some girl on Facebook—maybe a Sindhi girl whose grandparent was educated at Karachi University. That would explain the logo. In any case, all my questions were about to be answered.

I thought I should retire for the afternoon to take a nap and be fresh for the evening. Before I knew it, Lela was in my room, waking me up.

“Are they here?” I asked.

“Already arrived...want to meet you.” she nodded.

“And where is Ratu?” I enquired.

“All of them are in the drawing room,” she said.

“How does Ratu's would-be-bride look,” I asked.

She said nothing, smiled, blushed and went out.

I went to the bathroom to freshen up. Just as I had finished getting ready, there was a soft knock on my door. I opened the door and Lela entered, leading a graceful woman behind her, and then left, closing the door behind her.

The late afternoon light didn't allow me to see her clearly, but when she spoke, the voice was unmistakably hers.

“How are you, Suresh?” she asked in Sindhi.

It was Kavita. I was so taken aback that for a few moments I could only stare at her. She was still beautiful, her eyes still shone, but her hair was short now. The lustrous curls were gone. We sat in silence for some time and just looked at each other. And then we started reminiscing, talking and remembering our days together at the university.

I asked her about her life after leaving Karachi. She said that her family first went to Shimla and then they moved to Mumbai where she completed her graduate studies. She went to the US, to obtain a masters degree in Sociology, and then worked at first with the Indian Government, then with UNESCO in Sri Lanka as an advisor, before retiring in Mumbai.

While Kavita was talking, I noticed that her tone, manner of speaking, and the way she moved her hands were exactly the same as I remembered.

“How about you and your family?” she asked.

I told her how I had moved to the UK to study and then raise a family, that I had one son, and that my wife passed away a few years ago.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” She was quiet.

“Did you ever get married?”

“No.” She stood up suddenly and started to look at the photographs in my room. Reliving our memories seemed to have made her happy and sad at the same time. The room was emotionally charged. She tried to change the atmosphere by telling me that she knew all about me through Ratu. She complained that in all these years I had never attempted to find her.

“Has Ratu told you that I became friends with him on Facebook?” She probed.

“Yes, he has...” And I went on to tell her that my overactive brain had cooked up a story that Ratu and her granddaughter, who uses the Karachi University logo, like each other.

She laughed, and said bluntly, “You still have your old habits of student politics—‘always speculate, and speculate wrongly’.”

I joined in her laughter, looking at her face, seeing again the two dimples on her cheeks that appeared when she laughed.

Sadly I said, “I failed to be your *Rano*.”

She just looked at me.

Just then, Ratu came in and brought a tray of *chai* and sweets for us. As he turned to leave, Kavita stopped him. “Did you not tell Suresh about me?”

“No, I didn’t,” Ratu replied. He turned to me now and told me that Kavita was my mysterious Facebook friend, and that after she was sure that she had found me, she had reached out to Ratu and told him about us. He smiled and then left us alone.

I looked at Kavita. “You are still very dramatic; why didn’t you just tell me who you were?”

“And you still jump to conclusions,” she responded.

I smiled and handed her a cup of tea.

As she sipped her steaming *chai*, Kavita whispered, “I have borne the time we have been separated as a *Banwas*.”

I took off my glasses, and dried my eyes. I got up and went to my reading table, and from one of its drawers took out a worn scrap of paper and gave it to her.

“This is what kept me going in *Banwas*,” I said. And then I reached for her hand. “Like Momal and Rano, our story got interrupted Kavita, but unlike them, we have the chance to begin again.”

She held my hand tightly and nodded.

Later Lela and Ratu came in and joined us. Kavita invited us to visit her in Mumbai. Since then I spend time in Mumbai, a city which reminds both of us of Karachi across the border—where our story started so many decades ago.

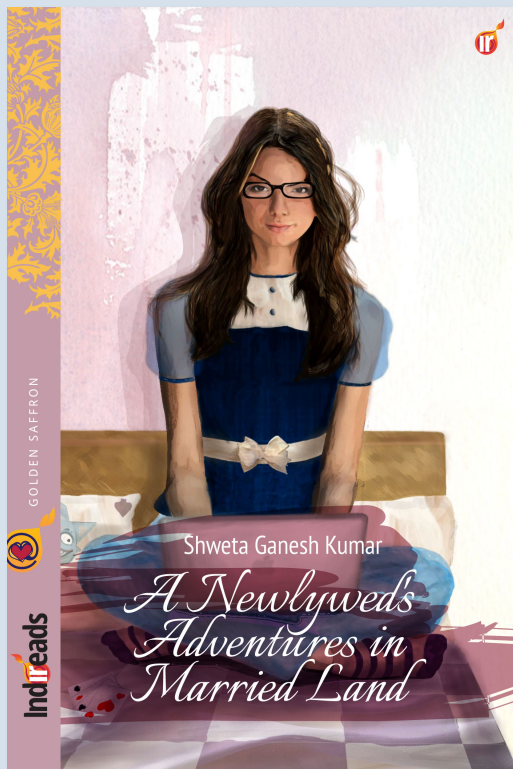


ABOUT ZAFFAR JUNEJO

Zaffar Junejo is an author, translator, editor and publisher. He did his masters in science [computer technology] from the University of Sindh, Jamshoro/Hyderabad but left to pursue a career in the volunteer sector. He has translated 25 books into Sindhi for young readers. Along with his wife, he manages 'Phoenix Books' a publication house for children. Occasionally, he also writes for Newsline—a Karachi based monthly magazine. His contributions cover themes of social change, culture and literature.

Zaffar works at the Thardeep Rural Development Program, an NGO which strives to bring about changes in the lives of the dwellers of the Thar Desert—a Pakistani part of a desert that spans both countries—India and Pakistan. He also teaches and conducts workshop at national and regional levels.

He lives in Hyderad, Sindh along with his wife Rozina and three children—Elsa, Maghana and Sudharath. He can be reached at: junejozi@gmail.com



A Newlywed's Adventures in Married Land

by Shweta Ganesh Kumar

Will this real life Alice find her way out of her own little Wonderland, or will the Red Queen take her head?

Available on www.indireads.com

The Old Willow

ADIANA RAY

Brattle Street was deserted even though it was just seven in the evening. Rocky turned his collar up against the sharp December cold as he made his way down Massachusetts Avenue to the welcoming beacon of Café Crema. A blast of hot air hit him in the face as he walked in, and the savory smell of pizza made him realize how hungry he was.

“Hi, how can I help you?” asked a disinterested girl behind the counter, not even bothering to look up from her contemplation of the chipped red nail polish on her nails. Rocky grimaced inwardly to himself - his charm was obviously wasted here.

As he walked to a table with his tuna-melt on rye and cappuccino, he couldn't help empathizing with her though. Working on the twenty-sixth of December, when everybody was at home with their families; must suck big time. Even Crema was pretty empty and that was unusual to say the least.

“Hi, do you mind if I join you?”

Rocky glanced up at the short, stocky guy standing there, bundled up as if he were catching the ferry to Alaska. A maroon Harvard sweatshirt was just visible below his coat. The familiar accent caught his ear.

“Sure,” he moved his stuff to one side.

“Thanks.” The guy extended his hand, a warm smile on his face. “Hi, I'm Imran.”

Rocky shook the proffered hand as Imran sat down.

“Rocky. Where are you from?” Rocky's tone was reserved. Usually it irritated him when *desis* just assumed an instantaneous connection and latched on. On the other hand he was feeling a bit lonely too. *Holiday blues* he thought wryly to himself.

“I’m from Karachi, first long holiday alone and I can’t believe how cold and depressing it can be.”

“Yup, everybody just takes off. What I wouldn’t give to be able to take a walk down Marine Drive today,” said Rocky, a nostalgic expression on his face.

“You live in Mumbai?” Imran was excited. “Have you seen any film stars? Have you seen Aamir Khan? That guy is amazing; loved his *Ghajni*.”

Rocky couldn’t stop his short burst of laughter. “Why does everybody assume that just because someone lives in Mumbai they are always bumping into film stars? As a matter of fact haven’t seen a single one, not one, in my eighteen years of living there.” He leaned back in his chair a slight smirk on his face.

Imran’s excitement abated a little at Rocky’s mocking tone. “Well if I lived in Mumbai, I would have definitely gone to see Aamir Khan,” Imran continued after a minute. “He’s really good, though sometimes I think a lot of it is media hype. But, I am a fan, a big fan,” he reiterated again, in case Rocky hadn’t gotten the idea the first time around.

“Media hype,” sputtered Rocky his chair hitting the ground with a thud. “What do you mean by that?” He couldn’t believe his ears.

“It’s the well-oiled Bollywood machine, *janaab*. All Aamir has to do is to announce that he’s launching a new movie and it’s certain to be a blockbuster,” alleged Imran matter-of-factly. “Now we have a fabulous director called Shoaib Mansoor. That guy makes great movies, but who’s ever heard of Lollywood?”

“Lollywood? What on earth is that?” asked Rocky, confusion written all over his face.

“Exactly,” said Imran smugly, his fingers beating a tattoo on the table. “You don’t even know that the film industry in Lahore is called Lollywood. Proves my point.”

“What point? That Bollywood is just marketing hype?” Rocky snapped back. “Aamir is talented, works damn hard, and gets the pulse right - his

work speaks for him. Next you'll say that Sania Mirza should start playing for Pakistan." This guy was really beginning to irritate him.

"Well...she has married a Pakistani," Imran shot back, unfazed.

"Has she become one?" Rocky leaned forward, steel in his voice.

"As a matter of fact, we don't want her to. What's her ranking anyway? Not among the top ten is she?" Imran was becoming aggressive as well. "And in any case," he continued, "we Pakistanis play squash." Casually, yet deliberately he sat up straight and put both his hands on the table between them. If Rocky wanted a fight he would get it.

"Dude it's been ages since you had Jansher Khan up there," Rocky said dismissively, "You haven't had a quality player in what - fifteen years?"

"That's what you think," gritted Imran through his teeth, leaning forward, his face inches away from Rocky.

"Hey guys, what's up?" came a friendly voice with an unmistakable twang.

Rocky and Imran broke their angry gaze to look up at the tall, gangly figure standing near their table.

"You two look pretty intense, all good?"

Rocky ran his fingers through his hair and leaned back in his chair.

"Yeah Kevin, we're good. Hey, how come you're here? I thought you were supposed to go home."

"I was," Kevin replied with a mischievous grin, "but I didn't want to miss the big play-off tomorrow. Told the parents I had some pending coursework."

Imran looked up puzzled. "What play-off?"

Now it was Kevin's turn to look mystified. "Hockey...the Bruins...big match against the Redwings tomorrow," he emphasized slowly for Imran's benefit. *How could somebody not know that?*

"Hockey? You watch hockey?" Imran was confused. He'd never known anyone in the US to play hockey.

“Ice hockey,” Rocky clarified for his South Asian rival.

Imran snorted. “You mean the game where all they do is push each other around?”

Kevin’s eyebrows went up. “Push each other around? Hey! It’s a tough game, it requires skill and...”

Rocky put up a hand to stop his friend. “Oh No! No! No! There’s no skill needed to play ice hockey. You want skill, watch cricket. Look at Dhoni’s knock in the Tri-Series against Sri Lanka.”

Imran nodded, talking across to Kevin. “Yeah! Can you imagine—fifteen runs in the last over? That guy is a law unto himself. Now that is a real sport.”

A charged-up Rocky agreed. “What about Afridi playing against the West Indies? He was like a one-man team. Seven wickets in the ODI, and then he makes forty-six off twenty-seven balls in the T20. Total class.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Kevin sat down heavily on an empty chair between the two *desis*, bewilderment written all over his face.

“Cricket is a game of finesse, skill and stamina - hockey’s a pub brawl.”

“And all over in, what, ninety minutes?”

“Exactly. Ask one of those players to stick it out over five days...”

“Or, even five hours!”

“Whoa.” Kevin put his hands up to stem the tidal wave of derision coming from the others. “Seriously, what’s up with you two?”

“Hey! You know what; I have some great recordings of old matches. Want to come over and watch them?” Rocky ignored Kevin.

Imran’s eyes lit up. “Sounds good, man.”

They grabbed their coats and got up.

A stupefied Kevin watched them leave together as if they were best friends. As they headed towards the door, he heard their last exchange before they left the café.

“So who’s this director you mentioned?”

“No idea. I was quoting a magazine article.”

“We’re a pair of morons; I’ve never watched an Aamir Khan movie myself.”

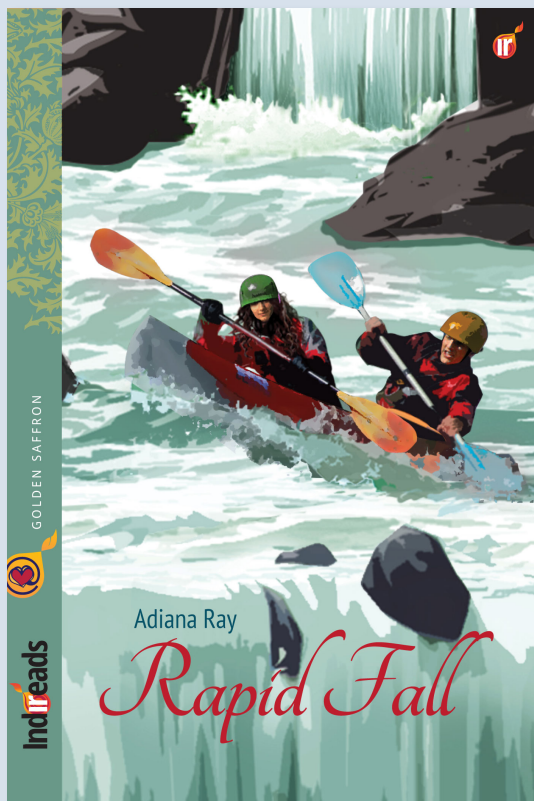
Their laughter bounced off the walls.



ABOUT ADIANA RAY

Adiana Ray believes in the Zen tenet 'each state has a 1000 truths'. Every person brings their own unique experiences to a situation, which makes them see things differently and interpret it in their own way.

This is what inspires her to write, trying to see each relationship in a different way, and always having a new story to tell. When she writes, her story could be a fantasy, but will be a believable one that could happen to anyone of us and her focus, above all, is to entertain the reader.



Rapid Fall

by Adiana Ray

A story that begins with the rapids of the Ganga and has as many twists and turns as the river.

Available on www.indireads.com

Remnants of a Rainy Day

MAMUN M. ADIL

I still have the umbrella, even though I don't think I have ever used it.

I have had it for more than a decade now, and even though it is tattered and torn, something prevents me from throwing it out. Like a talisman, I let it hang by the entrance of my apartment.

Sometimes, an unusually keen observer—usually a woman I hope never to see again—spots it, and exclaims in a pretentious manner, perhaps as a final act of seduction: “My, what an interesting looking thing...”

I choose to ignore such trivial comments, and let these irrelevant women out of the door, and try to forget the fact that I have spent a night, or a few hours, with them, hoping that they forget too. Most of the time, though, I don't really care if they do or not. I have other more pressing matters to deal with, you see.

But after they leave, I realize that the emptiness I am constantly trying to overcome, to fill, has never really left. And when I look at the umbrella, I am reminded that in all honesty, things really haven't changed. Although the present is somewhat bearable, it is tomorrow that I am still afraid of.

But enough of my pseudo-intellectual conundrums. I am anxious to relive the once glorious past that was, literally, in another country. The center of the world—New York City—in the fabulous US of A. The city where I lived for most of my adult life, where outwardly I led a life that many envied, a so-called ‘successful’ life with a coveted apartment in Manhattan, a swanky car and a happening job in IT.

Oddly enough though, despite all its glory, I was sick of NYC. It wasn't just September 11, it was everything. I was tired of everything... and everyone. Life had become monotonous and uninspiring; it had become a negative sort of affair, filled with the same people who talked about the same things at the same places over the same drinks.

And the celestial city, which I called home, and loved more than life itself was beginning to gnaw rabidly at my insides, making me even more cynical. I just wanted to run away.

But instead of just thinking about escaping, I actually decided to leave. I decided to end a life. Mine. My life in New York. I decided to move. Far, far away. Where there would be no more reminders of the past, where the shadows of yesterday would not brim into today, where I could start anew, forget the mistakes I made, and attempt to take control of my life instead of being a mere spectator.

Surprisingly, ending a life wasn't as difficult as I had thought. Perhaps death isn't as difficult as you'd imagine, and perhaps it is better to end it by yourself, rather than having death thrust upon you. Of course, there was the matter of fond farewells to deal with. Saying goodbye wasn't hard I realized—all you had to do was follow some fake hugs and kisses with comments such as, “We’ll stay in touch,” the insincere, “Of course I will come back...” and even, “I’ll always love you.”

The most difficult aspect of ending my life was getting rid of the all the things I had accumulated in the process of staying true to the good old materialistic American way of life. Being computer savvy—hey, I was an IT yuppie after all—I took pictures of my many belongings and placed them on Craig’s list in order to sell them.

Within a week, most of the possessions I had accumulated, each of which I had bought with careful thought and consideration, was sold. Gone. Almost as if they had never existed. Or been part of my life. On the upside, I managed to raise a decent amount of cash. Only the smaller television, and some knick-knacks remained.

That evening, it was a Friday I think, the phone rang as I was about to hit the shower. I instantly figured it wasn't anyone I knew by the thick, Indian accent, one that stressed on the T's and D's and lacked the V's. (“Do you have a television for sale?”)

I made an appointment for 7pm that same evening (I had a drinks thing at 8), explained the directions to my house, and figured I had a deal.

Seven-thirty and no one in sight. *Damn Indians, I thought. Never on time. That's why South Asians have such a bad name—we can't ever be punctual.* I peered outside the window, as if willing the man in question to appear instantaneously.

It looked like it was drizzling outside, a sort of unexpected, soothing shower, when you can tell that summer is flirting with you, telling you that spring, with its constant showers is about to leave, but not without letting you down many a time.

I poured myself a stiff drink, lit a cigarette and figured I'd wait another ten minutes. Just in case the curry smelling fool would arrive. I needed that TV out, and money in my pocket so I could splurge at a bar tonight, and maybe even get a hit of X in the bargain if I could manage it.

Just then there was a knock on the door. *God! Can't the guy see the damned doorbell? Damn desis.* I chugged down the drink...whoa...and opened the door.

I had been mistaken, it wasn't just a drizzle; it had been pouring, judging by the way the street looked. Hues of pink sprawled across the blue sky, and the golden rays of the setting sun seeped through the clouds. The rain had ended, leaving behind pools of water on the ground, which mirrored the sky's cerulean shades.

In front of me stood two creatures, dressed in cheap, transparent raincoats, sharing an umbrella, looking like something even the dingiest cat wouldn't have dragged in. Not even in one of its nine lives.

The man was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that was tucked in a little oddly, showing off a bit of a paunch, while his much younger sidekick sported a well-used *shalwar-kameez*. Her hair was oiled and tied in a tight plait and she was sporting what looked second-hand trainers. They were holding hands but as soon as I glanced at them, they pulled away, looking as if they had been engaging in a public orgy.

“Yes,” I barked. “You here to see the TV?”

“Yes,” smiled the man, showing off his white teeth.

“You're late. I've been waiting for more than an hour.”

The woman apologized.

“We are sorry we are late, but the bus got delayed.” Her accent was less pronounced than her man-friend’s, although she spoke in a rather halting, singsong manner.

Why didn’t you just get a friggin’ cab? Don’t you think I have anything better to do than wait for two curry-smelling Indians who will probably not even buy the damned TV ’cause they are so friggin’ cheap? I wanted to say.

But thankfully, for once, I stopped myself in time. Before I said things I would have regretted later. Before I said things that I couldn’t possible take back, things I would have to live with for the rest of my life.

I walked towards the lounge, and could hear the cheap rubber soles of their shoes squeaking on my well-polished wooden floors.

“Here’s the TV,” I said loudly, pointing towards the object in question, as if assuming that the duo was dim-witted and wouldn’t be able to identify it themselves. “It’s in mint condition.”

“Does it have a remote control sir?” asked the man. *Ah, he’s not all that dense after all. What’s with the sir, anyway? Should I ask him to wipe my shoes now?*

“Yeah. Somewhere. There’s so much shit here. I’ll look for it if you give me a second.”

Both of them literally died on the spot, especially the woman, as I said shit. I rolled my eyes and ignored their shudders, and started looking around for the damned remote control. Miraculously, I had actually put it in its place, on the center table. Turning the TV on, I passed the remote to the woman. Unfortunately, the TV turned on to show the last channel I viewed, which happened to be the Playboy channel. The woman turned crimson, while the man, half-tempted to watch, merely averted his gaze.

For some reason, even I felt a little uncomfortable, and swiftly snatched back the remote and changed the channel to something more respectable. I was so uncomfortable, that when they asked me how much the TV would cost, I quoted a lower price than planned.

“Are you okay with the pricing?” I asked. Almost instinctively, they looked at each other. Apparently they communicated without words.

“Yes, yes, we want it,” they said in unison.

“I can call my friend now and he can pick it up if that’s okay,” said the man.

“That’s fine. But I have to go out soon; can he hurry up? Or will he be late as well?”

“No, no, let me call him now. Can I use your phone?” (No cell phone, I noticed).

I was tempted to point out the grammatical error in the sentence he had uttered, but managed to restrain myself and pointed towards the cordless.

He called his friend, murmured something quickly in a language I didn’t understand, and then told me his friend would be there in ten minutes. (“He works nearby only, and he has a big car.”)

Then came a pause. Not being the type to make hypocritical small talk, I poured myself another drink, but was nice enough to ask them if they wanted one too, to celebrate their new idiot box.

“No thank you, it’s still early,” said the man, while his wife silently appraised the remaining things in the apartment, gazing longingly at my trendy kitchen.

“She is new to America,” explained the husband, “She is staying home these days, but will soon get a job. But she gets bored, so I am thinking we should be buying a television set for her.”

“Good thinking,” I said obviously disinterested. I glanced towards the woman, who was now looking at the spice rack.

“Oh you keep *zeera*, *haldi* and *dhania*!” she exclaimed.

“Well yes, for whenever I want to cook a desi meal.”

“Oh...you seem so American...where are you from?”

“Um, Pakistan I guess.”

“You are going back there?”

“I guess.”

“Oh, you will be so happy. Your mother will take care of you and so will your family. These Americans are so cold. Always wanting to be quiet and

clean and neat. No fun. Not one of them plays in the rain, you know. All of them have umbrellas.”

Apparently, it didn't take much for this woman to begin listing her woes against America.

“Why did you come here then?”

She paused before replying. “I got married.”

Her husband glanced at her with pride. “She is adjusting,” he said, “she has learnt how to use the washing machine already, even though it has only been a week since she came here. And I am teaching her how to use the cash register at the 7-11 where I work, so she can get a job too.”

Wow, what ambition!

There was something about the couple that I didn't understand. Maybe it was because they seemed to be so happy, despite not having much. (I mean, no cell phone, no cab fare and no TV up till now...). Or maybe it was because despite the fact that they weren't in the best of places they were living happily in their own little world, instead of going all out and trying to become 'American' like many of the immigrants in the US. (Maybe I was one of them too?)

Maybe it was the alcohol, or God knows what, but I told them to help themselves to the stuff in the kitchen, the spice rack, the Tupperware and the cooking utensils. Expensive items that I had bought, being brand conscious and all. I had thought that I would take them with me, but something told me the couple needed them more.

“Oh, see, Nikhil! This is how we Asians are to each other. We help each other out when we can!” exclaimed the woman excitedly, as she began to collect the stuff in a shopping bag.

The doorbell rang (no more knocks...maybe the friend was a little more with it.)

Within minutes they were gone, but not after thanking me profusely, calling me '*bhaiya*' and what not. I poured myself yet another drink, called a cab and headed towards the bar, washing the whole incident off me...for that time, at least.

But a few days later, as I began packing the life that I had built for myself over the course of many years into boxes, I came across the couple's umbrella. They must have missed it, but had chosen to let me have it.

It hangs, as I said before, near the entrance of my apartment. It has been more than a decade since that rainy day in May, and sometimes, the umbrella smells like the rain, promising new, clean beginnings that can allow you can start anew, to forget the past, and be comfortable with the thought of tomorrow.

I think I'll let it hang there for a little while longer. Or maybe I will throw it away. It is, after all, tattered and torn.

I'm not sure though.



ABOUT THE EDITORIAL TEAM

Curated and Edited by

Naheed Hassan

Sabahat Muhammad

Edited by

Mimmy Jain

Mimmy Jain has been a mainstream Indian journalist for the last 27 years and has worked in senior positions at publications such as The Economic Times, The Times of India, The Financial Express and Mint. You can find Mimmy at <https://www.facebook.com/MimmyMGeorge>, and at 'Living in the Happily Ever After' (mimmyjain.wordpress.com).

Sundari Venkatraman

Sundari Venkatraman tried drawing, painting, tailoring, embroidery, knitting, gardening and an umpteen other things before she discovered writing. Double Jeopardy is her first novella, and has been published by Indireads. Contact Sundari at <http://www.facebook.com/AuthorSundariVenkatraman>

Zeenat Mahal

Zeenat Mahal (@zeenat4indireads) is currently doing an MFA in creative writing from Kingston University, London. She won a BBC short story competition in 2001 and has been a regular contributor to newspapers. She is working on a literary novel with elements of magical realism, while continuing to write romances. She can be contacted on her FB page <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Zeenat-Mahal>.

Sucharita Dutta-Asane

Sucharita Dutta-Asane is a writer and independent fiction editor based in Pune.

In 2008, she received Oxford Bookstores' debut writers' (second) prize for her anthology, The Jungle Stories. Her articles, book reviews, short stories, and a novella, Petals in the Sun have been extensively published across electronic publications.

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Khudi

Khudi is a youth-focused social movement working to promote a democratic culture and pluralistic politics in Pakistan. Through varied initiatives, *Khudi* promotes the use of peaceful dialogue and discussion as the primary tools for dispute resolution, and aims to foster a culture of healthy debate within society. To this end, *Khudi* organizes regular trainings, seminars and debates, as well as partaking in public services and civil society associations and engagements.

Khudi's work also includes the publication of Pakistan's first bilingual monthly youth magazine 'The Laaltain' and the production of socially aware TV content for young Pakistanis. *Khudi* believes that direct and long-term engagement with the country's youth is the best route to building a more progressive, prosperous and peace-loving Pakistan.