



Every family has a story

THE RED CARPET



LAVANYA SANKARAN

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THE RED CARPET

for my husband, Nikhil Kumar,
and
for my parents, Laxam Sankaran and S. Sankaran

past perfect, present perfect

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BOMBAY THIS

Ramu studied the animated woman in front of him, a slight smile on his lips. And apart from the minor variances: his gender, darker skin color, the carefully trimmed goatee resting on his chin, and the worrisome hairline that danced away from his forehead in the coy manner that plagued so many men in their early thirties, it was practically a Mona Lisa smile – full of mystery and hidden amusement.

The woman, Ashwini, was a recent import to the city, having moved to Bangalore with her parents after living her whole life in Bombay. After a year here, she was still going through withdrawal symptoms, and her conversation was frequently colored with Bombay this and Bombay that and in Bombay we and o god why can't Bangalore? If she were smart, he thought, she would learn that this invariably irritated her listeners, many of whom had lived in other parts of the country and indeed the world, but on the whole had managed to assimilate into this southern city

with considerably more grace. One saw her everywhere however, in all the pubs and all the parties, because in addition to her list of nostalgic complaints, she was also armed with a lot of verve and fun. She was up for anything, a good-time charlie, a bustling ball of energy and laughter, a squeal and hug and kiss for everybody, her hips grinding inadvertently but pleasantly against the men she talked to as her bottom swayed happily to passing bits of music.

When she met people at parties, she didn't (as Ramu might) smile, chat, and withdraw from them until the next party. Instead she had the knack of making friends, and (before they knew it) of climbing deep into their lives. Then, there she'd be: visiting, cooing to their children, listening with concern to tales of their mothers-in-law, proffering advice on where to get the best blouse tailor versus the best pant tailor and who caters the best party soufflés, all of which she amazingly seemed to know, pulled out of the air of a strange and new city by some inexplicable consumerist osmosis. Every party Ramu attended recently had some contribution by her: Ashwini did the decorations, the hostess would say. Ashwini brought the sweet. Do you like the curtains? Ashwini showed me where to buy them. And all this, of course, to Ashwini's tune of Bombay this and Bombay that.

As far as Ramu was concerned, she was just one of those women one met in the evenings and promptly forgot about in the mornings. It was only recently that his interest had taken a direct and more personal turn.

Now he studied her and realized how self-defeating her actions were. He felt a sudden urge to explain this to her (first, of course, sitting her down in a corner armchair, extinguishing her cigarette, placing her drink on a side table, and waiting for her

Bombay This

eyes to focus on him instead of dancing about the room): Bangalore was a strange city, a potpourri of beggars and billionaires and determinedly laid-back ways. People dressed down here, not just on Fridays, but every day, and more so on occasions – and gently derided those who didn't. They spoke of their city's attractions to visitors in tones of disparaging surprise. Oh. You like the weather? Yeah, it's okay. I guess. Cool. Blue skies and all. Cosmopolitan people, you think? Yeah, they're a mixed bag. Different, one-*tharah* types. Not so hard-and-fast. A chill crowd, like. Doing ultra-cool things *chumma*, simply, for no reason other than to do it.

'See the software lads,' he could say, by way of example. See the software lads shrug off their stock options. (No, no, I'm *still* a simple *saaru-soru* rasam-and-rice guy at heart.) See the software lads morph their inner walter mitty into alfred doolittle (I swear, da, it was just a little bit of blooming luck). See them stab each other in the back trying to prove that they too can please-kindly-adjust, the mantra that the city uses to exact merciless compromise from all of its denizens.

Such self-deprecation appeared modern, with its blue jeans and infotech ways, but was actually a very old courtesy. Deride yourself so others may praise you. Did Ashwini know this? Did she know she was spreading irritation before her like a virus? And here, Ramu found his thoughts slowing to a halt. Perhaps she wasn't. Perhaps no one else was really bothered by it. Actually, until recently, neither was he, previously just swatting her behavior out of his mind as he might a fly. At parties, after all, one met all sorts of people and thought nothing further of it.

Until recently.

'Oh god,' Ashwini was saying, 'you should just see them,

yaar. Everybody does it, all the time. In parties, in bars, in people's houses. You're talking to somebody, and then suddenly, they're doing a line. It's crazy!

The people listening to the excited pitch of her voice did so with an air of fascinated disapproval, like height-of-empire englishwomen being regaled with missionary tales of naughty hindoo heathens. Ashwini was just back from a trip north, and deeply impressed by the spread of cocaine in polite Bombay society. I mean, she said, you don't see anything like that here. In Bangalore. No indeed, thought her listeners primly, all of whom smoked the occasional joint, but nothing more. They were strictly old-fashioned in that way.

'Did you try any?' someone asked.

'Oh god, no! Even though my friends – from good families, you know, from big industrial families – even though they all kept asking me to do it, I said no. They kept saying: god, you're so cool, so hip, why don't you try it? I said, nothing doing, I'll drink all the vodka and smoke as many joints as you like,' said Ashwini, proceeding to demonstrate, 'but this, nothing doing! Shit *yaar*, imagine me doing cocaine!'

Shit, thought Ramu, imagine anyone giving a damn.

Three days later, Ramu left his mother's presence with a vague feeling of doom.

This was not going to work.

Entrusting such a crucial mission to his mother was becoming a farce: like sending someone to the market with strict instructions to buy luscious, juicy fruit, and having them repeatedly, idiotically, come home with boring, healthy-for-you vegetables.

Yet Ramu couldn't extricate himself easily. He was, like any unmonk, a captive of his desires.

In recent months, Ramu had found himself attracted, regrettably, not to the pretty young things he met all over the place (for apart from a fierce desire to shag them, there was nothing else he could imagine doing with them); rather, he found himself being drawn to the wives in his circle of friends. Women his own age, claimed by marriage and scarred by childbirth years before; women who waded comfortably between dirty diapers and smelly spouses and stressful jobs and thieving servants and occasional bright evenings filled with beer and good cheer. They laughed easily with him, without that brittle coquetry that younger, single women offered in the name of flirting. They sometimes shone with all the gloss of a recent visit to the beauty parlor, but were more frequently without makeup, displaying casually hirsute underarms and rough-stubbed legs dressed in old shorts. Yet he was seized with feverish desires to taste the beaded sweat on their upper lips as they frowned over some chore, and to bury his nose and mouth and body in the liquid warmth between their thighs. He wanted to make homes with them. He wanted to fill himself with their comfortable, lazy sexuality. He wanted to spend hours in their kitchens cooking vast and creative Sunday meals with them, and then spend hours more eating and drinking, and lounging around with newspapers, absentmindedly rubbing toes to the distant clatter of maids cleaning up the debris in the kitchen. He wanted to father their children. He wanted to have little domestic quarrels about curtains, and long conversations about career issues, and exchange bright little secret jokes in whispers about people they both knew.

It was time to be married.

Ramu's decision to supplement his wife-finding efforts with his mother's was a purely practical one. Ma had resources he would never have access to. Ma had a lifetime membership to that hidden, systemic device, specially designed for men in his position: the matrimonial industry, a sinister social syndicate redolent with its own brokers and goons and gossip.

Ma was a blessing. Effectively disguised.

As he'd expected, she shot into action. Ma had first broached the subject of his marriage five years earlier, but had been shouted at for her pains. Mind your own business, Ramu had said. She was doing nothing else, but she didn't tell him that, instead biding her time, waiting patiently for the right psychological moment to bring to her son's disposal a vast arsenal of resources, contacts, and networking facilities. Ma was a one-woman marriage-bureau-in-waiting. Waiting, that is, to match her Long-lived *Chiranjeevi* with someone else's Very-lucky *Sowbhagyavathi*; and to print up those invitations: *Chi. Ramu, son-of-herself, to wed Sow. Girl-from-good-family. Please do come.*

This afternoon's conversation, like so many in recent days, was littered with the fruits of her research and followed a pattern that Ramu, with veteran discomfort, was beginning to recognize: Ma, bright, cheerful, animated; himself, uneasy, like a tethered animal sensing a storm; uneasy, and wondering about the forces of nature he had inadvertently released.

'So, what do you think?' she pressed him, as she served him with crisp fried *vadas* and a cup of tea.

Ramu dragged a vada through the coconut chutney, not willing to commit himself.

Bombay This

'So there is this Sundaram girl,' she said, repeating herself. 'Very nice. Very pretty. Good choice.'

Ramu couldn't sit through it all again without comment. 'Pretty? Please, Ma! She has a face like a dog's behind.'

'Okay. Not so pretty, then. But a very good family, nevertheless. Very well-to-do. Eat.'

She eyed him with speculative hope. 'Or there is that other girl, from Visakhapatnam. Excellent family, decent people, and I really like her, Ramu. What is her name? Sukanya. She reminds me of myself when I got married . . .'

Ramu's father grunted, in the wary manner of a man reminded of the same thing.

'She is really nice,' said Ma. 'You should meet her. You will like . . . Her mother says she is a very good cook. She has also been brought up in a nice, old-fashioned way. No boyfriends, or any of that nonsense. She will not want to go to work . . . and why should she? Certainly, we have enough money to support a hundred wives. She will stay at home, and she will be good company for me.'

This was the problem. Ma appeared to be looking for a wife for herself.

'Ma,' said Ramu, 'if I want a good cook, I will hire one. I don't think I need to *marry* one. And what difference does it make whether she's had boyfriends or not? I want a wife, not a nun.'

'Tcha!' Ma dismissed his words. 'All those modern girls you like so much will not settle down properly. They will be too busy taking care of themselves to take care of either you or us. And besides, Ramu, when you get married, you must consider our feelings also. After all, we will all be living together, and your wife will spend more time with me than with you.'

This was where Ramu begged to differ, but had still not found the courage to do so vocally. He lived with his parents in a large house. When he'd started working, he had moved out of his childhood bedroom and into a corner suite, with a separate entrance to come and go as he pleased, and joining his parents only for meals. It had worked well for several years, minimizing his housekeeping and maximizing his freedom, but now he suddenly felt as if he were wearing diapers. He wanted to move out, but knew that to raise the topic with his parents was to immediately invoke the reproachful deities of Family Shame and Abandonment. If he moved out after he got married, at least they could direct all their ire and blame on his (as yet unknown) wife.

It was a comforting thought.

His appetite for the vadas faded away. He glanced at his watch. He was supposed to meet some friends at the club later in the evening; perhaps he had time for a quick swim before that.

It was then that she brought up Ashwini.

Ma, of course, didn't refer to her by name, but by antecedents.

'Of course, if you really want modern, there is, as I said, that Desai girl. North-Indian, of course, but vegetarian. Parents are very good people, but the girl, I feel, is too modern.'

Ramu heard her out in some confusion. When she'd first mentioned Ashwini's name a week ago, he had dismissed it out of hand. Surely there were better options to be had? But now, he wondered, perhaps there weren't. Maybe those other options would never be better than Wealthy Butt-face and the Virgin Cook.

'She has studied well. She has a good job. She probably does not know how to cook,' Ma said, 'so she will suit you nicely. Too

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modern!’ Ma said: ‘Her mother tells me this girl – this, uh, Ashwini – does not even know that we have spoken about her. She will get angry, her mother says. What nonsense! But still . . . they are a good family, so she will adjust. . . . A good family, good background, and educated, also. There is a cousin,’ Ma said, ‘with a PhD.’

‘Wow,’ Ramu said, knowing that he had taken a wrong step.

He made his way thoughtfully to the club swimming pool. It was his daily habit: to swim thirty placid laps, and he did this throughout the year, shivering his way through icy winter waters, or ploughing through the hordes of summer children squealing in the shallows. It was now October, the monsoon rains had been and gone, and temperatures were rising once again, for a last late burst of warmth before winter.

As usual for this time of the year, the pool was empty of all but the group of four elderly men who never seemed to leave. He paused by the side of the pool, watching them swim. In his mind, he referred to them as the Buffaloes; they were swaddled in the fat of a lifetime and wrapped in discolored skin and liked to immerse themselves in the shallows. They cast vague smiles in Ramu’s direction. On land, the Buffaloes stood transformed into his parents’ so-respectable friends. But in the water they were part of some strange amphibious species, and Ramu eyed them dubiously before diving in.

The clear waters of the pool couldn’t wash the truth away. The fact had to be faced: his mother was unleashed and gaining momentum. In his worst nightmares, of being swept away in a

torrential downpour of maternal enthusiasm, Ramu clung feverishly to his lifeline – he had final veto. He had Final Veto. Hehad-FinalVeto.

He pulled himself out of the water and headed back to the men's changing room. His gaze wandered automatically over the long hair and tight jeans of the young woman standing to one side. She appeared to be waiting for someone; from the tetchy restlessness of her manner, Ramu guessed it was probably her son.

She couldn't enter, naturally, since the men's changing room at the club was inviolate; an ode, like Michelangelo's David, to pristine male nudity, and she seemed to resent her exclusion. Ramu had heard her speak: he knew her voice to be husky and melodious, as attractive as the rest of her, but now it changed, rising quickly up the scale and increasing in volume until she sounded shrill and irritable.

'Hurry up,' she called. 'Do you think I have time to waste? *Jaldi! Jaldi!*'

He could tell when she became aware of his presence: her body tensed, and she favored him with a small, tight-lipped smile; a grudging acknowledgment of distant acquaintance. Ramu nodded back as he walked past, refusing to point out that while the acquaintance might be grudging – at least on her part – it was far from distant. He had dated this woman, many years ago. This was, of course, before she had married – and definitely before her husband had started working in the same office as Ramu.

Now, the implacable gods of social propriety forced her into a convenient amnesia, and Ramu humored her, all the while wondering what his colleague would say if Ramu interrupted one of

their business discussions with the information that his wife had once spent an entire evening with Ramu's hand between her thighs.

Nothing more, alas, but those were the days when Ramu and his male friends had been happy with whatever they could get. That was when dates had consisted of the best cheap dinner that one could afford, followed by driving one's car (borrowed for the occasion from some tolerant uncle) furiously to dark corners of the city for dessert: a half hour spent in industriously attempting to explore the Inner Woman. Any inner woman.

That was, in short, when they were twenty, and achieving consensual sex with skittish young women whose knees were pressed tightly together by the weight of Indian morality was a triumph in itself. It had been enough to say:

I've been and gone and done it.

To say: I found a hole and dived right in.

To say: I fucked her. And to dream enviously of their western counterparts; men who, being blessed with women of Easy Virtue, reportedly did their fucking much younger. Eighteen. Sixteen. Fourteen. Twelve. In some countries, the rumor said, they were *born* copulating.

After twenty-five, things changed. The women relaxed, were easier, and suddenly whom you slept with became more important than what you did. Quality, dear boy, quality over quantity.

But it was only now, at thirty, that the true Call of the Patriarchy began to make itself felt: the urge to father, to provide, to pay bills for More Than One. Ramu never discussed this with his bachelor friends, for to do so would be to acknowledge the strange conundrum they faced.

For a decade, it seemed, they had been festooned with