

# Where Do I Belong?

*Where Do I Belong?*

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

# 1

**S**EVERAL ROADS WERE blocked, preventing all traffic to pass through, as they were reserved exclusively for *Kavadias*, the Lord Shiva devotees who were trekking thousands of miles with holy water on their backs. For this reason it took Rina six hours rather than the usual two to reach the International airport in Delhi from her father's hometown, Mohana, Faridabad. Moreover, due to a powerful bomb explosion which had claimed several lives and left scores injured in the city the airport had been put under high security alert. There were tight security checks everywhere – even at the entrance of the airport, where people were crowded in a semblance of a queue to get their passports and other possessions scrutinized. Rina stood leaning forward on her cart, awaiting her turn to enter the airport with her passport in hand. People thronged around her. She could feel the crowd behind her pushing her. But what bothered her most was the oppressively sultry weather. The night air was potent with heat and humidity. The sweat was pouring off her, as if she had a dip in a river.

Six of her relatives had come to the airport to see her off even in this intense atmosphere. Her uncle and aunt had driven her from Mohana to the airport. Her cousin Abha, a local resident of New Delhi had come along with her husband, son, and father-in-law. They all stood surrounding her, sharing last-minute stories, taking every opportunity to speak to her with happy expressions. But they were anxious. This time she had come all by herself. So her relatives were feeling more responsible towards her. Once she entered the airport and boarded the SAS flight they would relax.

After what seemed like an eternity it was Rina's turn to enter the airport. Her relatives squealed abruptly: "Oh, Rina, it was so nice to have you here."

"You brought freshness in our dull life."

"Come again next year."

"Do come during winter. Winters are good here."

Rina nodded, and said hurriedly: "I want to come to India every year." She didn't have the luxury to hug them or say a proper good-bye. The grim-faced security guards were standing in front of her, ushering her along, and a restless crowd was nearly pushing behind her. Waving an emotional farewell to her relatives and getting her passport and other possessions checked by the security guards she entered the airport.

The gust of the cool, air-conditioned air was invigorating. She sighed in relief and felt her body come to life again. Looking for the Scandinavian Airlines economy class check-in counter she joined the queue. It took her nearly an hour to register her ticket and luggage. But the wait inside the airport, Rina felt, was definitely more bearable than the one outside. After collecting her boarding pass she marched towards the immigration, where she spent forty minutes. Then, she had a long wait at the security-check. When her turn came a dark and stubby female security guard frisked her. The combination of her tight khaki trousers and buttoned up shirt with the big red *bindi* on her forehead gave her

an extremely comical appearance. After a long thorough check-up she declared, “There you go, baby! Have a nice flight.”

“Baby! India *bhi!*” Rina mumbled in annoyance. She hurriedly picked up her bag and came to the departure lounge – cast a glance at the clock dangling from the high ceiling by two rods. The SAS flight was at 1:15 and the clock read 23: 25. So she had made it on time. The boarding had not started yet. Drawing a sigh of relief she settled down in a chair and looked around.

The airport was full. She examined all the seats and their occupants. Some were reading, some were having snacks, and some were working on their laptops, determined to put the time to some good use. Some were staring blankly as if no passenger, no aeroplane, no airport existed, just a vast expanse of time. The fatigue and drowsiness Rina felt was reflected in everyone’s face. She shut her eyes, thinking of the first thing she would do when she arrived home – take a long leisurely bath, and then sleep. Suddenly someone came near her and sat beside her. She opened her eyes, and noticed the person had chosen to sit next to her despite the fact that there were two more empty chairs down the row. He restlessly rocked back and forth in his seat, a sheaf of papers clutched tightly in his hand. Rina turned to have a good look at him. The man was young and stocky like a sportsman. He did not look tired, no, though he was restless, his eyes were alert and he seemed excited and energized, in contrast to the rest of the passengers. Rina smiled.

“Excuse me-” her smile encouraged him to get into a conversation with her, “Are you going to Copenhagen?”

“Yes.”

“Me too! Are you studying there... or working?”

“Studying – actually I live in Denmark- with my family.”

“Oh... How long have you been living in Denmark?”

“Since my birth.”

“I see, so you are Danish!”

“Yeah - kind of.”

Studying her face with some fascination he appraised, “Well, you look Indian.”

“Well, so far scientists have not discovered that living in a different country, in a different time zone can mutate your genes. My genetic-line is Indian, although I live in Europe.”

“What are you studying there?”

“Biotechnology Engineering.”

“I see! Quite interesting!”

“What’re you going to Copenhagen for?” Rina asked him.

He smiled, a dimple appeared on his cheek. He had a beautiful smile, she thought.

“Well, do you know this centre?” he asked holding out a paper to her.

She took it from him and looked it over. It was a letter head of an organisation: ‘KBC Traeningscentre, Hedemrksvej 17, 2620 Alberslund, Denmark.’

He watched her study the paper “Albertslund is one of the suburbs in Copenhagen, but I don’t know anything about KBC Traeningscentre,” she said handing the paper back to him.

“I’ve enrolled myself for the Theology graduate programme.”

“Oh, sounds interesting. What exactly is it?”

“KBC is a Christian study centre, related to Lutheran Theological Seminary. I’m going there to study and research Christianity.”

“Are you Christian?” she asked instantaneously.

“Not by birth.”

Rina’s eyebrows lifted in question.

For a moment he seemed to hesitate, and then continued “Actually, I’m in the midst of a transformation in my life. I’ve changed my religion. I’ve become Christian from Hindu. My name is Hari - Hari Kumar,” he held out his hand for a hand shake.

Rina did not have a choice but to shake hands with him. “I’m Rina,” she mumbled. Giving him a look of appraisal, she thought, conversion from one religion to another does take place in the world.

“Why have you abandoned your Hindu religion?” she asked him, instantly regretting her direct query.

“For a new wisdom, for a new way of life.”

“I’ve heard that Christian missionaries are engaged in converting people in India since long. They target the vulnerable people from lower castes who are poor and uneducated. They lure them to change their religion with petty temptations. Poor people are easy to be manipulated,” she said with an edge to her voice.

“Jesus!” he screeched, “For that the society, and not the missionaries, are to be blamed. People convert themselves when they don’t feel secure with their present faith or situation. It provides them with some hope.” He paused, and then said with a curt smile, “You seem to know an awful lot about your ancestors’ country. Have you heard about the incident; ‘Five Men = One Cow’ ”

She shook her head no, but figured that it must be some kind of bizarre incident.

Hari, her new acquaintance explained to her, “In India, the cow is considered a sacred animal by many Hindus and killing a cow is considered a terrible crime by some of them. In the state of Haryana five *Dalit* youths, from so-called low castes, were slaughtering a cow who they claimed to have Mad Cow Disease. Some Hindu fundamentalists saw them and spread the word in the neighbouring villages. A good crowd gathered and started beating them, shouting slogans in reverence for Mother Cow - *Go mata ki jai*. The poor five *Dalits* were killed by the mob.”

Rina’s eyes widened at the story. “Wow, that’s brutal. An animal’s life was equated with five human lives!” She exclaimed.

“It sounds so absurd and ridiculous. Right? And these bombings and shootings...all because of religion and power. Here your religion can kill you.”

“Well, what you are saying is true but there is some bad in all religions. Not only in the Hindu one. I mean, what you are talking about happened once and probably in an Indian village. The modern India does not react that way. Oh! And these days many Hindus even eat beef.”

She took a glance at him and saw he had nothing to say. But she found his talks interesting. She wanted to continue her conversation with him, but the SAS flight departure had been announced. Both of them got up, gathered their belongings, and shuffled with other passengers to the boarding area.

As the aeroplane soared in the air, Rina closed her eyes and began to recap her journey to India: the places she visited there; the adventures she had; the food she ate; the

moments and events she shared with her relatives. Their conversation, their sense of humour, their way of expressing and their style of dressing all had amused her. Everything was so different in India - the climate, the people, and the infrastructure. She had felt herself an alien there. She began to think about Denmark.

*Is she Danish?*

*No*, her heart replied.

Ever since she was a child her family kept reminding her: *You are Indian. Your Danish passport is just a piece of paper that gives you conveniences to live in this country.*

It was ironic. She was a Danish citizen, spoke Danish fluently, moved freely in the Danish society where she had many Danish friends, yet she never considered herself a Dane. On the other hand, whenever she visited India, she never felt Indian.

*'Hvor du kommer fra?'* People in Denmark would often ask her.

*'Indien.'*

She was surprised when she encountered by the same question in India – ‘where do you come from?’

‘India.’

People in India sniggered at her answer.

“Yes, I am from India. I speak Hindi,” she argued.

“But your accent.... The way you speak... We mean where do you live?”

She would reply, defeated, “Denmark!”

“Where is this country? Never heard of it.”

Those who had some knowledge of the world would say, “Oh, Denmark. It is famous for milk and cheese, right?”

“Have you ordered a Hindu meal?” the flight attendant was asking her, with a food tray in his hand. She opened her eyes and replied in the affirmative. Her mind still occupied by past occurrences, she opened the tray in front of her and let the flight attendant place the food tray on it. Her encounter with that man, at the airport intruded into her thoughts. *What was his name? Oh yes! Hari.*

She had a window seat on the right side of the aisle and he was sitting two rows ahead of her in the middle section. She saw him reading a guidebook about Denmark. From time to time she observed him. A little later she noticed that he was not feeling well. It was probably the first time he was flying and travelling abroad. She saw him using the brown paper bag and going to the lavatory frequently. Flight attendants came to see him a couple of times. He had not even eaten the food. She felt sorry for him. *Poor guy!*

They remained air bound for exactly seven hours and fifty minutes and when they reached Copenhagen the sun was blazing in the sky. The local time was 07:00 a.m.

There were two queues at the immigration counter – one for European Union citizens and the other for other nationals. Since she had a Danish passport she finished the formalities at the EU counter quickly. But Hari got stuck at the Non-EU counter. The immigration official checked his passport and other documents very minutely and began to interrogate him.

He was already feeling sick, and all this questioning made him feel very nervous. He gave Rina a piteous look. *Please help me!*

Rina could not go, leaving him alone. Standing past the immigration counter she waited for him to clear the immigration. After a thorough and lengthy check up, which took more than an hour, his passport was stamped and returned to him. Both of them sighed in relief and went to the baggage claim area. The luggage conveyer belts had stopped moving round. Their luggage was lying on the floor near the belt. They loaded their luggage on the carts and came out.

Nirmal Sharma, upset because of the delay, had been pacing in the hall outside the custom area. He looked relieved as soon as he saw his daughter but asked her with some irritation, “The SAS flight had landed long ago. Why did you take so much time to come out?”

“Hi Pop! I’m back,” Rina yelled out and hugged her father affectionately. Nirmal realised that he was seeing his daughter after five weeks; he should not pose a query on her like that. He was embarrassed. He caressed her cheeks, planted a huge kiss on her forehead, patted her and said proudly, “You have made it! We were so scared to let you go to India alone, and then, when we heard of bomb blasts in Delhi... we got all the more scared. But you went to India all alone and came back safe and sound. *Shabas!*”

She had celebrated her twentieth birthday, but her parents still treated her as if she was a little girl. She hated this. “What do you think of me and India? she retorted. “First of all I’m not a kid, and secondly India is not a jungle where I would have got lost.”

“Yes, yes, *beta*, India is not a jungle, but it’s massive and mysterious for outsiders. Anything can happen there with anyone.”

“True, sir! It’s a crazy country,” Hari approved of his statement. Nirmal looked at him closely, surprised. Hari tried to summon a smile.

Rina introduced him to her father. Nirmal realized now that his daughter did not come out alone from the airport. However both the men exchanged greetings politely.

“Does your Mission know that you are arriving today?” Rina asked Hari.

He was baffled and could not offer an answer.

“Aren’t they hosting any academic orientation for new and returning students?”

“They had it on 31<sup>st</sup> July. But I could not get my visa by then,” he replied.

“You better call and inform them about your arrival,” she suggested.

Nirmal immediately fished his cell phone out from his pocket and held it out to him. “Thank you,” Hari muttered taking the phone from him in his trembling hands. Slowly and carefully he pressed the numbers, which he knew by heart.

He heard a Danish voice on the phone: *’God Dag! Du har ringet til Koebenhavns Bibletraenings Centre! Alle linjer er desvaeaerre optaget. Vent venligst! Vent venligst! venligst!’*

“I don’t understand this language,” he said and immediately pushed the phone into Rina’s hands. She took charge of the conversation.

“A student from India?” the mission receptionist exclaimed.

“Yes, his name is Hari Kumar.”

“Haarhi...”

Rina spelled his name: HARI KUMAR

“There is no such name in our record,” said the receptionist after checking in her computer.

“Maybe there is someone who might know something about him. He has your mission’s papers, including an invitation letter,” Rina said to her.

“Wait a minute; I’ll check with my colleagues.”

“Yes, please ask them.”

“What’s his name again?”

“Hari Kumar.”

“Haarhi Khumaar?” She said with a thick accent

“Yes.”

“*Et oejeblik*- Just a moment.”

Her voice was replaced by some spiritual melody on the phone. Rina waited. Nirmal and Hari also waited. Hari’s shoulders had slumped a little and he had been watching expressions on Rina’s face anxiously. The receptionist came back on the line after several minutes to say, “We have no records or information about him. I’m sorry, I can’t help you.”

After a pause, she added, “Why don’t you check at Gothersgade office. I think they will be able to help you”

“Can I have the phone number, please?”

“Yes. Are you ready to note it down?”

Putting her hand over the mouthpiece Rina said to Hari and her father, “A paper please.” Hari immediately went through his handbag, pulled out a paper, a pen, and handed them to her.

Rina scribbled the phone numbers on the paper and after saying a quick “*tak*” disconnected the line. “They have no information about you,” she told Hari. “They didn’t even know that a student from India is expected to come to their centre.”

Hari’s face sagged. He began to feel so sick and nervous that it was difficult for him to stand straight. To prevent himself from falling, he held on to a shaft in the passageway.

“But they suggested that we should call another office on this number,” Rina said to give him a boost.

Nirmal watched Hari. His face full of sorrow. Holding the shaft he was standing defeated, and drooped with fatigue. Nirmal sympathised with him. Hari reminded him of his early days in Denmark, when he had come here for the first time from India- how stricken and disoriented he was; how alien the things were for him; and how he had to struggle to rehabilitate himself. Staring at Hari, he suggested to his daughter in a soft tone, “Rina, let’s take him home first. He can take a shower and eat something. He’ll get some life. Then, we’ll find out who has invited him and where he has to go.”

Rina looked at Hari for his reaction – he nodded, albeit a bit reluctantly.

The air outside was refreshing and the breeze ruffled their hair and cooled their brains. Throwing a glance in the clean environs Rina murmured, ‘No matter where you go, there is no place like home...I belong here.’ They all walked towards the parking lot. Hari let himself be led by them. Nirmal had brought her Suzuki, which was her twentieth

birthday present from her parents. It was a second-hand, one-decade-old model which they had negotiated from an Indian friend for DKK 10, 000. Despite that Rina was very proud and happy to have her own car.

“Hi, Suzuki!” Rina said patting her car affectionately.

“Do you want to drive?” her father asked her, offering the keys.

“Me!” she said, somewhat surprised. But the next moment she got tempted to drive. She’d not driven any automobile in India for five weeks and was longing to drive her cute little car. Taking the car keys from her father’s hand she opened the front door, and eased in behind the wheel. After five weeks the touch of her car felt nice to her. Nirmal climbed in and sat beside her. Hari almost collapsed on the rear seat.

“Did you have good time in India?” her father asked her.

“Yes, a wonderful time! It was simply great. All our relatives live in lovely houses with lots of servants.” Rina smiled as she began to reminisce.

“It’s very cheap to hire domestic servants there. But that does not make them happy. Does it?”

“I don’t know about that. But they are affectionate, though - particularly Dadima. She kept feeding me. All the love she feels for you, she has lavished upon me. Oh! But the weather was horrible! The sun was exploding in the sky...urgh...”

“When you went there during summer time what had you expected - snowfall?” Nirmal said teasingly.

Rina rolled her eyes at her dad’s statement. “Well, I’ve experienced warm weather before in Italy and Spain but it was something else in India. It was like a large hot oven. I’m surprised that Indian summer is so different than Danish summer. But never mind. I saw a lot of India this time! I visited so many amazing places. I got so many amazing things done there – a body massage, facial, and I got some dresses of my exact body measurements sewn too. Tailors and beauty parlours are so cheap there-ah, it really felt like a lavish life.”

Nirmal turned to look at her. Her face looked slightly tanned, but fresh and healthy. And she had a new haircut. “Yes, you look nice,” he said to her.

“Thanks,” she said and went on with talking about her experiences, “I ate lots of seasonal fruits there. The markets were full of mangoes.”

“Yes, this is mango season in India. Sometimes I miss India’s fruits and vegetables here,” Nirmal said in a gloomy voice. “*Kaddu, lonki, parvar* and *tinda* I never used to eat these vegetables in India. Here I long for them.”

“Well, Dadima has sent you some mangoes. Actually they all have sent gifts for Mummy, Naina and you. Bua has sent you a sweater knitted by her. It’s a lovely grey colour sweater with beautiful patterns. She seems to be an expert in knitting.”

As Nirmal thought about his sister a smile ran on his face. “Why does she do so much for me?” – it wasn’t clear if his question was rhetorical or not.

Rina smiled, “You and Bua really are brother and sister. She also asked me the same question when I handed your gift to her that why you care so much about her,” Rina said turning the steering wheel. “Bua had become emotional. She was saying that you and she grew up together from Dadima’s womb, but now you both live so far from each other.”

Nirmal smiled thinking about his sister who was his beloved twin.



“Ah yes, Papa!” Rina continued, “Dadima told me about several incidents of your childhood. She even showed me the school where you and Bua went. Dadima was saying that the school hasn’t changed much since then. I visualized you there. Just the thought that you were once a child was exciting and I learnt many interesting things about your childhood. According to Dadima tales you were a very mischievous child.”

“Is it!” Nirmal hooted laughter, and then grew serious. He enquired about his parents. “How are Ma and Bauji?”

“They’re doing fine but growing very old,” Rina said. “They look really fragile now.”

Sitting at the rear, Hari was silently listening to their conversation. He hardly knew them, let alone their relatives.

Nirmal had become thoughtful. The greatest regret of his life was that he lived a long distance away from his parents and was not able to help them physically.

“Well Papa, how’s everything here – in our Copenhagen?” Rina filled the awkward silence. “Tell me some news of Copenhagen.”

“Some news! Well, Suresh and Linda are finally divorced after six months’ legal separation.”

“Oh, no... They could not resume their marital cohabitation!”

“No, they could not.”

“Although it was anticipated, it feels awful,” Rina mumbled. From the steering wheel her hand went to up to her mouth. The questions and feelings that had been suppressed all this time now came to the forefront on Rina’s mind. How had it all come to this? They had loved each other passionately. How could the relationship between two people so much in love, end in such a mess? Rina thought about their two children Atul and Vipul, and how this would be affecting them.

“Who got the children’s custody?”

“Linda. But Suresh can visit them once in a while.

A sadness began to creep over her. The thought that Linda wasn’t related to them anymore caused her distress. Since her childhood she had often felt a connection with her. Besides her, she was the only Dane by birth in the family. Linda used to tell her, “Rina, you and I both are Danes, trying to understand the Indian culture.”

“It’s strange to think that we will not be related to Linda anymore...” Rina thought aloud.

“No,” said Nirmal, “there is an indelible link between Linda and this family: the children...”

## 2

**W**HEN GOVIND PRASAD Shandilya had migrated from Panipat to Copenhagen, leaving his home, business, people and motherland behind, he had carried with him only his talents, values, and a determination to make a new start in the new land. Everyone in his family was against his idea of going abroad and even called him insane. His wife Kamla, who had delivered their third child a month ago, was sad and distressed at the mere thought of his leaving. She begged him with tearful eyes not to go so far away. But his resolve was irrevocable. With a little education and living in a town where opportunities were very limited, he could have never earned a good living. Then, when his wife became pregnant for the third time he became desperate to flee home. If he wanted to provide a reasonably good life for his children, it was necessary for him to leave the sleepy town and search work elsewhere. He persuaded his father to pawn some pieces of their land to buy a ship ticket for him to travel abroad. His journey from Panipat to Copenhagen was a struggle.

With a few hundreds dollars in cash and some belongings he sailed one evening from Bombay harbour to Basra with a group of youths, all aged between twenty-five and thirty. The six-week long ship journey had first taken them to the waters of the Arabian Sea and then they had entered the Gulf of Oman. The ship had touched many coasts, and at times, passed through violent waters and high winds before reaching Basra, Iraq. After a week in Basra, they trespassed through Turkey, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Vienna, and Germany, travelling through road and water, before reaching England, their final destination. After leaving their village, the youths had been living and eating in *Gurudwaras*, wherever they could find them. But the real struggle had begun after Turkey as there were no more *Gurudwaras*. Sometimes they had to survive on a piece of meat for a whole day.

His original plan was to get to England. He had a cousin there to sponsor him. But as soon as Govind Shandilya arrived at the border of the United Kingdom, he was deported. Only highly skilled and well-qualified people were allowed to migrate to the U.K. to look for work or self-employment opportunities. Having a cousin to sponsor him was not enough.

By now he had heard about Denmark, and also that it had no entry restrictions. It was the year 1966. Industrialization had come to Denmark much later than England. With its low population size, the country needed an inflow of migrants to work in factories and industries. Govind Shandilya came to Denmark with a view to work and make money here.

On his third day in Denmark, walking on the streets he came across a Cookie Factory. He entered and asked in his broken English if a worker was needed there, and after a short interview he got the job. He baked, packed-wrapped, washed-cleaned, did all

sorts of jobs and errands in the factory. In his leisure time, with a beer bottle in his hand he entertained the factory employees with bollywood songs and dance.

Initially he shared a bunkhouse with seven other immigrants from developing countries. Everyone had different timings for coming in and going out of the bunkhouse, rising in the morning, eating their meals, sleeping in the night. They all spoke different languages and had different food habits. It was a time of great struggle for Govind Shandilya, yet he was happy and satisfied. If he worked hard during the day in the factory, in the evening he had money in his pocket to roam around, eat a good meal and have fun. Unlike his country, there were no competitions, grudges, or conflicts among the people. It did not seem that anything ugly and unfair was going on. Everything seemed to run smoothly. There was some degree of racism but it was a small price to pay in exchange for exchange his daily bread and entertainments.

Later when he could earn and save some money and it became financially feasible he left the bunkhouse and moved to a two-room apartment. He was an active, hard working and risk-taking man, and his family in India was also supportive. Within two years, with his relatives' help in India, he was able to arrange for his wife and children to fly from India to Denmark. Their three children, Sudha, Subhash and Suresh were eleven, six, and almost three years old then.

So, first they left their country, and then its citizenship. Time passed by rather quickly. Sudha, Subhash, and Suresh grew very fast. Govind and Kamla, although not very educated themselves, went out of their way to provide best education to their children. All three of them turned out to be wonderful adults. Their daughter had taken the short height of her mother but both of their sons soared over six feet, like their father. They all went for higher education and acquired appropriate employments. Thereafter, the Shandilya couple faced the most crucial issue – finding life-partners for their children.

Even after adopting Danish citizenship and having lived many years in Denmark, Govind and Kamla could not fully assimilate the Danish way of life and culture. They remained Indian to the core of their heart and tried their best to inculcate beliefs of their cultural heritage in their children. They partially succeeded.

Their daughter Sudha, despite studying with and being friends with Danish girls, grew with the belief that in the matter of her marriage, her parents' decision would be in her best interests. The Shandilya couple got her married to an India based boy, Nirmal Sharma, who willingly migrated to Denmark after the marriage. Sudha had been following the values and customs she had inherited, and this was quite satisfying to her parents.

The older son Subhash, who had little talent for charming and dating girls, left it to his parents to find him one. The girl the Shandilya couple chose for him seemed highly agreeable to him. Asha and he, even though raised in different parts of the world, readily adjusted to each other and lived together as happily married partners. Asha learnt Danish and acquired a moderate job in line with her qualifications and talents – that of a *paedagogmedhjælper* (an assistant in a kindergarten). They had two children – a boy and a girl. They gave an impression of a committed couple, leading a good married life, having all marital joys.

The Shandilya couple was content that their children were staying with their spouses; the word, 'divorce' was not echoing in their family. They did not give great importance that staying together because of the commitment did not necessarily mean to be happy.

However, their younger son, Suresh, was different from his siblings. He was exceptionally dark and tall- taller than his older brother; he was thin but had a muscular physique. He was also a source of constant worry for his parents. With a large group of loafer kind of friends, he used to get frequent phone calls and was asked out on dates by his female admirers. Govind and Kamla, while taking pride in their son's youthful flamboyance and his being well liked by white girls, detested his going beyond friendship with them. Sometimes in the morning when they walked into his room they found a blonde haired girl sleeping with him, sometimes they would note that he was not home the whole night. He went to too many parties in his parents' opinion, and at one time some of his friends were even involved with vandalism. Suresh helped them get out of the jail.

During his early student life he found many girls interesting but did not date anyone seriously. But when he was in DTU- Denmark Technical University - he got intimately involved with a Danish girl, Linda with whom he spent more than a decade of his life and fathered two sons.

He was studying computer science at DTU then, and Linda was doing a secretarial course from a technical diploma school. They met each other in a dance club. Linda's slim figure, white skin, blue eyes and blonde hair attracted Suresh. Linda also liked his gorgeous looks and masculinity. He appeared to her the embodiment of the ideal good looking Asian man. They liked each other so intensely that after two hours of their meeting, they went straight to Linda's apartment from the dance floor.

After a few days, Suresh picked up his things from his parents' spacious house and began to live with Linda in her crummy apartment. His parents were deeply upset, for their codes of tradition did not approve of a man and woman living together on any terms other than marriage. The Shandilya couple condemned their son for mocking their ethical values and cultural beliefs.

"Bullshit! He would say to his parents. "What are our cultural beliefs? Superstitious fears, fasts, miracle cures, beliefs in unreal gods and goddesses, and observing total abstinence from sex before marriage - I don't give a damn about them. "

He completely ignored his parents' objections and predicament, as if they were just background noise. Linda was the centrepiece of his life now, and suddenly all other relations appeared to have lost their meaning for him. For three years Linda and Suresh lived together as cohabiting couples, without any formal-legal bindings. But when Linda conceived, they discussed the future of the upcoming life as well as that of their relationship.

"I don't want my children to be called '*harami*'. Let's get married," he said to Linda the day they found out about Linda's pregnancy.

Linda agreed and they got married lavishly. (Govind Shandilya and Kamla threw a grand party for them).

Their married life started like everybody else's. Love, commitment and mutual respect, all the factors they had at the beginning. Two sons were born during the first five years of their marriage. As the father wished, the boys were given Indian names – Atul and Vipul. Both the parents were happy to have such cute children and were trying to become good parents. But, on the other hand, their love for each other had started wearing off.

It wasn't long before matrimonial disputes surfaced between the two. Linda was a heavy smoker. She smoked almost three packets of cigarettes a day. Cigarettes were integral parts of her life. Earlier Suresh would light a cigarette for her and slip it into her slender fingers out of intense love for her. But slowly he developed a strong dislike against her chain smoking and started showing his resentment.

“Why don't you at least try to quit?” he would often grumble. “Smoking isn't a private matter. It pollutes the air. You smell of smoke all the time. It's so disgusting. You never bothered about me but now you should at least think about our kids. This acrid smoke is poisonous for them.”

Sometimes he would upbraid her, “You squander all your salary on cigarettes and I alone have to meet all our household expenses.” Linda worked as a secretary of a doctor in a hospital. Her salary was no match to Suresh's salary, who was a computer engineer with a well-known telephone company. But Linda's tastes were expensive and that needed a great part of their family income.

She would turn a deaf ear to his constant nagging as long as her patience would allow, and then she would get irritated and scowl at him, which would lead to arguments, and eventually a fight. “Don't get too distressed over my smoking. I smoke, because it releases my tension in this suffocating environment which you call our home.”

Linda did not believe that her husband should be accompanying her wherever she went. She had her own friend circle to which Suresh had no access. Many times Linda had arranged parties and picnics for her friends where Suresh was never invited. Suresh was supposed to keep away from Linda during these times without a murmur.

Christmas was another sore point between the couple. Linda wanted to celebrate every Christmas with her parents and brother. Suresh wanted them to spend Christmas with his family alternate years but Linda would argue that Christmas was more important for her family than for his – it was not even his festival! Although, having lived for so many years in Denmark the Shandilya family had started celebrating a Danish style Christmas with all their enthusiasm. Setting up a Christmas tree in their house, decorating it, holding Christmas get-togethers, exchanging gifts... Many of their relatives from India would even call them on Christmas Eve to wish them a happy Christmas. Linda believed that they did it more for fun's sake. Every Christmas-time Suresh and Linda had a fight on this issue, and finally it was always with Linda's family.

Though Suresh tolerated everything, he never liked any of it. But the limit of his tolerance was breached when Linda found a new chum in Morten, who was her school time boyfriend. They had dated for a couple of years and then had broken up. After their break up Linda had met Suresh while Morten had married a Greek girl called Tansy.

For ten years there had been no contact between Linda and Morten. But when young Tansy died of breast cancer, their friendship was renewed. Linda tried to convince Suresh many times that Morten was just a friend who was utterly bereft due to the untimely death of his wife, and she was helping him overcome his grief. Suresh, even

though he wanted to, could not believe Linda. Distrust developed between the couple, but it had not reached the stage where their marriage would have fallen apart.

Then the inevitable happened. It was a Saturday morning, like any other morning, except that when Suresh got up, he did not find Linda beside him in bed. Being an early riser all seven days in a week during their twelve-year long union he had left the bed much before she did. But that day Linda had been up before him. He came into the living room. To his surprise, she was standing there; fresh from the shower, her blonde hair, still wet, flowing down on her shoulders.

*“Hej! God morgen! Skal jeg få dig kaffe?”* she asked with a smile.

It surprised him all the more as this kind of courtesy had hardly existed between the couple in all these years of their marriage. “Like to have some coffee?” she asked him again, smilingly.

He nodded, delighted but somewhat bemused. Linda hurried to the kitchen. He sat down on the sofa, and picked up the paper. Suddenly it appeared to him as if preparing coffee and breakfast, tidying up the house, doing laundry, all household chores were supposed to be Linda’s business. He would sit on the sofa and read paper and watch TV. *Ha!* He felt like a real man in his house that day. A short while later when Atul and Vipul came out from the bedroom rubbing their eyes he shouted to Linda, “The kids are up. Get them some milk.” Thereafter he put a cartoon film on the television and began to watch the film with his sons.

After a while Linda appeared from the kitchen with a tray in her hands. She handed milk glasses to her sons and the mug of coffee to her husband. She then sat down on the couch across from Suresh and looked at him sip the coffee.

“It’s good!” he praised.

She smiled, softening her facial expressions further. *Why is she so nice today? What is she going to demand?* Suresh was still wondering when the question finally came, “Listen, can you do me a favour?”

Suresh looked askance at her.

“The thing is, ever since Vipul was born I never had time for myself. I want to take a break from my routine.” She moved to sit on the couch next to him, and kissed him. Stroking his jet black hair lovingly, she continued, “*Skat*, if you could take care of the boys at home... I would go out into nature to inhale some fresh air and revitalize myself. That will only help me look after you three males in the house properly.”

He knew disagreeing with her would not deter her from going ahead with her plan; he had no power to curtail her freedom.

“Where are you planning to go?” he asked politely.

“Moens Klint.”

“Moens Cliff.”

“*Ja*”

“With whom?” he tried hard to keep his voice from wavering.

“With some friends,” she said giving a careless shrug. After a pause, showering more love on him, she said, “Don’t bother too much about it.”

Linda often made such abrupt plans with her friends, and many weekends he had to stay alone at home. He hated that. “The thing is...,” he suggested, “we can leave the kids with Ma and Bauji and we both can go to Moens Cliff. It’s a romantic place,” he winked as he said.

“*Ja-ja-ja!* But why do you want to bother Kamla and Govind?”

‘*Stop addressing my parents by their first names,*’ he wanted to yell but preferred to remain quiet. Linda continued, “Don’t ask Kamla and Govind to baby-sit our kids. They both are getting old and then the kids are also not attached to them that much. The kids will be happy staying with you at home. With their daddy! I’ll be back by four o’clock. *Min elskede.*”

“Take the car,” he suggested gently.

“No, no. No need,” Linda protested hastily, “keep the car with you at home. You may need it.”

He nodded, but had become pensive by now. He remained seated on the sofa with the children watching the Danish version of ‘Tom & Jerry’ on the TV while Linda dressed up, kissed the kids, waved them good bye, and exited through the main door.

*Why did she avoid telling me with whom she was going to Moens Cliff? Is it with that widower?* The thought was consuming him. On the TV he numbly watched a grey cat chasing a brown mouse.

“Shit! he uttered and got up. He began to pace the room. After half-an-an hour or so, he dressed himself and his sons – Atul, and Vipul, who were six and two years old then. He kept some food, water, and diapers to change Vipul in the car, adjusted them on their baby seats, and started his journey to Moens Cliff.

*Off we go!* It was a long drive.

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**G**LEAMING WHITE AND steeply rising cliffs of Moen above the sea present one of the most striking landscapes in Denmark. The visitors' arrival point is halfway through the hill with its base at the sea. It has a café, some souvenir shops, picnic grounds, and a car park. After parking the car and silencing the engine, Suresh leaned back in his seat to ponder over the situation. Should he go ahead or not?

Atul and Vipul watched their father thinking something deeply. "Far, why are we not getting down?" Atul asked from the rear seat.

"Wait a minute."

Atul watched his quiet face for a while, and then called him again, "Far..."

"Okay, let's go." Letting out a deep breath, he finally climbed out of the car, took Vipul in his arms, and started to walk with Atul by his side. He looked around for Linda everywhere - in the cafeteria, souvenir shops and the picnic grounds. She could not be found anywhere. He climbed to the cliff top. She was no where. The shoreline could be reached after walking down the cliff. He thought she might be there. The trio consisting of himself and his two sons climbed down the four hundred steps lined with lush green herbs, shrubs and trees that lead to the beach. It's the most scenic stretch of the cliff. But he was in no mood to enjoy the beauty of the place. He was consumed by suspicion. All he was concerned about at that moment was to find out who the so-called friend of his wife was.

The sun above the cliffs was inching to the west. The sea was stretched far into the horizon, as far as one could see. Linda, sitting with Morten on a rock along the beach, was looking quite relaxed. She was smoking and enjoying the cold breeze, and the view of the calcified white cliffs. The shock on seeing her sitting there with Morten caused a sudden spurt of irrational anger in Suresh. He did not, or perhaps did not want to see Linda's other two friends, Charlotte and Oscar, sitting on a nearby rock. He thought that Mortan was alone with Linda.

Linda also saw them, and was utterly surprised. For a moment she thought she was dreaming. The cigarette slipped from her hand and fell down in the water. She gaped at Suresh and wondered what he was up to.

The children, however, rejoiced to see their mother. Yelling, "*Mor! Mor!*" Atul ran to her. Vipul also stretched his arms towards her, eager to jump into her lap.

Suresh, holding Vipul tightly in his arms and looking at Morten angrily, screamed, "What is this bastard doing here by your side? Leave my wife alone. If your wife has died, it does not mean that you can flirt with other men's wives."

It was an odd and slightly comical scene. Linda, now shocked, was standing on the rock with Morten. Atul was desperately trying to climb the rock to reach his mother. Suresh, holding Vipul who was also desperate to jump into his mother's arms, was growling at Morten. Startled, Morten was listening speechlessly to Suresh hurling abuses at him. Charlotte and Oscar were terrified and had risen to their feet.

Before it could become more comical or turn ugly, Linda regained her composure. She jumped from the rock, held Atul's hand and walked up to Suresh. In a calm but stern voice, she said to him, "Let's go home. We will discuss it at home."



“In the first place, I should not have let you get mixed up with this white monkey. I knew you were up to something when you left the house,” he said to Linda looking at Morten with intense hatred.

“All right. Can’t we go home and talk about it?” Linda held his hand and drew him away from there.

He turned his head and continued shouting at Morten, “Respect my marriage. Stay away from my wife. I know you are a lonely and bereft widower, but it does not give you any right to flirt with MY wife. Stay away from my wife, you hear me...”

Linda applied more force to draw him away quickly.

Dazed, Morten saw them walking away. He did not move. His feet appeared to have been stuck to the rock. Charlotte and Oscar also seemed to be glued to the rock, and did not know how to react to this situation.

They hurriedly climbed the stairs, Suresh ahead and Linda climbing back with the children. They reached the car park. Suresh opened the car door and sat in the driver’s seat. Linda took the rear seat with Atul and Vipul. Throughout the journey she kept herself busy with her sons, behaving as if Suresh was an unknown driver. He too steered and changed gears in silence, without a backward glance.

On reaching home Linda sat down on the same couch where in the morning, stroking her husband’s hair lovingly, calling him ‘darling’, ‘my love’ she had pleaded him to let her have a break from her normal boring routine.

In disgust, she covered her face with her hands, and then a little while later told him, trying hard to keep her voice steady, “Suresh, we can’t live together now. This marriage is over.”

“Don’t try to run away when things don’t suit you. I want some assurance of commitment in our relationship.”

“Assurance of commitment!” Moving her hands away from her face she rebuked him, “You followed me, and suspected me when there was nothing going on. Do you have any idea what you did?”

“It is too much to expect from a husband to allow his wife to sleep in her former boyfriend’s arms.”

“*Hold op, du dum mand!*” she got to her feet angrily. “*Det passer sgu ikke!*” In a fury she started hitting him.

“*Det er sgu rigtigt!*” he yelled stopping her by his strong arms.

“I’m not sleeping with Morten. He is just an old friend. I’m not having an affair with him.”

“Very hard for me to believe. If he was your friend, where was he all these years? The fact is that now he is available to you. But I will not allow this to happen, because it is his wife who is dead, not I.” Pointing to himself he said in a firm voice, “I am your husband - Suresh Shandilya - still alive and healthy. Don’t act as if I don’t exist.”

“What nonsense are you blurting out? I’m telling you that I’m not having an affair with him. Why don’t you believe me?” Gritting her teeth she suddenly clutched at his collarbone. He shoved her away so wildly that her slender body knocked against a piece of furniture. Now the fight went out of control.

“*Du beskidte indiske mand!*” she screeched. “Fuck you!”

“*Du beskidte dansk kvinde!*” he retorted. “Damn you!”

“*Du er en svin!*”

*“Tu kutia hai!”*

They used cushions and books as weapons as they grappled one another. They abused each other profusely. Their faces had contorted with intense hate for each other. Finance, sex... many issues were raked up; they recounted incidents when one had caused pain to the other, embarrassed the other, and shown indifference to his or her feelings.

They fought until they had the strength. Both the children were completely neglected during this period. The kids were horrified to see their parents fight physically and hurl allegations at each other. They were shocked at the swear words being exchanged.

*“Rend mig i roeven! ”*

*“Neech Aurat!*

*“Lort!”*

*“Chinaal!”*

He had reverted back to his mother tongue. Atul whispered to his brother, “Mor is saying bad words to Far in Danish and Far is saying bad words to Mor in Hindi.” Vipul got more terrified; clinging to his older brother, he sucked his thumb. Linda looked at them. A mother takes her children for granted to unleash her anger. “What the hell are you two doing here so late?” Snapping her finger she commanded them, “Boys, go to bed.”

Timidly, Atul rose with Vipul following him, and both turned to walk towards their room. Suresh watched them and felt sorry for them. His sons were his pride. They resembled him more than they resembled their mother – this gave him comfort in times like this.

“Wait a minute,” he said to them. “Eat something before you go to bed.” The children had not eaten anything for the past four-five hours. They were getting cramps in their stomachs, but probably more out of fear than hunger.

Suresh went to the kitchen and the children followed him. He brought life to the kitchen which lay still since morning. He boiled some pasta and tossed some butter and pasta sauce. The pleasant aroma of food filled the kitchen. Thereafter he made a salad and asked Atul to take out yoghurt and ice-cream from the fridge. Atul helped him with his tiny hands and Vipul kept following his father, clinging to his long, muscular legs all the while. After setting the table Suresh gave a helping to Atul, and started feeding Vipul with his hand. The children were hungry so they relished the food.

“Far, the pasta is very tasty,” Atul said.

Vipul also revealed his liking with a mild shriek.

Suresh took a spoonful of pasta in his mouth. “Yes, you are right, my good sons. It’s really tasty. Your far is a good cook. My mother had taught us cooking when we were young.”

“Yes, yes, we heard it many times,” Atul said.

“You will hear it a thousand million times more so long your far is alive.”

“Far, Far, you also eat with us,” Atul said promptly, trying to make some room for a plate on the dining table. Linda, who had lit a cigarette, was observing this cordial exchange between the father and sons. She felt totally left out, and this irritated her all the more.

With a jerk she rose and walked to the dinning table. Pulling Vipul violently from Suresh's arms, she screeched, "You are not supposed to feed him. You don't have any right to the children."

It was a brutal attack. The fork Suresh was holding flipped and hit the floor. Vipul began to cry. Tears came rolling out from Atul's eyes also. He pushed away the plate from which he was eating pasta a moment ago so zealously.

Suresh glared at Linda. "Well, if I don't have any right on you, and I don't have any right on my children, then what kind of a life do you want me to have in this house?"

"Well, when a man loses his right to a woman, he automatically loses the right to the children born through her."

Clenching his teeth he said, "Shameless woman, you are testing my patience; you should have been ashamed of leaving your husband and kids at home and flirting with a guy at a picnic spot. We caught you red-handed. You are not contented to only one man."

Linda instantly looked at her sons. They were looking at her in dismay.

Avoiding her children's glances, she shifted her gaze to Suresh, her eyes slowly filling with tears. She felt too humiliated to even retaliate. With tearful eyes she could only say, "It is impossible to compromise now." Suresh walked away angrily to the bedroom and banged the door shut. Linda wiped her tears and tried to pacify her children who were crying now. She began to feed them with her hands. Her motherly instincts were telling her that the kids were hungry and they needed nourishment. Thereafter she put them to sleep, and curled up on the same bed with them.

**T**HE following morning when they got up, they were no more aggressive. The night had brought calmness to them. Like a traditional wife Linda made coffee and brought in two mugs in the living room where Suresh was flipping through the newspaper. She offered a mug to him. Before taking the mug from her hand he glanced at her for a moment. The brief moment of touch of her hand felt new to him, as if he was touching his wife after several months.

They sipped coffee in awkward silence. They both had given their situation considerable thought and concluded that they could not go on like that.

"We have had enough now," Linda mumbled and broke the silence.

"Linda, come back to your senses. All I want from you is to be faithful to me."

"That's what you think- that I am unfaithful to you. What I think is that you have betrayed my trust. So where is our marriage working? ...I don't want to drag on a bad marriage."

"Issues always exist in marriages. All couples have some differences. Divorce should not be the first option," said Suresh and added after a pause, "Instead, why don't you give up your friendship with that white monkey. The sooner you get over with your so called friendship with him the better it is for all of us."

"Oh Suresh, you make me laugh. You call Morten a white monkey, but do you know you look like an ape."

He glared at her.

Covering her face she began to sob all of sudden, violent sobs that racked her slim body. Between her sobs, she said in a thick voice, “It is not a question of friendship, Suresh. It is the trust that you have shaken...”

On any other day he would have hugged her and soothed her but he couldn’t do it that day. Watching her cry helplessly from a distance for some moments, he finally apologised with a tinge of edge in his voice, “Look, it sure is not my fault that we are in a mess like this. Still I want to say, I’m sorry. ”

“No, Suresh,” she said wiping her tears with the back of her hand, “our relationship has deteriorated to the point of no return. If we continue living together, we will only harm each other.”

He had married her against his parents’ wishes. They had initial doubts about the success of his marriage with a white girl. He wanted to prove them wrong by establishing an everlasting relationship with Linda. He wanted to show to his community people that a dark colour Asian man can live with a white European woman throughout his life in perfect harmony. Getting emotional, he reminded her, “Linda, remember... when we were getting married you had said that you and I were going to grow old together, that we were setting out on a long journey together, which would last a lifetime.”

“Come on, Suresh,” Linda snapped, “expecting a marriage to last until death is too much. It is not possible for every couple. But see, we have lived twelve years together!”

“Twelve years! I married you to spend my entire life with you. You may think I am old-fashioned, but I believe in the sanctity of marriage. We should keep our marriage vows.”

Linda laughed sceptically over his remarks.

“Look no one is divorced either in my family and nor in yours. Next Saturday my parents are celebrating fifty years of their marriage – fifty years! Your parents have also been together for the last forty years. Look, Linda, although divorce is so common in Denmark, your parents have never followed that practice. They have been trying to make their relationship work. We should be proud of our parents and try to follow the examples set by them.”

He continued, “My brother and sister have also been loyal to their marriages; your brother has also been with his Canadian wife for the last eight years. They also must be having their share of problems but they never consider a divorce; on the contrary your brother on the last Christmas told me that his marriage will last as long as he and his wife will live. We have so many good examples to follow, Linda.”

“I cannot continue living with you because other women are not leaving their husbands,” Linda said curtly, unaffected by his sermons on unbroken relationships. “This is my life. I don’t want to live with you any more. Yes, thanks for your love and the time we spent together.”

“Am I a bad husband?”

Instantly Linda looked at him. Thoughtfully she said, “*Nej. Du er en flot mand.* But for now, it is over. We have reached a dead end. Either you leave this house or I will pack up my things.”

“We are not free to make choices. We have kids?”

“Well, there are many children in the world whose parents don’t get along.”

“I don’t want my kids to be counted among them...” he said slowly, and lapsed into silence. Not knowing what to do, he just sat there with a sad face.

Linda looked at his face, and then said solemnly, “Leaving you is painful but living with you now is even more painful, Suresh.”

He smiled demurely. “In the morning you call me, *‘min elskede’*, and in the evening you want to walk out of my life? Life is not so simple, Linda Moeller. You can’t get rid of me so easily.”

“Don’t make it more complicated, Suresh Shandilya. Please pack your bags and go,” Linda said in a tired voice. After a while she repeated: “*Gae Vaek!*”

Forlorn, Suresh finally got up and started collecting his belongings. Standing in the bedroom he stared at the bed where he had slept with Linda for twelve years. He took out his clothes from the closet he had shared with Linda. He removed his bank, health insurance and other important cards and documents from the cabinet he had bought with her. Linda helped him pack by gathering his things from here and there in the house.

A stunned silence had befallen them. Both were apparently sad about the separation, but it now seemed inevitable. She said to him in a gentle tone, “It will go smoother if we both agree on other issues. It’s easy to get divorce in Denmark, and it almost costs nothing.”

He glared at her. “You can discuss it with your attorney,” she said timidly.

Suresh did not utter a word further. He felt that her decision about divorce had been made a long time ago and that the Moens Cliff episode had only triggered her decision.

All of a sudden, he too wanted to get out of her life. He quickly finished packing and started to walk towards the main door with just a suitcase in one hand and a bag in the other, leaving behind his children, his house, and all material assets that had been a part of his life since his partnership with Linda.

“Suresh, wait,” Linda cried from behind. “What about the other things? We had bought them together. Shouldn’t we split them equally?”

He had reached the door, from where he turned back to face her. He said slowly, without showing any resentment, “No. You can have all of them.”

“You can at least take some of your favourite stuff- your cat,” Linda mumbled.

Without uttering another word he left.

\* \* \*

**O**N CARL LANGES Vej in Valby, a locality predominantly immigrants, Govind Prasad Shandilya and Kamla had an independent house with a big garden in the front. They had been living there for the last thirty years and all their children had practically been raised there. Now the children had their own lives, their own families and lived separately, but their personal rooms in their parental house had been kept intact. The uninhabited rooms remained in the same condition as each one of them had left it. Govind and Kamla rarely entered their children’s forsaken rooms except to dust and vacuum them once in a while.

From time to time, when the children came from their abodes and assembled in their parents' house, there would be a flurry of activity in the house. But all too soon they would go back and the house would again plunge back into quietness. Govind and Kamla rejoiced when their children came and always felt increased loneliness after they had departed.

Govind Shandilya had taken up and changed a number of jobs in Denmark; had earned and saved a substantial amount of money. In her young age, Kamla had also taken up some odd jobs off and on to supplement the family income. Now they were both old and retired. Govind Shandilya was a shrewd man and Kamla an efficient housewife. They had planned their retirement in advance to give themselves some of the best years of their life. As a result of their planning, they had adequate money to spend and live a leisurely life. On Sundays and festive occasions they religiously visited the Indian temple for *Bhajan-Kirtan* (prayers) and to volunteer their services for the temple. The temple was now a significant part of their life.

It was summer time and the summer had been unusually long this year in Denmark. The front door of the house was ajar. Kamla, sitting in the drawing room with a cup of tea, was enjoying the view of their well-tended garden - the manicured hedges, the lawn with its green velvety grass, and of the rows of Yellow Azalea, Lady Orchid, Lillies and Roses that they had planted. The flowers were in full blossom and the trees had regained their full greenery. Almost every week, Kamla and Govind slogged in the garden for hours to give it an attractive look.

Kamla was watching her garden and priding herself for keeping it in such a good shape. The next weekend she and her husband were going to celebrate their fiftieth marriage anniversary. She was mulling over how the garden party would go. A hundred guests. On this corner they would make the sitting arrangement, on that corner they would lay out the food tables. And what about some music!

Suddenly Suresh came in her view striding alone across the long gravelled path built along the lawn. He was carrying a suitcase in his hand, and a heavy bag flung across his shoulder. Kamla's memory flashed back. He seemed to her the same tired little boy, who used to come home with his bag hanging on his back after a long day at school.

But Kamla got somewhat alarmed. She rose and put down the mug on the window sill, and clasped her hands nervously. Govind Shandilya sitting in his favourite cosy chair in front of the television was watching a football match between Germany and Denmark. Kamla told him, "Suresh is coming..."

"Why are you sounding so nervous?"

"He is coming with his things..."

Govind got up from his chair and came to the doorway where his wife was standing. As Suresh came closer, their heartbeats became faster. Their apprehension increased when they saw sadness writ large on his face.

"What's the matter," both asked almost at the same time, trying to read his face.

Suresh entered the room silently, laid his baggage down on the floor and sank in his father's favourite chair.

There was a long silence. They waited anxiously for him to speak.

He broke the creepy silence, saying in a mild tone, "Linda doesn't want to live with me any more. We have decided to separate."

"What! Linda has left you!" Kamla asked in dismay, feeling hurt.

His lips quivered with emotions as if he wanted to cry.

Kamla immediately embraced him putting her arms around him. “My son, you are a very good-looking and handsome man. Girls liked and adored you. You were like Krishna around whom flocks of girls danced, and that foolish woman does not want you any more! She has underestimated you and your qualities. She will regret it.”

Suresh looked at his mother tiredly.

Reassuring him, she said, “Yes! She will regret for sure.”

“What we had feared has happened,” Govind Shandilya said in an agitated voice. “When you were marrying her, we feared your marriage may not last long. These white people don’t believe that the marriage is meant to last.

“After a few months’ of separation, divorce proceedings will start,” Suresh interrupted to give them more information.

“Oh, my God! Divorce! This was never happened in our family before,” said Kamla almost shivering. “These white people have a very low level of tolerance and practically no patience in these matters.”

“They get irritated too quickly,” added Govind Shandilya.

“But Linda should realise that she has married an Indian, not a Dane. Divorce may be a way of life for them but not for us. We try to make the marriage work, no matter what the circumstances may be.” Kamla vented her feelings.

“Where did you go wrong?” Govind asked his son in a stern voice suddenly.

“Yes,” said Kamla, studying his face. “Linda used to love you so much; I know it must have not been easy for her either.”

Suresh told them everything truthfully, word by word.

“You suspect your wife has started seeing another man!” Kamla said in dismay.

He hesitated, embarrassed about it, and then nodded slowly.

“Oh, my goodness! You are at fault, my son. You have committed a very serious mistake. On the whole a woman prefers to stay faithful to her husband, and a man should trust his wife. A wife can never tolerate her husband’s suspicion. You suspect her virtue. How can she live with you?” While saying that Kamla became very emotional. Tears came to her eyes; she wiped them with her robe.

“How could you suspect your wife?” Govind Shandilya said angrily to him. “If she told you Morten was just a friend, you should have believed her. These white people don’t lie about these matters.” After a moment’s pause, he continued, “Before marrying her you should have accepted the fact that she is a white Scandinavian girl. You were supposed to give her this little freedom.”

Suresh listened quietly, his head stooped low.

Govind Shandilya observed his son. His anger disappeared, getting replaced by pity for his son. He said in a gentle voice, “Look Suresh, twelve years ago when you were leaving us to live with Linda we had said ‘no’ to you. Today now you have come back to us, we’ll not approve of this either. Pick up your things and go back to Linda. Whatever misunderstandings have been developed between you both, sit down together and clear it out calmly.”

“I have tried. I even apologized to her.”

“Should we talk to Linda?” Govind Shandilya asked.

“No, no. Please, no. It will be of no use,” was the hasty response from him. “It’s all over. She is not willing to compromise, and she would not like to talk to you about this either.”

Govind Shandilya and Kamla did not insist.

“I’ll get you some chai,” Kamla told him suddenly, throwing a glance at his dry lips.

He nodded. He had not eaten anything, not even the smallest morsel since the previous afternoon and was really feeling weak. He needed some nutrition.

Before getting up, Kamla gave him another affectionate hug. Then she went into the kitchen, and brought chai for him in his childhood mug, which had been lying unused in the kitchen’s cupboard for ages. While handing him the mug she looked at him, searching his face for a response. He took it from her without noticing much about the mug.

Glancing at the wall clock, Govind Shandilya asked his wife, “It is three o’clock, Sudha’s ma. Don’t you want to go to the temple?”

“How can we go anywhere, Shandilya-ji? Such a big tragedy has struck us... Our daughter-in-law forsook us and she talks of divorce... Did this ever happen between any of the married couples in our family?” As she said tears rolled down her cheeks again.

Govind Shandilya shook his head gloomily. Kamla continued in a choked voice, “There have been animosity, betrayal, beatings, cheating and physical abuses between married couples, but divorce never ever happened in our family. What is the joy of celebrating our fiftieth marriage anniversary when our son is filing for a divorce? Shandilya-ji, call all our friends, and tell them we are not celebrating our marriage anniversary. The party is cancelled.”

“I’m sorry, Ma,” Suresh mumbled meekly.

“It’s not your fault, *beta*. It is the consequences of our choice to have come to this country and settle down here. We may have earned money and have a good livelihood here but we have lost our values. We are no more rooted in our values. We have become rudderless.”

Govind Shandilya watched his crying wife, offered her a tissue and a glass of water, and then suggested in a low voice, “Let’s go to Temple, Sudha’s ma. You will get some solace there.”

Wiping her tears with the tissue, Kamla looked in her son’s direction. Lost in his thoughts, he was sipping tea silently. “Suresh, you never think of God.” There was an accusation in her voice. “Come with us today to Temple. Turn to God; he will see you through your problems.”

“No,” snapped Suresh. He took the last sip of tea and placed the empty cup on the table beside him. Then he got up, picked up his baggage and entered his old room to live there again for an indefinite period...



### 3

**“IT** WAS *PRETTY much* expected that Suresh and Linda would split up. It requires one hundred percent commitment to stay with one partner throughout life. *They* are uncommitted when it comes to the institution of marriage. For every two marriages there is one divorce practically,” Nirmal blurted. From the airport the drive to their home was about twenty minutes and they had almost reached their destination. But Nirmal was unceasingly talking about the divorce between his brother-in-law and his wife, and he had been blaming Linda more than Suresh.

“You cannot blame only Linda for it,” Rina retorted repeatedly.

Ignoring her, Nirmal turned towards Hari, and said, “It is said about this country that you cannot trust the three ‘Ws’- weather, work and woman. They are very unpredictable here. The weather can turn bad in an instant. One can be fired from his job at any time without any prior warning, and a woman can walk out on her man at any time for no apparent reason. Hari Kumar, you have come here to live, but beware! Throw-away culture is very strong here,” he laughed as he said.

“Papa, that’s rude!” Rina said furiously. She never liked her father ridiculing the lifestyle of the country where he had been living for so long. “Use and Throw,” her father added and laughed all the more. Hari tried to smile, but could not. The statement seemed neither important nor funny to him at that time. He was worried, and wanted the mess he was in to get sorted out so that he could start his life in Denmark. Rina eyed him several times in the rear-view mirror.

The Sharma residence was a small and semi-detached duplex house with a patch of grass in front in the silent suburb of Copenhagen, called Taastrup. As soon as they reached home, Hari took a warm shower and put on a new set of clothes. He seemed to feel better and comfortable. Nirmal immediately entered the kitchen to prepare tea. His wife, Sudha kept their freezer loaded with savouries; he took out a portion to heat. In the meanwhile Rina kept trying KBC Mission’s Gothergade office telephone number. Finally she was able to get the international co-ordinator, Peter Petersen, on the line. He had information about Hari’s arrival. He advised her to take him to Skovej, Ballerup where the Mission had its field hostel; Hari would be provided with a room and board there.

“Just hold on for a second. Hari is here. It would be better if he talks to you personally.”

Hari, who had been listening to Rina’s conversation with Peter Petersen on the phone with rapt attention, instantly came near the phone to take the receiver from her.

“The gentleman speaks good English,” she briefed him while handing over the receiver to him. He cleared his throat and started carefully, “Hi, I am Hari Kumar– just arrived from India. Right now I am in the house of a very nice and friendly Indian family whom I met at the airport by chance. But I am very anxious to go to KBC missionary centre.”

Thereafter he listened to the person in complete silence, ear glued to the receiver, muttering incoherently in between into the receiver, 'I see,' 'Oh yes' 'interesting', 'yeah'. Then he finished with, "Oh yes, of course, certainly, certainly. Thank you. So nice of you!"

He laid the receiver on the cradle, and then making a cross on his chest said, "Thanks, Jesus. It was such a big worry!"

Rina laughed and invited him for tea.

Sighing, he sat down around the dining table with Rina. He was looking quite relaxed now. A warm-water shower, fresh clothes, pleasant home atmosphere, and conversation with Peter Petersen had helped him regain his composure. Now his eyes were exploring the tastefully decorated room. Earlier he was too exhausted to notice anything. With an admiring look he said to Rina, "You have a beautiful house."

"The credit goes to my mother."

"Mothers are great. But where is she now?" he asked looking around.

"She is at work," Nirmal replied while bringing a tea tray from the kitchen

"Quite interesting! She is a working lady and still has the energy to keep the house so neat! You are lucky, sir."

Nirmal kept mum. It was very hard for him to accept the fact that his wife had a better paying job than him, and her job kept her busier compared to him. Since he had come to Denmark after his marriage to her, it was not easy for him to get settled in a foreign country. He had to learn the language and develop new skills to be able to get a job here. Even after that, he could only find a moderate job.

Rina noticed that Hari was a talkative person by nature. He had initiated a discussion with Nirmal and was talking to him incessantly, addressing him as 'sir'. Her father seemed to enjoy the conversation with him, and the way he addressed him as well.

"Sir, may I help you?" he asked Nirmal seeing him setting the table.

"No, thank you. Today you've come here for the first time. Maybe when you visit us the next time you can help me."

"I would love to, sir."

Nirmal placed the kettle, savouries with sauces, and some ready to eat snacks on the table. Glancing at the various substances Hari exclaimed, "Wow! So many things to eat! I'm hungry." Suddenly he longed to eat.

Now and then Nirmal had been checking his watch, and finally he announced to Rina with a laugh, "I'm going to *Boernehaven*. Naina had told me in the morning that I should collect her from her *Boernehave* when Didi gets home."

Rina laughed, and exclaimed, "*Min lille soester! Jeg savner dig.*"

"You're not joining us, sir?" Hari asked Nirmal.

"No, you guys eat. I'm going to the kindergarten to pick up my younger daughter. See you after a short while." he said and left.

"Your sister is so young that she goes to a Kindergarten?" Hari asked Rina.

His question revived Rina's memories. After her birth her mother did not conceive for many years. She grew from a child to a teenager. Sudha and Nirmal really wanted another baby but had lost all hope. Then three months after Rina had turned

fifteen, Sudha miraculously conceived again. It was thrilling but embarrassing also for the couple, as by this time, Rina who stood taller than her mother had become a young lady. Whenever Rina accompanied her mother to social events during her pregnancy, people stared at them. **Her 151 cm tall mother had such a big belly. Rina would help her mother in climbing up and down the stairs.**

“Look how these women are gawking at us, as if we are some kind of specimens to ogle at,” once Rina told her mother, getting annoyed.

“Let them gawk at us. We can’t close their eyes,” Sudha said. But Mother and Daughter both felt uneasy by those stares.

Some of the mischievous women even chuckled about it: “Sudha, You will not need any helper. Your daughter is big enough to help you with your delivery.” Rina listened to the women’s remarks quietly. When Sudha’s time came she indeed nursed her mother.

“Yes,” Rina told Hari. “My sister is much younger than me. She was born on my sixteenth birthday.”

“It means you both celebrate your birthday on the same day?”

“Yep.”

“Interesting!”

Yelling, “*Didi-Didi*,” Naina entered the house and climbed on Rina’s lap straight away. Naina was a kid for her. She would climb off and on her lap. Until last year she would even try to touch her breasts - surprised that her sister too had those round soft organs on the front part of her body as her mother had. The whole family pampered her. They affectionately called her Nain, which in Hindi meant ‘eyes.’ She was literally the eyes of their household; always curious about things, sharing her kindergarten experiences everyday with everyone, and taking interest in every member of the family. If anything got misplaced in the house, she was the one to find it.

“*Didi*, I missed you so-so much,” she said stressing on every syllable.

“Nain, I also missed you a lot. The only thing I missed in India was you,” Rina said kissing her cheek. Naina also kissed her in return. Hari looked smilingly at both the sisters kissing each other.

“*Didi*, what have you brought for me from India?”

“Oh! A lot of things.” Rina put her little sister down on the floor and walked towards her baggage, which was still lying unopened. She opened her bag and took out the articles purchased by her or presented by their relatives in India. There were all sorts of things: jewellery, dresses, show pieces, pickles and sweets. Slowly a small mountain that reflected India’s craft, art, cookery, sculpture and pottery rose on the table.

Nirmal’s eyes roamed from one piece to another. “Mini India!” he exclaimed.

“Wow! Wow!” shouted Naina in utter awe, and took in her hands as many as she could.

Hari smiled looking at her.

Hari was now their responsibility. Rina did not want to bother her father much about him. Hour an later she drove him to the mission hostel stationed in Ballerup. They stopped at several places to look into the city map for directions before they reached a

pristine building at the edge of a green forest. Rina parked the car outside and taking Hari's luggage they walked into the carved portal of the premise, and pressed the bell. When the electric device produced a buzzing sound Rina pushed the huge door open, and entered with Hari following her. They moved cautiously towards the reception. It was the first time Rina had been inside a missionary centre. She had thought that it will be a divinity place and she would find there saintly people draped in white or saffron robes. But the two people, a man and a woman, who were at the reception, looked quite like ordinary human beings to her. They were apparently expecting Hari.

"Harry," the man pronounced his name in his Danish accent, Hari felt extremely happy. Rina briefed them in Danish about their chance-meeting at the airport and all that had happened until they reached the mission. They looked at her with admiration and thanked her for helping Hari. The lady, who was middle aged, grey-haired but lively, took them for a quick tour of all that lay inside the tall walls of the premise. They had a reception, a library, a parlour, a kitchen with a dining hall, a prayer hall with a neat garden in front on the main floor, and several dorms on the upper floors. The lady asked Hari, "Which floor would you prefer? We have rooms free on the first, second, and third floors."

After giving it a thought he said, "Second floor will be fine." Opening a drawer, the lady took out a set of keys and led them to the second floor through an elevator. "The 'A' key is for the main entrance, the 'B' key is for your dorm and the 'Y' key is for all other special rooms," she explained to him on the way.

There were dorm rooms on both sides of the corridor with a common bath and toilet at the rear. She turned the key in the lock of door number 206, then pushing the door open she declared, "This room is now yours."

Hari inquisitively stepped into the room and explored the room. It was a small and compact room, furnished simply with a bed, a desk, a chair, a closet and a dresser.

"You can put your things down and place them in the room," the lady said pointing towards his suitcase, which he was still holding.

"Oops!" He realized that and dropped his things on the floor. The lady handed him the keys and left. Rina stayed there with him. He continued surveying the room.

"It's tiny," he mumbled in a disapproving tone. Rina said to reassure him, "Look, you were so worried only a few hours ago, but you now have everything here – a room to live, a dining room at the ground floor to eat, a library to read, and a garden to.... You have now everything."

He nodded slowly.

"Okay then, enjoy your new abode. The jet lag is getting to me – it's ten o'clock in the night according to India's time, and I hadn't slept in the plane last night," she said exiting the room.

"Rina," he called after her. It was the first time he had called her by her first name ever since they had met. She turned back to look at him.

"Thank you so much. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"You're most welcome," she said gladly, and turned to walk towards the elevator – the route they had taken while coming.

He came up to the main entrance of the hostel to see her off. "If you want...eh we can exchange our phone numbers and email IDs..." he said hesitantly.

Rina thought it over for a moment, and then said, "Alright."

She wrote down her cell phone number and email ID for him. He also gave her his email ID.

As a matter of courtesy, she told him not to hesitate to ask for any help in future, if he ever needed. He thanked her once again.

\* \* \*

**A**FTER RETURNING TO Copenhagen Rina was feeling fresh and motivated to resume her routine life, which had been in abeyance during her India visit. Secretly, she had been cheering herself that she went to India all alone and came back home safe and sound. Her trip to India gave her a new vigour to pick up her life where she had left off.

Classes had started. A new semester had begun, and with this a long commute to the university. She had also resumed her ten-hours-a-week job at the kiosk of the Q8 petrol pump. Then she could not neglect her friends who constantly wanted her company to socialize with. On top of all of this she planned to collect donations for Ekal Vidyalaya, a tribal school in India. There were so many reminiscences, important and mundane, of her five-week stay in India.

Rina's married cousin Abha lived in Rajendra Nagar in New Delhi. As old parents living with their grown-up children is a common practice in India, Abha's father-in-law Yaspal Bhardwaj, a well-known name in the social voluntary work, lived with them. Rina had encountered him, when she had visited her cousin in New Delhi.

That hot afternoon, in front of a window air conditioner, the old man, chewing *paan* (betel leaf) after a good lunch, got Rina into a conversation with him. Being an outspoken public figure he talked mostly about politics, integrity, and importance of religious beliefs. "Our fellow Hindus are forgetting where they belong. They are becoming obsessed with foreign things. We are losing our culture and languages, big international companies are snatching away the small enterprises of local businessmen, our saints are fading away, our customs are disappearing, and many Hindus are turning into Bible Christian."

"Turning into Bible Christian!" Rina had wondered.

"Yes, *beti!* In many ways India has always been a vulnerable country. People around the world target it, if they needed to get done something. Western photographers and filmmakers take pictures of our poor and show them on international screens to make money. The attempts to convert Hindus by Christian missionaries continue unabated ever since the British and Portuguese colonisers came to this subcontinent. They think the Lord Jesus is the only real god and Bible is the only scripture. Everyone around the world should pray to Lord Jesus and read the Bible."

"How do you convert someone into a Christian?" Rina asked.

He was baffled by this question, but tried to answer boldly, "With Bible in hands the missionary teams would go door-to-door to advertise Christianity. They would say: If you become a Christian you are promised a good life, Heaven, bla bla bla... They would offer our poor and low-caste petty rewards and persuade them easily for the conversion. You know, poor people are easy to be manipulated."

Rina nodded, as good manners demanded.

"Munna..." he abruptly called to the house servant.

“*Ji, saab!*” Munna shouted back from the kitchen.

“Some chai, please.”

“It’s getting ready, *saab.*”

After a while Munna appeared with a smile on his face and a tray of fuming hot cups of chai in his hands. Rina looked at him. The way the eighteen-year-old served people in the house made Rina feel extremely sorry for him. The poor lad was not treated with any respect or dignity. *Poor him! These poor people make rich people’s life so comfortable here. Their richness depends on their poverty,* she thought inwardly. Munna first held out the tray to her. Thanking him warmly Rina took a cup from the tray.

“Welcome” Munna mumbled in an inaudible voice.

Reaching for a cup, Yaspal Bhardwaj said, “This is the best antidote to heat.”

Rina smiled. Surprisingly she had developed a taste for this hot beverage after coming to India in this sizzling summer temperature- the mercury was touching in New Delhi forty-seven degree Celsius.

Sipping noisily Yaspal Bhardwaj continued, “We have launched a movement - to educate our poor, so that they can understand and not follow anyone blindly. Have you heard of the Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation?”

Rina shook her head, no. As far as she was concerned, the old man was not of any significance to her. **His incessant talking was just keeping her from enjoying her meeting with her cousin.**

“The foundation was initially laid by Swami Vivekananda. Have you heard of Vivakananda?”

“Yeah... somewhat.”

“Well, Vivekananda is considered the first key figure to disseminate Hinduism and Yoga in Europe and America. He said, society does not go down because of the activities of bad people. But because of the inactivities of the good people. He laid down many foundations to uplift the societies. Ekal Vidyalaya was one of them. Today various NGOs have joined this movement to bring education to the doorsteps of many forgotten children.” After a brief pause he said in a cajoling voice, “You have come on a tour of India. Don’t intend to see only gigantic, cosmopolitan cities, try to see village life here, as well. Then only you will get a true image of India. Eighty percent of India is in villages. It is an unfortunate aspect of India that making a sound progress in the area of science and technology India is still struggling to educate a large chunk of its people.” After a pause he asked, “Would you like to visit a village here?”

“A village,” she repeated

“Yes, I would drive you there.”

After giving it a thought, Rina nodded.

The following morning, Yaspal Bhardwaj drove Rina to a tiny hamlet near Gurgaon in Haryana district, where about two hundreds families of Jatt communities lived. It was a two hours drive from New Delhi. As the jeep entered the village through a dirt road, rattling over the pocks and pots of the dirt road, Rina saw wandering cattle, a column of women walking with bundles of firewood or grass on their heads, cowdung cakes being dried in the Sun, heaps of fodder and rotting cowdung on the mud-covered ground, clusters of thatched huts, and a distinct stench... The village appeared deceptively simple, unsullied by the complexities of modern urban civilization.

The jeep was pulled in the yard of a rural school. Rina was overwhelmed at meeting the underprivileged children who belonged to the poorest of the poor, the lowest of India's wretched caste system. However she was highly impressed by the noble initiatives of 'FTSF: Friends of Tribal School Foundation,' an NGO that had been working earnestly to provide opportunities for education to tribal children by running non-formal educational institutions in their remote habitats.

She saw that the school was not an impersonal organisation but rather a space that was a home to the villagers. The teacher, the children and the other inhabitants of the village greeted her and gave her a warm welcome. The children in the school sang for her: *Atithi devo bhava...* (Guest is God). They offered her barley roti with mint chutney, jalabi and buttermilk. The Foundation people asked her if she could sensitize the Indians living in Denmark about their project and motivate them to help them financially to run the schools.

Yaspal Bhardwaj said with an edge in his voice, "Denmark is a developed country. Indians living there must be rich. Tell them to do something for their homeland. Their generous support can help us to make a real difference in the life of a child living in poverty and hardship." He had filled her hands with pamphlets and videos of their scheme.

The glimpses of shy village children in rags that Rina had met there were constantly in front of her eyes. She had made a promise to herself that she would not only help and work for them, but she would also visit them again.

Of the various people she knew, there were some she was sure would donate without any reservations. That morning, sitting in her living room in Copenhagen when she was making the list of the potential donors, her father said to her, "Include Smita Bhatt in your list."

"Smita Bhatt!" she exclaimed. She knew very well her parents had new people added to their social circle recently. Her father's twin sister lived in Dehradun in India, and had known Smita Bhatt's parents who were the local residents of Dehradun. When Smita Bhatt was coming to Copenhagen, Nirmal's sister had given her his contact information, and that's how they had met her. In the interim, she had become so friendly with Sudha that Rina had ended up bringing a gift package for Smita from her family in India. So in any case Rina was likely to see her.

"I have to see her. I have brought a parcel for her from India."

She dropped the pen and paper and decided to call her first. She had never seen her, but there had been talks of her in their house. "How old is she and how should I address her?" she asked her father.

"How do you normally address your mum's Indian friends?"

"Auntie, or sometimes – Auntie-ji."

"Well, she is not that old that young ladies like you should address her as 'Auntie'," said Nirmal thoughtfully. "She looks quite young."

At this point in their conversation, Sudha emerged as if from nowhere, and said derisively to Nirmal, "She may seem young to you, but she is a mother of two girls like me."

"But her girls are of Naina's age, not of Rina's age," Nirmal argued. "And don't forget, there is a difference of sixteen years between our daughters."

"So?" Sudha said jerking her shoulders.

“What do you mean so?”

“Why are you guys quarrelling?” Rina interrupted, somewhat surprised. “Smita Bhatt is not a relative. I can address her in any manner.” She often found her parents arguing on trivial matters.

“I’ll just address her Smita,” she declared to her parents.

“No,” objected Nirmal. “She is Indian, and she hasn’t been here long. She may feel awkward that her friend’s daughter is addressing her by her first name.”

“It doesn’t matter, Nirmal. This is Denmark. Oh God! Why do you always bring Indian culture in discussions?” Sudha said and frowned at Nirmal, which accentuated the creases on her solemn face even more. Rina was watching her mother. Sometimes, especially on occasions like this, her mother looked like a bitter, frigid nag to her. Make-up and hair dye were unable to conceal her true age and all her attempts to look better also would not succeed, for though she could shape her unruly and bushy eyebrows in the most elegant manner in a beauty parlour, she could not do anything about her flat nose, and short and stout stature. Moreover, lately, she had begun to wear gold-rimmed eyeglasses, making her face look even sterner. Rina sometimes thanked God that she had not inherited her mother’s features. It is often said that beauty is hereditary, but she knew she was much prettier than her mother. People used to wonder how she was born to such an ordinary looking woman. Perhaps she got her looks from her father’s side.

Ignoring his wife’s frown Nirmal suggested to his daughter, “Okay, call her ‘Auntie’ and see her reaction. If she feels offended, just call her Smita-ji. You know ‘Ji’ is used as a suffix to show respect. You will not find usage of such suffixes in many languages. This is the beauty of the language we use.”

“Hello,” Sudha almost screamed, “Who are you to advise Rina as to how to address my friend? This is not your business.”

“She may be your friend now but she was introduced to us by my sister,” Nirmal said evenly.

“So?”

“Sudha, I think we need to talk about this,” he said and stood up from the sofa, and continued in an agitated voice, “We may live in a foreign country and work with multiethnic groups of people, our cultural heritage is an integral part of our identity. I don’t want my children addressing their elderly friends by their first names. I want them to be cultured.”

“Do you mean white people are uncultured?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth!”

Rina began to worry that their argument might lead to a fight, a terrible fight, the kind she had witnessed numerous times for as long as she could remember. Her mother would start shrieking at the top of her lungs, lamenting her fate, blaming her parents for arranging her marriage to such a lowly man, a man inferior to her in every way. And her father would start throwing things; finally he would tie his show laces and would disappear from the house, not returning for hours.

“It’s okay!” Rina shouted. “It doesn’t matter how I should address Smita Bhatt. This is not something for you both to fight over. You are overeating.” Rina did not want her parents to be together at this moment. Trying to calm them down, she reminded them, “Look, you both have taken the day off. Isn’t it? Mum you’ve called in sick because of your migraine, and Papa, you’ve to attend to a lot of chores and errands today. You have



to take the car for a wash and also go to the passport office for your passport renewal. So why don't you both mind your own business and let me decide how to address Smita Bhatt."

Sudha went off in a huff, and Nirmal sat back on the sofa poker-faced. Sudha and Nirmal found so many oddities in each other's behaviour that at times they felt they were totally incompatible and blamed that on their upbringing in different continents. But they never thought of a divorce. They remained loyal to each other, although they did not love each other deeply and passionately.

Ever since Rina was a little girl she had taken it upon herself to try to make her parents' relationship a bit loving. She would book movie or theatre tickets for them, reserve tables at restaurants, or simply take Naina outdoors with the view to give them some private moments at home.

She picked up the receiver to call Smita Bhatt. Should she address her Auntie or Smita-ji, she was still indecisive. Perhaps, at times like this the western style is better, she thought; one can address everyone by their first name. The system is convenient as it transcends age and relationship barriers. Then, it is human nature- everyone likes to hear the sound of their name.

The phone rang for a long time but no one responded at Smita's residence. "No one is picking up," she said to her father.

Nirmal, who was sitting silently, smiled. It suddenly occurred to Rina that her father liked Smita Bhatt more than just as a friend.

"She must have gone somewhere," he said smiling. "She is new to this country and inquisitive, keeps exploring it..."

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# Where Do I Belong?

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