

Yashodhara
Lad

Just
Married,
Please
Excuse



Opposites Attract—Trouble 

Just Married,
Please Excuse

Yashodhara Lal



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To my family – for the material they provide.

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PART I

CAUTION MARRIAGE AHEAD

Pop Goes the Question

‘Achha, I’ve been meaning to ask you,’ Vijay said casually, over the phone. ‘When do you think we should get married?’

The question caught me off guard since the only build up to it had been our wishing each other a rather soppy, lovey-dovey good morning. I paused for a moment to give it a considered response.

‘Eh?’

I was never at my eloquent best when taken by surprise.

I looked at my phone with raised eyebrows as if Vijay could see my questioning expression. Considering that we had been seeing each other for only three months, and that I was in my early twenties and just out of management college, I was completely unprepared for even the mention of marriage. But here it was – an unmistakable, undeniable, definite mention.

‘Married?’ I choked out the words with some difficulty. ‘Ha ha! You’re joking, right? I’m only twenty-three – a mere *child*. You want to be held directly responsible for child marriage? No, na?’

I heard a by-now familiar, stifled sigh at the other end of the line. ‘Honey, mujhe pata hain you’re only twenty-three. But I’m thirty, and I can only hold my parents off for so long. You know they’re starting to look for arranged marriage matches for me. Again.’

I did know this and didn’t particularly like it. I became petulant. ‘So tell them to butt out. Or *maybe*,’ I added spitefully, ‘you should just go and marry some Harbinder or Buntvinder that they choose for you.’

‘Buntvinder?’ he chuckled. ‘That’s not even a real name. But tumhare liye achha hain, actually my little Buntvinder. Ha ha.’

He sensed I was not amused, and his voice became serious again. ‘Look, we are eventually getting married, right? So why not now?’

‘Vijay! We’ve only been going out for three months ...’

‘Arrey! I’m old-fashioned ... I don’t understand all this going-out, shoving-out stuff. I thought you were as serious about it as I am.’

‘Of course I am as serious about it as you are. I just didn’t know that you were so ... serious!’

This time, his sigh was not as stifled as the previous one. ‘Okay then. I guess we’ll talk about this some other time. See you in the evening.’

Exchanging goodbyes that were a little colder than usual, we hung up, and I flopped my head back onto my pillow. I was definitely *not* prepared for a discussion like this. Besides, it was one of those beautiful chilly Saturday mornings in Bangalore which are best spent lazing in bed. So although it was already 9 a.m., I had still been in the process of waking up when Vijay had called. He, on the other hand, had taken the early morning flight for a day-trip to Delhi and had already been up for about five hours before he called me. He thus had the unfair advantage of a fresh and alert mind.

I realized sadly that I wasn’t going to be able to sleep now anyway, and thought I might as well make some sort of an attempt to get out of bed. I looked around the sparse room of the company guest house in which I was staying and decided it wasn’t even worth trying to get the so-called caretaker

make me a nice refreshing cup of tea. That dude was even grumpier than I was in the morning. Despite the severe handicap of no tea, I bravely managed to push myself out of bed and spread my arms wide and yawned, indulging in a long, slow stretch. It looked like it would be an empty sort of day – a Saturday without Vijay was no fun.

Yeah, but still ... Twenty-three, I reminded myself, was just too young to get married.

I briefly considered telling myself that perhaps I was actually very mature for my age, but then I rejected that on the grounds that it was a blatant lie. I definitely wasn't ready.

How did you *know* you were ready, anyway?

In any case, I wasn't altogether convinced I was the marrying type at all. I'd always liked to think of myself as a bit of a wild, free spirit. And right now, I had most of that beautiful decade – the twenties – ahead of me. Full of possibilities for adventure, exploration, thrills and – who knew, I thought a bit fancifully, maybe even a spot of danger. All this, notwithstanding the fact that I had just finished my MBA and entered the corporate world, as an employee in a large, staid MNC. Still. There could be *some* form of danger while peddling soaps and detergents.

But the only danger now seemed to be of getting trapped in a domestic rut and becoming a housewife, a mindless, wifely Buntvinder myself. The self-image that this conjured up in my mind inspired me immediately to start the day with a workout. And so I lay down and began to practise some contortions I had seen on the Yoga DVD I had obtained about a month ago from my mother. Even while I struggled to breathe correctly – or rather, to just breathe – during the dhanurasana, sarvangasana and other assorted asanas, I couldn't get our conversation out of my mind.

I knew that Vijay's parents knew nothing of my existence. They had been pressurizing him to get married for a while now, and had been lining up 'meetings' with nice girls from respectable families all over the country, but mostly from his hometown of Jaipur. 'At least just meet her' was the constant refrain. To oblige them, sometimes he did.

I had discovered that even before I had come into his life a few months ago, Vijay had found his own unique, rather intriguing way of getting his parents to ease up on the topic, if only temporarily.

He would simply get himself rejected.

It was quite a feat for him to get rejected – tall, good-looking, IIT-Delhi graduate from a respectable brahmin family, working in large MNC and all that jazz. Still, he manfully rose to the task and achieved it through the simple means of being obnoxious.

During each of these meetings, there would inevitably come a point when he and the girl were left alone to get to know each other better. He would act normal enough to begin with. Then, at some stage, he would clear his throat, look deep into her eyes, and say in a low, serious voice, 'Look, Buntvinder (example of name). Before we think about whether we should take things any further, there is something I have to ask you.'

She would lower her eyes and reply breathlessly, 'Go ahead.'

'It's something very deeply personal, and I'll understand if you don't want to answer it.'

'It's okay, you can ask me.'

'It's just that for me – and I hope for you – marriage is not a thing to be taken lightly. So I really need to know this ...'

She would be very nervous by now, but would steel herself in preparation for the worst. 'It's okay, Vijay! What is it you want to know?'

'I just need to know,' he would lower his voice even further and after a dramatic pause for effect would say, 'Who was the first Mughal emperor of India?'

The ensuing silence would only be broken by the sound of his loud guffaws at the look on her face.

The responses ranged from huffy walk-outs to cushions thrown at his head. Either way, the girl would get the message that this wasn't a suitable boy, although the parents involved were never exactly sure why.

Being an easygoing and open-minded sort of chap, Vijay was not opposed to introducing variation once in a while. As in the case of the overly sweet and sensitive young girl that he met in Jaipur, whom he didn't have the heart to try the usual Mughal emperor prank on.

Instead, after around twenty minutes of conversation – nervous and shy on her part, friendly and encouraging on his – he sidled up to her, making her back further into the sofa they were sitting on. He gazed into her eyes and murmured, 'You are one of the sweetest girls I have ever met in my life.' As she blushed in flustered confusion at this unexpected display of forwardness, he put his arm around her shoulders and whispered in her ear, 'And don't worry, I will *personally* find a nice boy for you.'

The poor girl was in tears by the time he left. Finally, his parents had eased up on the match-fixing efforts. Only temporarily, of course.

When I had first seen Vijay in the office three months earlier, my first thought had been, 'Wow, that guy has *long* legs – where do they make pants his size?' He was a tall, lanky young man with smooth hair, and a boyish-looking face that belied his thirty years.

I was only a lowly management trainee, fresh out of IIM-Bangalore, and Vijay had been in the organization for several years. We both worked in the marketing department, and had been introduced by his boss Madhukar, who also happened to be my project guide. I was impressed by Vijay from the beginning – that is, I thought he was cute. I liked him even more when I got to know him better and found that he was a laid-back, down-to-earth young man, with an extremely quirky sense of humour. He stood out in the corporate environment – literally, because at six foot two, he also towered over most other people.

The office campus was a beautiful one. It was built over a very large area of land on the outskirts of Bangalore, with plenty of greenery around. The building itself was a quaint old structure, and from the outside was more reminiscent of an ancient castle than a modern office. You would enter through large ornate doors into a spacious lobby, upon the walls of which hung some great works of art – priceless pieces by M.F. Hussain and the like. There was even an impressive bronze statue of a raging bull, bang in the centre of the lobby. The fact that it faced away from the lobby entrance, and therefore you had a bull's backside greeting you every morning as you entered the office, did little to detract from the timeless charm of the building.

So, this was where we first met. Where our little romance started. Where we took many after-lunch strolls, around the campus. Where I once caught a glimpse of Vijay sitting at the large window of his ground-floor room, gazing outside in deep thought, immersed in what was probably some important business problem. I had watched him admiringly for a few moments, thinking how picturesque the scene was, and trying to come up with an appropriate title for it in my head, something like 'Long legged Professional Contemplation'. Exactly at this point, the object of my scrutiny had coolly swung his legs over the sill and slipped out of the office in one smooth motion, presumably for a smoke. I was taken aback by his exiting in such a novel fashion and had thought for the first time – but certainly not the last, 'Man. That dude is weird.'

Later, I asked him out of curiosity what he thought when he first met me. He replied spontaneously – a bad habit he would soon learn to curb to some extent – 'I thought, Arrey yaar, here's yet another trainee to waste my time – but she's a rather cute jhalli.'

I didn't really know at the time what the term 'jhalli' meant, but I could sense it wasn't anything

very complimentary. Vijay never offered compliments unless they were double-edged – part of his charm, I supposed.

He had done his share of stretching the truth to try and impress me. When he learnt that I was into music and playing the guitar, he said casually, ‘Oh really? You know, I played the drums in college.’

This greatly raised him in my esteem. It was only later that I discovered that he had been referring to *one* specific occasion ten years ago when he had happened to pass by the auditorium, seen the Indian rock band members taking a break during practice, and had banged about a bit on their drum set for a pleasant five minutes.

He also mentioned that he had been on the college volleyball and basketball teams – this was easy to believe, given his height, and later turned out to have the plus point of being true as well. When it finally hit me that he was giving me all this information in order to try and flirt with me in his own unique, subtle and slightly sardonic way, I was quite floored – here was a musical, athletic, handsome and nice older man who seemed intent on winning me over. It had seemed too good to be true.

And clearly, I now thought a tad bitterly as I struggled to unravel myself from a particularly complicated asana whose name I could no longer recall, it *had* indeed turned out to be too good to be true.

The lad was already talking marriage. Talk about killing a perfectly good romance.

Typical.

The First Date

Vijay was due back in Bangalore later the same day, at 8 p.m. It was about 7 p.m. when it struck me that it would be nice to surprise him by going to the airport to pick him up. I realized with a little start of guilt that every single time in the last three months that I'd had to travel on work, he had picked me up or dropped me off at the airport – whereas it had occurred to me only now, for the first time, that I could pick him up too. Especially since my guest house, strategically chosen at a milestone's throw from his house, was also fortuitously located a short distance away from the airport. But my sense of remorse was quickly overtaken by resentment. Just because I was an innately selfish person – a fact that I immediately decided to blame on my faulty upbringing by my mother – it didn't mean that Vijay could go about always playing Mister Nice Guy and being all thoughtful about every little thing and making me look bad in comparison. It hit me that being cooped up in my guest house waiting for Vijay to come back, had quite possibly addled my brain. A breath of fresh air would do me some good.

I was still in a contemplative mood as I slouched along Airport Road. Maybe Vijay's acting all thoughtful and gallant was a scheme to trap me into marriage. Maybe he would start acting completely different once we got hitched. Well, I wasn't just some naïve silly girl. I was a savvy woman of the world – and I wasn't going to fall into any sort of trap.

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I stumbled on a loose slab on the pavement and nearly fell into an open manhole. After loudly cursing the civic authorities of Bangalore, I was reminded of how I had already demonstrated my clumsy side to Vijay on various occasions, and had been saved at least twice from a sudden and imminent death on a busy road by his long, steady arm. It was kind of nice to be with a man who continued to think of me as hot stuff despite prolonged exposure to my klutziness. Besides, my own personal survival rate would possibly improve simply by virtue of having that long, steady arm around. These were no doubt fairly useful qualities to have in a potential husband.

Husband. Ewww.

I finally reached the entry gate to the airport and negotiated my way past the many vehicles moving at a mere crawl, until I found myself at the Arrival gate. It was crowded to the hilt, as usual. I cleared my throat, tossed my hair back and gave a few of the local men a haughty look until they meekly shuffled aside. I then proceeded to occupy a prime waiting spot near the front where I could comfortably lean on the steel bars as I waited for Vijay to make his appearance.

It was still fifteen minutes to eight, and I found my mind beginning to wander again as I waited moodily, my baggy-jeaned skinny frame hunched over the bars.

Had it really been three months already? It seemed like only yesterday that we had gone out on our very first date.

When Vijay first suggested that we go out that fateful day, he did so in a deliberately casual manner. Determined to outdo him, I accepted in a manner bordering on careless indifference.

‘Oh sure. Whatever. I mean, I don’t care.’ For good measure, I even added something along the lines of ‘I go out with anyone who asks me.’

He looked at me appraisingly and I realized this hadn’t sounded too good, so I deftly changed the subject. ‘So where do you think we should go?’

He thought for a while and then, with a gleam in his brown eyes, he asked me, ‘Would you like to see ducks?’

This was a question I had never been asked before, but I decided to just go with the flow and said in the same casual manner, ‘Yes, of course.’

That afternoon, I found myself getting a little worried. I had no idea what to expect and was vaguely apprehensive that ‘seeing ducks’ was perhaps in fact some sort of secret code for acts I was not yet ready for – or even worse, that he might be planning to take me to the Bangalore zoo.

That evening he picked me up from my guest house. I walked up to his car, a dark green Hyundai Accent. As I got in next to him, he said, ‘Hey, you’re looking nice.’ I was congratulating myself for the wise but unusual decision of wearing a skirt and applying some lipstick when he added, ‘Nice than you usually look.’ My smile froze on my face, but he looked like he hadn’t noticed anything amiss. I would learn later that Vijay usually said whatever popped into his head. This was always without any malice whatsoever, but still difficult for a slightly oversensitive person like me to digest. Right now, however, he appeared to be in a very happy, conversational mood, and I melted as it dawned on me that he was talking about making this a very special first date – he was planning to drive us two hours out of Bangalore to ‘see ducks’ at a little resort right on the Cauveri river. I settled back in my seat with a delicious feeling of anticipation, put on my seat belt, and we zoomed off.

Vijay was a very skilled driver, at least as far I could tell, with my own limited knowledge of the matter. He negotiated the city traffic with great speed and nonchalance, humming tunelessly to himself when he wasn’t keeping the conversation going and swerving out of the way of oncoming buses just in the nick of time. I tried to play it cool too, restricting my display of horror to a few shallow intakes of breath whenever it looked like we were going to perish, which he did not seem to notice. Thankfully, we were soon out of the city and headed along some quieter country roads leading towards Mysore. Our destination was about mid-way between Mysore and Bangalore, a resort called Amblee.

We finally reached and I was quite delighted by my first glimpse of the quiet, scenic place. It did give the impression of being rather dilapidated and I was dimly aware that at least part of its charm at the moment was the lack of sunlight, but for now, it was quite perfect.

The promised ducks were indeed there – all four of them – in a murky little pond in the resort gardens, and after paying our respects to them, we proceeded to a table set by the river that sparkled in the moonlight. There was absolutely nobody else around and we were having a pleasant, quiet conversation and getting to know each other better. Therefore, I was taken aback when after a comfortable lull, Vijay leaned over, looked me in the eye and said, ‘Naam hain Vijay ... Deenanath Chauhan. Maalum?’

I had not the slightest interest in Hindi cinema till I met Vijay. Obviously, therefore, I did not know that this was a dialogue from the movie *Agneepath*, and that Vijay was trying to impress me with what he thought was an uncanny imitation of Amitabh Bachchan. I only wondered why he was suddenly whispering in a voice two octaves lower than his regular voice. Out loud, I just politely remarked that I had always thought his last name was Sharma, not Chauhan, adding that Deenanath was a very interesting middle name, if a little old-fashioned. He was a bit demoralized by my reaction but when he explained to me what he had been trying to do, I pretended that I had just been kidding and praised him for his unmistakable impression, possibly overdoing it a bit by saying he ‘actual

sounded more like Amitabh than Amitabh himself.'

After we finished our otherwise uneventful, peaceful dinner, Vijay announced that he had organized for us to do some fishing, a thought that I was quite excited by. We settled ourselves comfortably on the cool stone steps leading into the river, and a friendly resort employee handed us our extremely makeshift fishing rods – which were actually two thin bamboo sticks with strings, one at the ends of which dangled little hooks wrapped in bits of atta.

There we sat, the two of us, holding our charming and only slightly sad little fishing rods, and the conversation now took a more serious turn as we quietly exchanged our many divergent views on the world at large.

It was clear that despite our mutual attraction, we had too many differences – he referred to himself as a 'simple man' and was easy-going, good-humoured and even-tempered. He also was a small-town boy, had been brought up as part of a conservative family in Jaipur and had a distinctly desi flavour. I, on the other hand, was a 'modern' Delhi girl who had always had a bit of a hot temper and clearly favoured Alanis over Amitabh.

He had just finished telling me about how he had always been told that he was one of the calmest and most centred people around, when he suddenly felt a tug on his fishing rod.

'BHAIYA! BHAIYA!' His sudden panicked screams shattered the stillness of the night. I asked him to calm down, but he babbled on rather incoherently about being a brahmin and a vegetarian, and how he had never thought these sticks would ever catch a fish and that he wanted to throw it back but couldn't bring himself to touch it and anyway, he was afraid it would bite him and it looked so awful struggling there like that and so on. The friendly resort bhaiya came back and laughingly rescued Vijay from the fish, tossing the latter back into the river whereupon it indignantly swam away. Vijay shuddered and said we should head back into town now.

And that was our first date.

I was amused by this memory as I stood waiting for Vijay at the airport, and couldn't stop chuckling throatily while shaking my head from side to side, causing a couple of the local men standing around me to edge away warily.

What were we *thinking*? We were so different – it would never work. And yet, here we were carrying on regardless. What was the point? What *for*?

And then I spotted a lanky figure that stood out head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd and my heart skipped a beat. And I suddenly remembered what for.

I Saw the Sign

I watched Vijay walk out of the Arrivals terminal, unaware of my presence. His dark brown hair glinted in the harsh airport lights, and he was simply dressed in a long-sleeved T-shirt and a pair of black pants – one of the three decent pairs that he possessed. He slid along gracefully, almost gliding, and as always, he gave me the distinct impression of being a giraffe on skates, but one who had been practising with great dedication for years for some sort of championship. He looked like he was just out of college – the one and only thing that he had ever displayed any sort of vanity about.

It was only because I was observing him closely that I noted that as usual, his brown eyes were not steady but shifting about at lightning speed. He had once told me that the reason he was able to drive so well was that his eyes were never still and he was constantly looking about all over the place and was very aware of his surroundings. Of course, I started calling him shifty-eyes after that, although this rapid eye movement was barely perceptible to the naked eye of other mortals. Sure enough, those shifty eyes now cut through the colourful confusion of the airport and settled on me, even though I hadn't been expecting me there. He smiled and raised his hand slightly in a cautious wave. Unlike me, he was always wary of public displays of affection. Still, for me, that little wave was sufficient to cause another tiny skip in the cardiac region and I hurried towards him.

We greeted each other with a hug, warm on my part and hurried on his, as he simultaneously tried to register exactly who in the crowd of strangers was watching us. We held hands as we walked along, and I started to talk about some inane things while he steered me towards his waiting taxi. I was still chattering happily in the car, when I noticed that he hadn't said very much and was watching me in a bemused manner.

'What?' I asked warily.

'Nothing. I was just wondering if you've thought about it some more.'

I started to observe the scenery outside the window and said coldly, 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

I knew exactly what he was talking about. And he knew that I knew. And I knew that he knew that I knew. This was getting slightly complex, so I was glad when he cut into my thoughts with 'Oh come on, honey. How much do you think we'll be able to put it off anyway?'

This was too much. 'You're *rushing* me, Vijay. It's too soon for anyone to make such a big decision.'

'Arrey! But I've decided, na? I want to marry you only. So why would it take you much longer?'

'Because ... I'm just not ready.'

'And when will you be ready?'

'I don't know,' I said honestly.

Honesty is rarely rewarded in this world.

'What do you mean you don't know? And how will you know you're ready, by the way?'

I decided to adlib. 'It's one of those things, Vijay. You just *know*. I'm sure I'll just know. But please give me time.' I preempted his next question with 'At least a few more months, maybe one

year.'

His face fell. I knew that this would be tough for him to digest, but I *had* to buy myself more time. A year wasn't that long. I heard him mutter, half to himself, 'I love you but I'm not really sure I want to marry you ... I don't understand this thinking ... is it supposed to be very modern or something ... aaj kal ki ladkiyan ...'

Sometimes Vijay acted like he was not only from another planet but another generation altogether. This only served to strengthen my resolve that I would wait for a long time before making any sort of commitment.

He stopped talking about it, clearly having decided not to pursue the matter any further. Instead, he rolled down his window and produced a cigarette. I watched incredulously as he lit up in front of me, knowing fully well that I absolutely abhorred his smoking. I decided to give him the royal ignore which would probably have worked well if he hadn't started giving it to me first, and turned away from him to look out the window. The taxi was crawling along in the traffic – it would have been quicker to walk.

As we sat there in a moody, smoky silence, I thought bitterly that maybe it would even take two years before I knew I was ready.

Three months had clearly not been enough, in any case. My mind began to wander over the various small incidents that had taken place during these past few months.

Unlike Vijay's pretence of being some sort of a champion solo drummer at college in a lame bid to impress me, I had always let him see the real me. Take it or leave it types.

The only time I had stretched the truth *slightly* was one morning when he said that he had to go out for a haircut. Since we were at that happy lover's stage where every minute apart is seen as a minute wasted, I told him that I was great at cutting people's hair.

'Really?' he asked and I replied that I had been quite the lady in demand when it came to haircuts in my earlier days.

What I omitted to mention to him was that I had been in demand *one* day when I was ten years old – and that it was only my mother who was demanding to know where I was hiding, after a rather unfortunate haircut that I had given my younger sister. The result had come out rather uneven although I stoutly maintained that I had intended it that way and that I quite liked it. As I had crouched in the cupboard of my room, listening to my little sister's inconsolable wailing and my mother shouting for me, I had understood even at that early age, that I was destined to be something of a misunderstood genius.

In any case, after hearing about my supposed expertise with the scissors, Vijay eagerly asked me to give him a cool haircut. I said, with an appealing combination of generosity and modesty, 'Sure, why not?'

He sat on a tall stool in the bathroom and I assumed a professional stance behind him. He was gazing into the mirror so I didn't dare to touch the front much, but I snipped away happily at the back, pausing to admire the effect now and then. I gave him an attractive series of about five steps in the hair on the back of his head. He couldn't see it, but when he reached back to touch it, he said it 'felt nice' and that he had never had this kind of haircut before.

He went happily to office the next day, clearly expecting some admiration for his new haircut, but the general reaction was summed up for him by an unnecessarily outspoken colleague who informed him that it looked as if 'Kisi billi ne noch-noch ke baal nikaale hain.' Vijay was not very amused by this and over the next few days in office, could not keep from self-consciously covering the back

his head with his hand. To my chagrin, he never let me come near his hair again with a pair of scissors, even when I offered to ‘fix it by snipping a bit off the back and evening out the layers.’

Our different temperaments also resulted in many fights. Given his tendency to make silly wisecracks and say whatever he felt like all the time, I often flared up about something that he did or said.

At the time, Vijay’s elder brother Ajay and his wife Garima were living with Vijay, and I got along well with them. They had been witnesses to quite a few of our fights, which usually ended in me flouncing out of the house. I discovered that they usually took my side, especially Ajay, who would always explain to Vijay, ‘Tu bada hain. Tujhe samajhna chahiye.’ Quite sweet of him, I thought, and my heart would warm up to Ajay when Vijay reported this to me.

One late night, Garima found Vijay sitting out on the balcony of the flat, staring forlornly at the children’s playground below. When she asked what he was doing, he pointed to a lone figure sitting on one of the children’s swings and said, ‘Yashodhara. She’s angry with me again.’

Garima breathed, ‘Oh how sweeeeet.’ Vijay stared at her in incredulous annoyance. It was anything but sweet, according to him.

It all started with a casual remark he made about one of my favourite kurtas – an ethnic looking black-and-yellow long-sleeved, beaded number that I often wore with my jeans. I had always been under the impression that I looked really cool in it, but Vijay had lovingly asked me, with no small degree of interest, while toying with the beads, ‘Tell me, na – why do you always wear this Har Rama-Hare-Krishna kind of stuff?’

It was all downhill from there and ended with my walking out of the house in a huff.

Not having any place to go to so late at night, I headed to the playground, thinking that I would console myself with a little swing in the cool night air. A few minutes passed and I was sniffing around, feeling very sorry for myself when suddenly Vijay materialized out of the black night, holding two Orange Bar ice lollies, one of which he held out to me. I took it without a word, and he sat on the swing next to me with the other ice lolly, saying, ‘Garima said we fight like kids, so we should make up like kids too.’ We ate our ice lollies on the swings in philosophical silence and went back upstairs after a while.

He rarely lost his composure. Only once, when I had started getting upset about some small thing he had announced, ‘I’m telling you, I don’t know how to deal with such tamper tentrums.’ It was then that I discovered his tendency to lose his already tenuous command over the English language in moments of high emotion. He kept repeating the phrase ‘tamper tentrums’, obviously not spotting any flaw in it, until I finally melted and broke down in a fit of laughter. He thought I had lost it until I breathlessly explained to him why I was laughing. Thereafter, we often used the words ‘tamper tentrum’ to try and lighten the most unpleasant moments of conflict. Sometimes it worked.

As our taxi pulled to a stop, I briefly debated with myself whether to try and use this phrase to lighten the mood now, but decided against it. The blatant smoking in my face was really the limit. Maybe, I thought as I moodily slammed the cab door behind me and stomped towards his flat, it would take me *three* years to decide. Who knew?

We had a quiet dinner at his place, with Ajay and Garima. We routed most of our conversation through that hapless couple, addressing each other only a few times with exaggerated and dangerous politeness. Once in our room, we simply turned our backs on each other. I was only pretending to be asleep – I really wanted to talk to him and make up but just as I finally turned around to do so, he let out a gentle snore. I tried to shake him awake and whispered with increasing loudness

‘Vijay. VIJAY!’ but he was out like a light. Irritated, I turned my back on him again and grumbling to myself, tried to go to sleep. It took me a long time.

I woke up late the next morning, the bright sunlight hurting my eyes. I licked my dry lips and realized that I was feeling very sick. It was probably my lunch of leftover Maggi and chips the previous day, at the guest house that had done me in, because my stomach was hurting terribly and I felt nauseous and weak.

This was the first occasion in the past few months that I had fallen sick, and so I had not yet discovered Vijay’s weakness for tending to the sick. He immediately forgot all about our differences of the previous day and started to fuss over me in a way that even my mother never had done.

He asked me whether I wanted to eat something and I replied in the negative – I was feeling too sick and didn’t think I would be able to keep anything down.

‘But how will you regain your strength if you don’t eat?’ he chided.

It was kind of cute at first, but then it started to get a bit out of hand. I insisted that all I wanted to do was go to sleep, but he kept fussing over me and suggesting that I eat or drink this or that, and started measuring my temperature at fifteen-minute intervals. I just lay in bed with a thermometer in my mouth, while he pottered about with an enthusiasm that he had hitherto not displayed. To my horror, he even declared that he was planning to take off from work the next day – Monday – in order to nurse me back to perfect health.

He kept coming up with new and inventive ways to fuss, but it was clearly in the matter of nourishment that he felt he had found his specialization because he kept offering me all the food and drink in the house, until I finally agreed that maybe I would try something after all.

Thrilled by this first sign of success, he made me drink a huge mug of chocolate milk, reasoning that ‘milk is generally good for health’ and ‘even if you don’t eat something, it’s important for you to drink and keep your fluid levels right.’

My condition showed no visible improvement. In fact, my stomach felt significantly worse after the milk, leaving me groaning and clutching my belly in agony – until he made me sit up in bed and consume a large bowl of papaya. ‘I know papaya is really good for the tummy, my mother said so.’ Against my better judgment, I somehow gulped down the pulpy fruit. I had never liked papaya and now started to feel even more queasy.

‘You’re feeling queasy?’ He had the remedy for this too. He grated some ginger and asked me to chew on it, assuring me that this would make me feel better instantly. If there was anything I disliked more than papaya, it was the taste of ginger, but I was too weak to protest and began to chew on it with an air of resignation.

The wave of nausea that overcame me right after this was too strong to resist, though I gathered up enough strength to lurch towards the bathroom. I began to throw up violently into the toilet. In between bouts, I became aware that the very concerned Vijay was standing behind me and trying to help me throw up. Weakly, I tried to push him out and shut the door behind him, but he insisted on holding me up over the toilet seat, running one hand over my hair to keep it out of the way. After I finally finished throwing up, I stumbled towards the washbasin and started cleaning up. When I looked up, I got a glimpse of both of us in the mirror. I took in my own appearance first – I looked completely washed out, with my face pale, hair matted and oily, and eyes red and watering. Repulsive was the word that I would have used to describe myself.

Then I caught sight of Vijay in the mirror. He was gazing at the back of my head, still stroking my hair affectionately and muttering in self-reproach, ‘Oh yaar ... it’s my fault ... I should have added some lemon juice to the ginger. That would have worked ... come on, I’ll make you some nimbu pan

okay?’

It was then, at that exact moment, that I *knew*.

I drew in a deep breath and my words came out with the slow exhalation. ‘Okay ... let’s do it.’

‘Okay?’ he said with the same undue enthusiasm. ‘Okay, you wait, I’ll get it ...’

‘NOT the nimbu pani, you dumbo ...’ I hissed. ‘Okay, as in ... okay, let’s just get *married*.’

Just Married, Please Excuse

Meeting the Parents

‘Okay Mum ... I’ll talk to you later then.’ I was about to hang up the phone when it occurred to me that perhaps now was as good a time as any. ‘Oh, hey Mum, I’m getting married and needed to ask you – what’s our caste again?’

‘What??’

A tad late, I realized that there could have been a better way to break the news, so I changed it to ‘Ha ha! Surprise?’

Stony silence at the other end of the line. I knew this stony silence well. In fact, I had inherited the Great Art of this very stony silence from my own Mother Dear.

I said, ‘Ma, what I meant was that I was thinking of *maybe* getting married *sometime* and wanted to talk to you about it ...’ I proceeded to pour my heart out about having met Vijay a few months ago and explained to her in great detail exactly what he was like.

The stony silence changed to cold *hmmms* and *achhas* over the course of the rather one-sided conversation, but by the time I had finished, I had apparently done a decent job because I got a positively lukewarm ‘Achha beta, at the end of the day, it is your decision.’ Her only concern was that he was so much older than me and that the family backgrounds sounded like they were rather different, considering they wanted to know about our caste.

‘They don’t want to know,’ I hastily corrected her. ‘As in, Vijay said since they don’t know anything about me, they *might* want to know. But he said it’s probably not relevant at all, but still, you never know. You know?’

I knew I wasn’t being very convincing. The truth was I wasn’t too convinced myself.

In fact, when he had tried to casually slip in the question about my caste, I had felt my hackles rise. I had told him in no uncertain terms that while I didn’t have the slightest clue about my caste, if the conversation was going to be an eighteenth-century, caste-based discussion, then he could take his highborn brahmin ass and jump off the nearest conveniently located cliff. He had tried to explain to me in a earnest, fumbling manner that while it was of zero consequence to him, and *probably* of none to his parents, he just wanted to sound like he was completely prepared with all the answers. I wasn’t happy about it, but after much grumbling, had finally agreed to ask my mother.

In any case, just before we hung up, my mother agreed in a resigned manner that she would check with her own father and get back to me about our caste. I marvelled at this – clearly she and my late father hadn’t cared about caste when they had decided to marry, and neither had their families. How different my situation was, even though it was what, like, sixty years later or something? Ah, the things we do for love, I thought, feeling quite like a Hindi movie heroine. I realized with a start that I was not only going to be somebody’s wife, but somebody was perhaps even going to refer to me as ‘bahu’. Holy crap! Cow, cow, holy cow, I told myself reproachfully. Had to tone down the language.

It turned out that we were from the lineage of something called Suryavanshi Rajputs – now that sounded quite cool to me. I always knew I had a little bit of the warrior in me. I told Vijay this, adding a little bitingly that if his family had a problem with me, mine would wage war against his and be

them. He brightly said that this explained a lot and confessed that he had always privately likened me to the Jhansi ki Rani. In any case, he promised to keep my threat in mind.

The next step was for him to meet my mother, and he accordingly made a trip to Delhi about a week later. He was a little nervous but I wasn't worried. I knew it would not be much of a challenge for him to win her over.

Mother Dear was a high-ranking government official – at that point, she was the Chief Commissioner of Delhi in Customs and Central Excise. To the outside world, she was a highly respected and impressive figure, bordering on the formidable. But to me and my two siblings – the elder, focused doctor-residing-in-England Abhimanyu and the younger, easygoing Gitanjali – she was just Good Old Mama. Generally terribly wise and sensible and capable of just about everything, but with a remarkable tendency to exhibit rather daft behaviour at times. She actually had only two primary shortcomings – which we called in the politically correct corporate world 'Areas of Improvement' – the first being an inability to admit that she was wrong and the second being an inability to tell a coherent joke or story to save her life.

It turned out that I was right in my estimation that she would approve highly of Vijay. After his visit, I had a quick conversation with my sister Gitanjali, who reported that Vijay had quite floored our mother. Almost literally, because apparently he had caught her off guard and nearly tripped her up by making a dive for her feet as soon as he entered the house. In this regard, he was old-fashioned, like the rest of his family. In any case, it was apparently his innate niceness and almost painful shyness that won our mother over.

Gitanjali said rather gleefully, 'He kept laughing nervously and saying, "It's a pleasure, aunty . . . eh-eh-heh" about everything. It was funny!'

I did not approve of this fun-making of my beau, even though she was doing a good job of imitating his embarrassed mumbling and it did sound as though it had been rather amusing. I snapped, 'Stop laughing. He's going to be your brother-in-law. What did *you* think of him?'

Her response was immediate and warm. 'Oh, I thought he was very sweet!' Honesty compelled her to add, 'But a bit mad, of course.'

I narrowed my eyes at my cell phone and opened my mouth to refute. But I realized that I found her a fairly accurate assessment and decided to just let it go at that. Thanking my little squirt of a sister for her frank opinion, I hung up and sighed.

He had done it. However, I suspected that winning over *his* parents was not going to be so easy for me.

For one, they were from a different generation altogether – Vijay was not only already much older than me, but he also happened to be the youngest of the four children, the imaginatively named quartet Rama-Shyama-Ajay-Vijay. He was the baby of the family. The one they were all the fondest of and referred to by the nickname 'Tunnu', which of course I found eminently laughable and derived great pleasure in teasing him about.

'But Ajay's pet name is Pappi,' he had pointed out vehemently.

I had doubled over in laughter all over again.

They were from Jaipur which, of course, was a very different kind of place from my hometown of Delhi. Also, they were strict vegetarian brahmins and had certain ideas about the kind of daughter-in-law they wanted. It was clear to me that these certain ideas were at odds with the person that I was. Vijay assured me that they were wonderful people, but I could see he too had his doubts about how easily they would accept me.

I brooded on this issue for a while – so far the only members of his family that I had met were

Ajay, Garima and his little nephew Praagya, nicknamed Pikki. Pikki was the son of Vijay's elder sister – the rather ominous sounding gynae-oncological surgeon, who I always thought of as Scary I Rama Didi. Little Pikki however was a chubby-cheeked little lad, whom I had first met two months ago when he had been sent to visit Vijay for a few days in Bangalore. During his stay, we had hung out a bit and he had heard me strumming on my guitar. Being a mere eight-year-old and therefore easily impressed, he was quite taken with me. In return, I thought of him as a particularly cute and intelligent child who exhibited an obvious good taste in people.

It later transpired that when Pikki went back home, the hot topic of discussion amongst the various concerned adults in the family was the screening of prospective brides for Vijay. Some nice shiny new brahmin girl from Jaipur was apparently one of the frontrunners, and young Pikki could not stop himself from piping up with a scornful challenge, 'But can she play the guitar?' This statement had the effect of mystifying his parents completely – and later, when we got to know about it, of amusing Vijay and doubling my admiration for young Pikki.

I now found myself feeling anxious as Vijay was travelling from Delhi to Jaipur to have the talk with his parents. Just a couple of years before, Ajay and Garima had been married through the conventional arranged route, and Vijay's parents were clearly expecting him to go the same way. Now that it was clear that we wanted to get hitched, he felt they needed to be primed accordingly, so that they would be happy about our decision.

I didn't realize at the time that Vijay had chosen to arm himself with a couple of things he had sneakily taken from my files as a first step towards winning over his parents. One was an unusual picture of me at my recent convocation from management school, where I was dressed in a sari – one of the few occasions I had consented to wear what I considered a particularly painful and wretched garment. I was standing straight and tall, smiling brightly right at the camera, my shoulder-length dark brown hair shampooed and blow-dried, looking slim and elegant in the light blue sari that my visiting mother had helped me don. In other words, I looked nothing like my usual skinny, grungy and hunched-up self.

The other item that he took to show his father was the resumé that I had prepared for placement season at B-School. It had been suitably crafted to impress any prospective employer with my various wonderful professional qualities. Little did I know that he would cunningly swipe it to impress his father, a retired professor of physics, who Vijay knew would be pleased to see my impeccable academic qualifications from the best institutes in the country. When I found out about this later, I shook my head in disbelief – the whole set-up seemed completely alien to me, almost surreal.

During his all-important visit to Jaipur to break the news about me, Vijay did all the priming and question-fielding and truth-stretching required, smoothly assuring his parents and elder sisters that I would fit very well into the family and they would see that for themselves when they met me.

I had pounced on him for all the details once he returned from this trip, and had been listening with great interest to his account of his conversation with them when he reached this point. My voice came out in an unnaturally high-pitched squeak. 'Meet them? Already?'

Two weeks later, I was a nervous wreck as we flew out from Bangalore to Jaipur for this fateful meeting. As luck would have it, the food on our Indian Airlines flight was so singularly stale that the non-vegetarian meal that I consumed to fortify myself caused me to develop an immediate and severe case of food poisoning. This was the second instance in the last few weeks that my stomach had failed me, the bitter irony of it being that prior to meeting Vijay, this had never happened to me. Most of the next few hours passed by in a blur, but I was aware of a few things – high fever and giddiness; the concerned look on Vijay's face; the memory of how he had acted when I had fallen ill earlier, and

consequently a vague sort of worry at the back of my mind that the ghost of Florence Nightingale might re-enter his body and he would start to feed me his special, vomit-inducing combination Horlicks, papaya and grated ginger.

He somehow managed to get me into a taxi when we landed at Jaipur, and on the way to his parents' home, I kept deliriously repeating in a conversational tone, 'Honey, you know what? Your family is going to absolutely hate me!' For some reason, this thought struck me as pretty funny and I added, 'Wheee! Ha ha!'

'No, no, of course they won't,' Vijay assured me a few times, his voice uncertain.

As our taxi wove its way towards his home, he said, 'Er, you remember what we discussed about speaking only in Hindi to Mummyji, right?'

'Of course,' I retorted dizzily. 'I can do Hindi. Hindi is my mother's tongue.' Then a feeling of sudden panic hit me and I demanded, 'Quick! How do you say namaste in Hindi?'

Vijay said something in response, but at this point, I fell asleep against his shoulder.

I woke up just as we reached their house, a nice little one-storeyed grey structure in an old colony of Jaipur, situated opposite a well-maintained park. I had, as a concession to the big occasion, worn a salwar-kameez. I was completely overwhelmed. There were many people milling around; I had never done this sort of thing before; I had no idea what to expect and felt like my every move was being watched and judged. On top of this, the fever seemed to be peaking and I was dimly aware of the fact that I wasn't thinking or speaking very clearly.

It was a crowded house because Vijay's sisters and Ajay, along with their respective spouses, had also landed up to grace the occasion. Vijay had told me that they always greeted each other with the younger people touching the feet of the older lot, and I was the youngest person around for miles. This meant that, as soon as I walked in, there were many pairs of feet for me to bend over and touch respectfully. This was also something I had never done before and had only seen in movies, but I just followed Vijay's lead and once I got into the flow, it felt nice and theatrical. 'Pau laagu Maaji!' I thought, as I touched my prospective mother-in-law's feet. 'Pau laagu Bauji,' I murmured as I touched Papaji's feet. In a fit of enthusiasm, I found myself bending over to grab the feet of everybody in my sight, being stopped by Vijay just in the nick of time from also embracing those of Murugan, the other family servant, who stood looking on curiously, somewhere at the periphery of all the mayhem.

After this, I smiled beatifically at everybody around me throughout the remainder of the visit and answered all the questions directed at me. I remembered and followed Vijay's advice that one of the keys to Mummyji's heart would be to converse with her in Hindi. She was a small lady, and she sat next to me on the sofa, observing me keenly with unexpectedly striking grey eyes through her spectacles. All her children were above average height, clearly having taken after Papaji in this regard. Just to make some conversation, I was about to remark on how amazing it was that four such tall strapping adults could have been produced by such a tiny being as her, but thought the better of it. More accurately, by the time I finished doing an acceptable translation of the thought in my head into Hindi without sounding hopelessly vulgar, I had forgotten all about it.

Now, Mummyji was saying something to me which I had missed. I concentrated hard and realized she had just asked me whether my elder brother was already married. I was dazed, but I knew the answer to this one. Giving her what I hoped was a winning smile, I informed her in no uncertain terms, 'Yes. Aur Bhabhiji bhi bahut acchi hain – bilkul meri tarah!' There was a moment of silence and then the whole room burst into laughter, while I looked around and blinked at everybody in a confused but good-natured way.

Vijay had informed them that I was very ill and therefore not my usual dazzling self. Either way

despite the fever – or perhaps because of it – his family accepted our decision to marry. A month later my mother came over with me and Vijay to Jaipur for a visit to meet them, and a date towards late February was fixed.

My mother had been a tad indignant when, towards the end of her visit, Papaji voiced his request that there be no alcohol and non-vegetarian food at our wedding. ‘What do they think, we are some kind of barbarians or something? Of course there will be no alcohol and non-veg food at the wedding,’ she said when we were back in Delhi. I couldn’t quite muster up the courage to point out that the conversation was happening over the carcass of a delicious but unfortunate chicken and a glass of wine. I was always up for a good debate, but not with my mother, who was a worse loser of argument than even I was.

In any case, I was just happy and relieved that both sides had been successfully convinced to approve of our impending marriage. Also, one of my newfound principles in life: You don’t argue with your mother, especially when she is generously springing the cash for your wedding. At least, not until after the wedding.

Marrying a Sharma

The wedding was a fairly low-key affair at the Radisson hotel in Delhi. It would perhaps have been a little higher-key if all of my friends had shown up, but unfortunately, a lot of them were scattered across the country and worldwide, and apparently the notice that I gave them – ranging from about two weeks to five days before the wedding, depending on who I remembered when – was not good enough for many of them to make the trip. Instead, they sent their love and best wishes for the both of us with a few choice abuses just for me. The argument I used in my defense, that I had never been married before and it was all very new to me, did not cut much ice with them.

As always, blood proved to be thicker than friends and most of my family, also scattered all over the world, *did* make it for the ceremonies – perhaps also due to the fact that my mother had handled their invitations and had apparently informed them about a month in advance. So my favourite cousin Mini had flown in from Australia and was flashing her dimpled smiles all over the place; and my brother Abhimanyu and his wife Vandna had also landed up, all the way from England.

My make-up was done by a distant relative whom we called Mrignaina Mausi, who was a make-up artist by profession. She had been overly enthusiastic, caking on layers and layers of make-up on my face and sticking about sixty-seven pins into some sort of a fake bun on my head. I was itching to get away from her expert hands and was fervently wishing that this distant relative would make herself distant again, but just as I was on the verge of tearing out of the room screaming, she said, ‘There! All done!’

I looked at myself and I had to admit that she had done a really good job. I looked quite stunning, probably wouldn’t go out to the market like this, but for my wedding, it seemed just about right. My pale-pink and silver sari, which I had insisted on as opposed to the usual red or maroon varieties, shimmered delicately around my person. The fake hairbun and make-up didn’t look half bad either. My mother took one look at me and a little tear started to form in the corner of her eye, but she stopped herself from making any sort of impulsive display by somehow finding a stray hair and tucking it behind my ear in a business-like manner. I just grinned at her cheekily, for once refraining from protesting at this gesture. It was okay. I understood how she felt.

It was finally time to make my appearance in the wedding hall. I waited outside the door to the hall, concentrating on not tripping on my sari. Vandna was accompanying me, and just as the door opened, she whispered to me, ‘There is no need to smile so much.’ This remark confused me for a moment, considering that this was supposed to be the happiest day of my life and all that, but I quickly deciphered it to mean that she thought I should be a bit more of the coy, blushing bride. I obeyed her as I entered the hall, and managed a fairly sombre expression, although it was quite an effort when I caught sight of Vijay.

He had been refusing to behave like the typical groom and had been wandering all around the large hall, greeting old friends and long-lost family members – much to the consternation of Rama diya who had a very strong sense of propriety and was unsuccessfully pursuing him through the crowd in order to inform him that he should really be sitting still on one of the two chairs on the platform.

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