



NANDINI BHATTACHARYA

# The Cousin's Wedding

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Shabari had painted the seats on which the bride and groom would be carried. On Charu's she had painted a vial of some indefinite medicine, a syringe, and a stethoscope – he worked for a major multinational pharma -- and the peanut gallery applauded. On Shoma's seat she had painted a crude eighties telephone, black and white. Shoma had been a call center girl before marriage to Charu made her future unreadable. Charu's seat was bordered in red; Shoma's in a metallic yellow that hurt the eyes. "This is the best I can do with the tools I have," Shabari declared ruefully as she contemplated her handiwork, still on her haunches. Near her, a six-year old boy stood breathless. He looked at her now, his tubby face registering wonder and undying love.

Charu took a look, and snorted. "That telephone looks like liberalization was really good for India. Mind you, this is a card-carrying communist saying this."

The most comfort she felt was in the company of Ba-

kulrani and a few stray young girls. Bakul had showed up for the wedding, out of sheer force of habit probably. Bakul was befuddled from her opium habit, and when she was high her talk was always narky. She snivelled vocally, to the great delight of the Neronic children, that she did not understand why the household quartered her in the ground floor, where all the servants and gatekeepers slept. Her great fear was of rape. She sat in a lilac opium haze and confabulated with sister spinsters about the dangers posed by men. They were everywhere, the assembly nodded and whispered; behind office doors, on trams, in cinema halls, in government offices in the late afternoons, in women's colleges. The women agreed also that the men delighted most greatly in virgins. "If once they get a virgin, no, they do it once, twice, thrice, the brutes!" the whisper went around. "Hard to find virgins nowadays, that's the reason, no sister Bakul?" The assembled spinsters or virgins with no prospects of marriage, ever, found this probable. Anyway, Bakul who often chaired these sessions of *paan*, *chaa* and whatever-else, had her fears resurrected every day at this time. Her heart swelled in impotent anguish, imagining her own dishonor. She knew she had no protectors.

On the wedding night Bakulrani was not allowed to come up – she was too high and too unmanageable.

Charu's brother-in-law had worked very hard to have only the right people sit up in the newly-weds' room the night of the wedding ceremony. Shoma sat huddled on the snowy, scented bedspread, a crumpled rose on snow. Young men stood about talking to girls they had just met or brought with them. A girl was standing to one side, with a group of Shoma's college friends, all of them giggling and chuckling, conscious of their power. She had an audacious bust. She was smiling slightly, baring her teeth a little, and below the nervous beads of sweat on her neck and collarbones, the bust rose high and fell dramatically.

In the bridal chamber, the party was warming up. Someone had got rum.

"None for her," Charu said menacingly, pointing to Shoma. Shoma lay now on the white bedspread like a large, spreading stain. She had fallen asleep. A very soft snoring came from her.

Shabari took her plastic cup out to the terrace and lit a cigarette. When she saw Charu now, she could not remember him as a lover, even from the recent episode of their farce. Many other shapes and touches smudged out Charu. The rum trickled down to a warm place in her stomach. She felt herself getting a little hysterical.

Shoma seemed like a really nice girl. She had smiled

shyly and meekly at the comments wrapping the noose around her, even at the comment about her slight chubbiness -- "bride is healthy, no?" -- from the aunt who did not understand or care that young women today want to be slim. Even disappointed cattiness about the jewelry from Shoma's family had caused only a small shadow of uncertainty to pass over the smile. Shoma's parents were nice people from the suburbs.

Clearly she was a good-natured girl. Clearly she would make Charu happy, whatever that meant. Someone had reported that Shoma liked the perfume and the Yves St. Laurent watch that Shabari had brought. Though gold would have been better, of course. People were working hard on being in Shoma's good books; they expected to live many more years in the household that would one day be Charu's. Shyly, Shoma had acknowledged to Shabari her pleasure at these gifts with a little nod.

Now she was sleeping in a heap on the dreadful white sheets. They would stain the sheets no doubt, Shoma surely being a virgin. Thank God that here was no custom of displaying nuptial sheets the day after, but Charu would probably brag secretly to some of his friends, and Aunt Bipasha would look pleased and bereaved at the same time, her firstborn male given to another woman,

while Shoma, Shoma would probably look like the goddess Durga, preparing for the shocking plunge into the long, muddled river of wife for life.

The wedding music was just fading out, the last moans now more sorrowful than story-telling. This moment of entering a stranger's life, and he yours, as though the past never was, or was only for this. She saw how Shoma smiled, as though wanting to make everything right, right away. She had been set adrift on this new river of life, cast into a house where one day she would not know where to find water to drink and the next day she would be asked to care for everyone in it.

Someone in the room pimpled with sound shouted hoarsely, "Hey girls, let us have songs, what do you all say? Kalpana, why don't you show us your magic, that you used to enchant us with in college? Do you still have those pipes?" The person said "pipes" in English, setting everybody laughing. Shabari tiptoed to get a look through the window that opened onto the black sky. Kalpana looked uncomfortable, but said nothing. Another one of Shoma's more abrasive college friends said loudly, however, "Mind your own pipes. Want me to get you some more *ganja* to put in them?" The room was flooded by a wave of *oohs*, *aahs*, *baap-res*. Snatches of "Woman or switchblade?" and "Gave what, eight an-

*nas* a kilo!" floated about. Kalpana, however, snapped suddenly into "*You don't know me. . .*" Obviously she had come prepared. The people in the room fell into a gorged, glassy-eyed, bored, slow foot-tapping rhythm. Someone shouted as soon as Kalpana finished, "Sing something recent *yaar*, not this nineteen-one-ty stuff!" "Yes, yes, something recent," other voices chimed in. Kalpana broke obligingly into "*Mujhko beautiful banake tension kiun diya [Why cause me all this tension by creating me beautiful]. . .*" the room burst into a handclapping, footstomping frenzy, someone catcalled in the back, an unknown drunk was heard shouting, "tension for nothing, *yaar*, you are not beautiful," but over all the song was a huge hit.

Shoma was awake; all the noise had woken her. A young man started talking to Shoma in a low voice. Shoma started animatedly explaining something. Was there a hint of ardor between them? Had Charu noticed? Would he say something if he had?

Charu was obviously not going to notice. It was probably beneath his dignity. Shabari lowered her head, suddenly queasy. The rum swirled about in her stomach. It also made her mischievous, careless. She shouldn't have stayed in the wedding house, but gone to sleep with all the other women now supposedly free

of desire: the wives, the spinsters. They were probably sitting in their darkened rooms, looking at the dark, wet night streets of the emptying city, covering their mouths and noses against the billowing fumes of the lorries and the occasional renegade bus, their eyes screwed, their faces scrunched. No more music or coy looks for them. She thought, *nota bene*, I was trying to be good, even with the rum swirling inside me, lest it be said that I was merely willful and did not resist my bandit desires. Living in America was supposed to have made her self-sufficient, or at least to have made her desires invisible, irrelevant, to this population. She said, I say, I should have not come. I am a necessary ghostliness now. She looked again at the bed, and there Shoma was, still talking to the unknown man, but Charu was gone. She looked around the room. He was not in it. She thought about Bakul's eyes, watchful, bleary, demented.

From the bridal chamber came a snatch of a melancholy fifties song, "What a strange story it is that you have become another's. . . ." There was a Hindi film song for everything.