

The Wall

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I waited well into the dinner before dropping the news.

“I think I am ready for marriage.”

I, Shafi Ahmed, a Nuclear Physicist, worked as a researching scientist for a reputed company. At 30 I was still single and lived with my parents, as I had all my life.

It was a regular family dinner, the only meal in the day when we sat around our oversized dinner table and ate together. Emigrated from Dhaka several decades ago, my parents diligently practiced some traditions over the years that they deemed as part of our Bangladeshi culture. One of them was, obviously, having dinner together. Not my favorite time, but obedience was supposedly another sought out tradition.

My dad, a reputed businessman, was picking out the tiny bones of a piece of hilsa - a popular fish back home that we bought frozen from local Bangladeshi groceries, his both hands occupied in the task, threw me a quick glance before concentrating back on the bones.

“Finally! Your mother has been waiting for this moment so long. She’ll find a beautiful bride for you.”

Now, that was part of tradition as well. In my community, not strictly but preferably, children were expected to allow their parents to arrange their marriages. It wasn’t as bad as it sounded, considering the long living marriages, mostly happy, that most of our parents had.

My mother - kind hearted, soft-spoken, couldn’t-be-more-naïve - looked at me with exploding eyes. “Really? I thought you didn’t like marriage.”

“I changed my mind.”

The college going twin sisters – Poly and Dolly – exclaimed in unison, “You are the best, bhaiya! Finally doing the right thing! We’ll have a sister-in-law in the house! It’s going to be so much fun!”

Dad defeated the mighty fish bones. His eyes glistened in success.

“You are not going to change your mind again, are you?”

“No, no. I am determined this time.”

“Great! Your mother was losing sleep over this. Now dear, go crazy.”

“Don’t be silly.” Mom shyly said. “I already have my eyes set on somebody.”

“Not Choudhury’s ugly daughter?” Dad asked.

“Are you nuts? Who would want her? I was talking about Selim Sahib’s daughter.”

“Rita apu?” Poly-Dolly asked.

“Yes! What a wonderful girl! Pretty, nice, smart, educated.” Mom dreamily said.

“I like somebody.” I muttered.

Mom turned anemic. “Oh! Who is she? You never told us anything about her.”

“I met her just recently”

“Oh! Who is she?” Mom was impatient.

“Her name is Jessica Ganga.”

“Race?” Dad asked, laboring hard not to show his emotions.

“Does it matter?” I let the words slip through my lips.

“May be not. I still want to know.”

“Canadian.”

“Don’t get smart on me.” Dad raised his voice considerably.

“Caribbean. “

“Black?” Mom sweated.

“Is that a problem, mom?” I tried not to sound rude. The last time I raised my voice at her she cried for two days, didn’t

talk to me for one whole week.

"I didn't say that. But you know how people appreciates light skin in our community." Mom spoke her heart. She looked worried.

"I guess a Caucasian would work for you." I said, perhaps a little too rudely than I wanted.

"I was thinking Rita. You should see her. She is so light skinned!" Mom was dreamy again.

"You should look at your own daughters." I had to point out. "They are not exactly milky."

None of us were, except mom.

"Shame on you, bhaiya! How can you speak like that about us?"

They can be very aggressive when they wanted. I surrendered.

Dad didn't like Rita, I knew. He showed some interest in Jessica.

"What does her father do? Where do they live?"

"Her father passed away last year. I never asked about his profession. Jessica lives in Ajax."

"She works?"

"Part time."

"Who handles the finances?"

"She does. Her mother has Alzheimer. She can't work."

"Any siblings?"

"A brother who is in the army. He is married with kids."

"What kind of work is she doing?"

I cleared my voice. "Waitress. In a bar."

Dad furrowed his eyebrows deeply before jumping out of his chair with disbelief. "What!"

"Are you out of your mind?" Mom was equally embarrassed.

"Gosh! "My sisters gasped.

"Why are you guys acting like that? She is not a showgirl or anything." It was not unexpected but I had to act.

“What’s the difference?” Dad displayed four familiar wrinkles on his forehead. “At least that pays way better.”

Mom was the first one to calm down. “How does she look?”

“Don’t think Bollywood, Hollywood.”

“Complexion?” Mom hesitantly asked, fearing my wrath.

“Brown. Light brown. Kind of like us.”

“What is she studying?” That was dad.

“Office administration, in a community college.”

“Why couldn’t she find a better job?” Mom was genuinely concerned.

“What’s wrong with her current job? She makes good money.”

Mom remained silent as she played with her food.

Dad sat down, took a deep breath. “Forget about her. I’ll speak to Rita’s dad tomorrow. It will be a good match.”

“I plan to marry Jessica.” I braved.

Poly-Dolly usually favored me. Not this time. “Come on, bhaiya. She is not that bright!”

I ignored them. They could be nerve wrecking annoying sometimes.

Dad gave me one of his famous fiery looks. “Any comments on that?”

“Her circumstances were not exactly favorable. She is a smart girl.” I tried to keep it in perspective.

“Don’t you want to consider our position in the society?”

“I don’t see anything to be embarrassed of.”

“You don’t? We’ll become a common joke among our peers. They would laugh at our back. Just last month my business partner Akmal got his son married to a lady doctor. If nothing else you could at least consider higher education.”

“Perhaps you need to re-evaluate the company you keep. Friends don’t laugh at your back.”

“Don’t you lecture me! You know what I mean. We’ll have little choice but to avoid gatherings. Don’t you realize how

humiliating it will be?" There was an urge in my dad's tone, almost like pleading. This wasn't something I was used to see of him. I sort of enjoyed it.

"We don't plan to stay in this house. Nobody would even see us. You'll be fine."

Dad gave me a scorching look before stomping into his bedroom. I knew he was going to call mom's big brother, Kasem, his mentor and friend.

"Kashem? Can you stop by A.S.A.P? Very urgent. Your nephew is planning to ruin us. He is talking about marrying a waitress from a bar! Either you stop him or bring a strong nylon rope for me. I'll end this life...."

"This is not good." Mom coldly said.

Poly-Dolly rolled their eyes in disgust.

Uncle Kashem had a reputation for being very prompt. He lived at the east end of Scarborough but managed to show up in Richmond Hill, where we lived, a forty plus kilometer distance, in less than thirty minutes.

He came in with his trademark big smile. "Don't worry. I'll set everything right."

I knew things were going to get down slope from here. He was notorious for that. To make things even worse he brought his wife Shahina and my father's younger sister Bina and her husband Jafor, who lived near him. Standing before the curious audience dad went berserk. He threw his arms in the air, turned his volume high and issued a fiery speech – he would rather cut his only son into pieces and feed the pieces to the about-to-be extinct Royal Bengal Tiger then to allow this unacceptable marriage.

Uncle Kashem broke into laughter. "Brother, you haven't changed a bit. Don't you get a simple joke? Do you think our Shafi would do something so stupid? Don't you know your own son? He is like the smartest kid in the family. He knows what is good for him. He was just pulling your leg. Ha...ha...ha..."

Uncle Jafor, a full professor in a reputed university, was

not a total loss. "What's so wrong with this girl?" He thoughtfully said. "She is studying, working. Sounds good."

Dad snapped. "You have a son old enough for marriage. Why don't you take her?"

"Well, I see no harm in it. If my son agrees we can pursue."

I had to step in. Didn't like the way it was heading. "There's no need for that uncle Jafor. I am getting married to her."

Aunt Bina was a true copy of dad, only belonged in the opposite gender. She and dad shared same temperament as well. "Don't be a foolhardy." She barked.

"I love her. I told her I want to marry her. I can't back off now." I tried to explain my situation to avoid the onslaught.

Uncle Kashem broke into another laughter. "So, what? I did the same with several girls before getting married to your aunt. What's the big deal?"

His wife, Shahina, chuckled. "Don't you lie. You were shy like a teenage girl."

They knew each other and had a mild affair of the hearts. We have heard that story too many times.

Poly-Dolly loved anything that smelled like love. They giggled. "Come on aunt Shahina, tell us more."

"Be quiet." Dad yelled at the twins. "We didn't gather here to listen to some prehistoric love affair. Let's talk about my son."

Uncle Kashem relaxed into his chair. "Give me few days. I'll find you the prettiest angel. We'll get this kid married by next Friday."

Mom interrupted. "There's no need to look. I already have one. Selim Sahib's daughter - Rita. We like her very much."

Aunt Shahina frowned. "Really? How much do you know about her? I heard she had several boyfriends over the years."

"What?" Mom must have missed a series of heart beats. "Who told you that?"

“Does it matter? I myself saw her with a boy once. They were – you know – intimate, in a mall. Kissing-issing!”

“Oh god!” Mom shrieked. “And I was visualizing her as the deity of my household. What is happening to our kids? We never dared to do anything like this when we were young.”

“Forget about Rita.” Uncle Kashem declared. “Allow me to find you a daughter-in-law. She will be everything that you dreamed of. Top class.”

Mom sighed deeply. “Do what you think best, bhaiya.”

I noticed aunt Shahina smiling at me. She was the type who said less and did more. When in trouble she could be a big help. I recollected some of my courage. “You guys should at least check Jessica out.”

“Forget Jessica. She has no social status. Your family has a respectable position in the community. Don’t forget that. There’s nothing to see here.” Dad was quick to dismiss.

“Don’t be so narrow-minded dad.” I objected.

Aunt Bina was quick to lose her temper as well. “I am yet to meet another rascal like you.” She snarled. “She is nobody. Why are you so determined to marry her? Are you out of your mind?”

“Who cares what he wants?” Dad declared boldly.

“Kashem, we’ll have to get him married tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? What about the bride? Where am I going to find a bride at this hour? Do you expect me to go door to door and look for a suitable bride? Ha...ha...ha...”

“Stop! Don’t laugh like a bed bug.” Dad snapped.

“Brother, you are turning into a genius. You even figured out how the bed bugs laugh! Do they really laugh?”

Aunt Bina had a different idea going on in her fertile mind. “My daughter Daisy likes him a lot.” She said. “She is pretty and smart. Why don’t we get the two of them tie the knots?”

I grimaced. We grew up together like siblings. What was wrong with this lady?

Uncle Kasem readily objected. "What do you take us for? Your daughter is no better than Rita. Since high school she must have changed three boyfriends. There's barely anybody who doesn't know about her romantic extravaganzas."

"Come on Kasem bhaiya, boyfriends are not husbands. Who cares if she had three or thirty?" Aunt Bina reasoned.

"Why not Rita then?"

Nobody replied. Mom said, "What other choices we have?"

Uncle Kasem cleared his voice. "Well, why aren't you considering my daughter Shila. Go find a girl like her. A living goddess."

There was a momentary silence in the room.

"But when I proposed you last time you got really mad at me." Mom was truly surprised.

"Forget about what I did last time. When almighty wants something who are we to object? Let's get it settled right now."

Gosh! Were these people nuts! Shila discussed her love interests with me. That's the type of closeness we had.

Aunt Bina strongly objected. "How is Daisy any less than her? Shila isn't half as pretty as my Daisy."

Uncle Kasem went all ballistic. "What are you talking about? Do you know how many guys goofs around just to see Shila smile?"

"Smile, my foot." Aunt Bina chewed out the words. "Such shovel teeth!"

Mom liked Shila. She objected. "Don't be silly Bina. She has perfectly good teeth."

Uncle Jafor agreed. "True. Such a nice girl. Whenever I go she makes me her especial barbeque chicken."

"Shut up!" Aunt Bina barked at him. "We are talking about two lives and he is reminiscing barbeque chicken! Listen bhaiya, Shafi and Daisy would make a great couple. There's no need to get out of our own family."

This got mom going. She furiously said, "Why, what's

wrong with our family? Do you know my grandfather's grandfather was a king?"

Poly-Dolly readily supported. "Yes, aunt Bina, his name was King Shofed Ali Shorder. We even saw his picture. So cute! Oh my god!"

"We also have dozens of such good-for-nothing kings in our family tree." Aunt Bina slapped in the air, disdainfully. "We are not here to discuss that. Shafi is getting married with Daisy. That's final."

Mom was trembling in anger. She shouted, "Never. Shafi will get married with Shila."

"Let bhaiya decide."

"Oh well!" dad scrambled for appropriate words. "What do you want me to say?"

Aunt Shahina softly said, "Let's all calm down for a minute. Marriage is not a game."

"Of course not." Dad scratched his head. He feared his little sister. "What do you say Kashem? Who is better? Shila or Daisy?"

"Daisy doesn't even come close."

"How dare you?" Aunt Bina lashed out. "Whole Shila doesn't stand a chance against a single toe of Daisy."

"Watch it Bina!" Uncle Kashem wasn't stepping back.

"Don't you threaten me. You think we don't know what you are up to? Your eyes are on my brother's property, especially now that his real estate business has picked up. Can you deny that?"

Uncle Kasem jumped up from his seat. "How dare you say that? Do I have any less?"

Uncle Jafor begged, "Please stop. This is going too far."

Aunt Bina threw her arms in the air. "Don't you worry. I know how to deal with thugs like him. "

Dad nervously said, "There's no need to fight over this."

None of the two warring parties paid any attention to him.

I had no clue where this was heading to. I stood there helplessly. It was remarkable to notice how a simple situation could turn into a feud. Aunt Shaina was looking at me. As I met her eyes she signaled me out of the room. I quietly slipped out to the porch. Moments later she joined me there. She was all smiles.

“Son, when did you get married?”

“Three days ago.”

“Where is Jessica?”

“In her house.”

“I don’t think you can bring her here. Not now.” She thoughtfully said.

“I just wanted their blessings.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen too soon. You realize that.”

“What should I do?”

“What else? Just go on with your life. You have a good job. You two will do great by yourself.”

“She is such a terrific girl! She would win you in seconds.”

“I know that. If she was any less you wouldn’t go for her. Now, get out of here. Once they stop fighting they are going to look for you. Spend a few days away. When things calm down come back to get your stuff. I’ll manage these old kids. It will be okay.”

“What about mom and dad?”

“Worry about them later. Parents loves to have opportunities to forgive their children. You just have to come and beg for it. Now go on. I’ll handle them for now.”

I touched her toes three times, an age-old Indian tradition to show respect. “Pray for us Aunt.”

“You can count on that. Go now. Quick.”

I left home empty handed. The mansion, the wealth, the expensive lifestyle that I got so used to, all stayed behind. But yet I felt so good. I thought of Jessica, drew picture of a happy

home, a healthy cute baby in our lives – my heart flooded with immense pleasure. As I walked to the curb where my car was parked I turned back to get a glimpse of Aunt Shahina, who still stood on the porch, smiling. Behind her now stood my mom, grim faced, concerned, loose end of her sari waved like a flag in a sudden gust of wind, as if to say, “Go on son. Break the walls.”