

Tale of a city man

IT was the moment Natasha had been waiting for all summer. A moment in which the blue winged flies drunk with a "crow-cracked open" jackfruit instantly detached and fell to the ground. A moment in which the green mangoes from the tree in her backyard as well as next door pounded the squelching muddy earth like disguised meteorites (with no specific aim).

After a beckoning of thunder, a hard shower of rain followed. It was the thirty first of July. Natasha's 20th birthday. Coincidentally, the first day of monsoon in Kiva, a remote island off the Indian Ocean, and the day Oliver Lalani, her fiancé, would return from a two-month-long corporate trip to Belgium. Oliver was a dark, intriguing man. He was intelligent. He owned a pale "ciel blue" Bentley with his father's initials carved above the name plate. He had this serene smile and a well-established, "experienced" attitude that provoked a kind of friction or tension among his college peers. The man that filled every girl's dreamiest cotton candy fantasy in that small, under developed island.

Natasha had diligently arisen that morning at dawn, scrubbing the floors and polishing ornamental pieces in the tin-roofed, summery house she called home. After feeding her adopted grey and white goat named "Gorgonzola" that kept her company, she would start preparing the evening meal of minted lamb as well as lychee and lime syrup to go with the coconut ice cream for dessert. These were the only dishes she learned from her mother who was a cook. A cook who found it impossible to take time out from her twenty-four hour job at the local resort restaurant to attend to family issues. To her, family meant only the kids Natasha and Nathan now that her husband divorced her a year and a half ago.

Natasha was a naturally self-disciplined girl who was used to being in charge of her fifteen year old brother as well as the housework and homework since an early age. But despite her domestic obligations, she managed to date one or two guys from school that made her life more enjoyable.

But one day while Natasha went out to a promotional boat sale with Nathan and her grand-father, she noticed young gentleman in an ocean blue shirt and "city sunglasses", examining a speed motor boat. Natasha's grand-father was a stubborn, competitive man who was determined to buy the very same boat at a price bargained with the salesman. The young man took off his glasses and grinned appreciatively at the grand father who was then struck by the fact that he looked so fondly at his young grand daughter. It wasn't long before this man started talking and called her for a date a day later, soon they realised they were falling in love. This was the story of how Oliver, one of the most sought-after bachelors with all the girls and speedboats in his world met this modest yet captivating "island creature" he went on to brag about to his friends back home in Belgium.

The house was literally gleaming cleanly from floor to ceiling and candles were lit around the garden and even on the balcony so as to show Oliver a piece of her heart as he drove up to the gate that evening. But evening came and went. Oliver hadn't turned up. Or the next morning at a dawn. Natasha checked the telephone message receiver. A husky yet calm voice as familiar as rain began speaking to her. "Honey, it's me. The flight was cancelled. Just wanted to let you know that I've got some extra business to attend to. More than I actually expected. Call you later. Bye."

For a moment Natasha stared out of the window trying to keep her eyes fixed on Gorgonzola who had somehow loosened his own leash and was chewing off the radishes next to the mint patch (he was "trained" not to go near the mint patch). Gorgonzola knows well what he can eat and what he cannot she thought to herself. But she contemplated the steady and purposeful tone of her fiancé. The simplicity and promptness of his message. The reason he happened to break this "promise."

A springy roar of laughter emerged from

the kitchen. It was Nathan making toast for breakfast before he had to catch the school bus. Did you know that Granddad helped me with my algebra so I got an A on my quiz yesterday?"

"Oh Nathan, good for you."

"Aren't you proud?"

"Of course I am, you know how gifted granddad is and that he used to teach math at Presley middle school. It's no wonder he's still as sharp as ever."

"Well, are you gonna rent out the new Kill Bill as a reward?"

"No, but I'll figure out something else you'd like and certainly not today." "Why, how come? And what's up with your boyfriend Oli?"

"He left a message on the answering machine. He's not coming home. Yet. Some business to take care of. But I don't want you to miss the bus so here's your bag of blue Gatorade and blue-iced brownies inside. Run now." Natasha cleared up the mess of crumbs and jelly her brother had just left on the wooden counter. As she wiped up the surface she could only wonder about Oliver. How odd that her fiancé said only what was crucial to say. Frankness and "straight to the point" is the motto of city men. How could she possibly question the manners of a city prince?

Later on the next day, Natasha's mother called, in an off-duty break from the resort. Like most mothers in that island, Natasha's mother was a tanned, traditionally influ-

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enced, woman in her mid-forties who favored Catholicism. And like most mothers in regards to their daughter on the basis of an upcoming marriage she cheerfully asked about the first thing that passed her thoughts, which was Oliver. Natasha then went on to explain the circumstances.

"Tasha dear, I warned you that he's not the reliable sort. Looks can be so deceiving and yet we strive to gain love from those who obtain them. I always thought you needed someone more trustworthy and loyal, like Tim the sweet preacher. Men must have a good reason for taking so much time to commit themselves otherwise it's not worth holding on to them. Besides, look at my previous experience, Fred. I wouldn't even call it a real marriage after I found him making out with a strip-teaser at the Capoeira night club. All I am saying is be careful not to fall for a mistake. It's the best advice I can give you as a mother."

Later that afternoon there was a bell ringing outside. Natasha set aside the chess game she was playing with Nathan and dashed out to unlatch the gate. A cinnamon-skinned, hazel-eyed man in a black suit, a red tie and a small black shoulder case came in with his mountain bike. It was Tim. "Tasha, what a pleasant surprise! I just rode here from the church session I had today at three. Your mom called but I told her not to get so uptight about you. You're too grown up to be fussed around by her, at least in my opinion. I actually came to let you know about something quite spectacular. Would you let me in?" Natasha bit her lip. "Yes Tim, let me see how far Nathan intends to go with his game so we can have a private talk if necessary." Natasha requested her brother to put the game on hold and go take Gorgonzola for a little stroll around the back. "Ooooooh, Biker Man has come to the rescue" Nathan sarcastically cooed.

"Quiet Nathan, I'll be done in no time"

Nathan left the room, grinning in a way that Natasha couldn't help but return the favor. How she loved Nathan for his indiscreet lightheartedness, almost telepathic communications. Then as she looked back at Tim, her previously playful mood seemed to have instantly diminished. Inside that

alien black case hanging on his shoulder. "Listen, I've been trying to figure out whether this has been going on for more than two years or so..."

"What?"

"Something I've been trying to tell you all this time while you've been with that Flemish guy."

"You near my fiancé?"

"Yes of course he is, hun, but Daniel has just given me a briefing on this periodic alliance with a jeopardizing M&M deal. It's all here, labeled out in hot red, deadlines repeated over and over, three month letter warnings, early conviction to a potential life sentence. All in this case."

"You sent Daniel over there as a spy?"

"I paid him. Fortunately he was able to extract some very useful information, if only partial. You see, this lover man had some real issues behind his sleeve. Big issues."

"But he told me it was just a part of his wacky past. A thing he regrets having gotten pushed into despite his "helplessly filthy rich" friends already scraping out that stuff like salt from a pavement as though they were black pearls from pearly oysters. How he was determined to be free of all of them including the million dollar zapping losers themselves. He told me he was destined to make up for all his mistakes or atleast he would definitely try."

"Tasha you might still be stuck on the idea that he's coming back. This is too dangerous. He is not the man who adores you for who you really are. He was using you. Using you for shelter, for guard against his rivals. His enemies. The cops. The ring-"Stop right there. Please go away. Just leave me right now. NOW."

A wealthy window of emotion, normally well suppressed or controlled to a certain extent began to melt. A bead of tear lightly teased and trickled its way down Natasha's smooth caramel face.

Six days later, Natasha had just finished hanging up the last few clothes items on the laundry line when grandfather came out with his light yellow shirt, wearing that grin that never failed to fill Natasha's spirit with a sense of mystic excitement. He showed her a piece of paper in his hand. "Tasha, you wouldn't believe who sent you all these bundles of orange blossoms, would you?" "No grand dad but do let me in on the secret."

"Kutcher and Marie Bogaerts. Long time neighbors of the Lalani's as printed down here."

Natasha held the card in her hands. Why would they send her flowers all the way from Europe by airmail without even coming close to contact with her? It wasn't even her birthday. And how did they find out where she lived anyway? Just then Granddad's eyes began to beam like disco balls and his smile widened across his sun burnt cheeks. There was a note attached to one of the flower bundles. It read: Natasha, forgive me but there was this one thing I had to try to cut off. More serious than family matters and more serious than my still infatuated ex girlfriend. I hope this will be the last time I'll ever need to break a promise. I've broken enough hearts and minds already, not to mention the balls of those who hated me the most. The boys who were so damn screwed enough to make me sell everything that I never was into. Waiting for the complete process of engraving was also holding me back which takes about eleven days maximum in a place like Van Clefs. Fortunately, I talked the engraver myself (using my special charms) into speeding up the process a little so there it is. Hopefully it didn't turn out to be a spoiled surprise but just a hint of what I've had in mind all year. We've still got so much to catch up on. Arriving at Kiva airport tomorrow at six twenty a.m. Love, Oli P.S: How's that preaching bike dude over there? Got some interesting company while I was out of town?

Love has a way of unmasking who we really are. It has a way of seeping through the toughest of obstacles and enables us to overcome them. "I knew I wasn't blind" Natasha thought. And with that she flung her arms around Grand dad and kissed him a heartfelt thank you on the cheek.

By Ana Moudud

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (Mar. 21-April 19)

Drastic financial losses may be likely if you lend money. You can make new connections if you play your cards right. Romance will develop through work. This is a great day for a trip. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

You can beautify your surroundings by renovating or redecorating. Don't let individuals with wild schemes talk you into a financial deal that is not likely to be successful. Overindulgence could cause problems for you with your loved ones. If you try to manipulate emotional situations you will find yourself alienated. Your lucky day this week will be Wednesday.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

Your partner may blame you for everything. Exercise your talents and present your ideas to groups you think you can contribute to. Opportunities to go out with clients or colleagues will be in your best interest. You will be accident prone if you aren't careful this week. Your lucky day this week will be Tuesday.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Be aware that minor accidents or injury may prevail if you are preoccupied. Be honest in your communication and don't lose your cool. Things may not be as they sound. Consider the source before you believe what you hear. Your lucky day this week will be Wednesday.

LEO (July 23-Aug 23)

Put your energy into home renovations. You will easily blow situations out of proportion. Make plans that will take you to exotic destinations. Visit friends you don't get to see that often. Your lucky day this week will be Friday.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 23)

You are best to stick to yourself this week. You can surprise members of your family, which in turn will bring you a pat on the back. Don't let the cat out of the bag. Friends or groups that you're affiliated with may want you to contribute more cash than you can really afford. Your lucky day this week will be Monday.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

Have some fun, but draw the line if someone tries to fast talk their way into your heart. Money problems will get worse if your partner hasn't been playing by the rules. You are better off visiting friends or relatives than entertaining at home. You are exceptional at presenting your ideas. Your lucky day this week will be Monday.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24-Nov. 21)

Unstable relationships are likely. Don't believe everything you hear. This will be a great night to invite friend over to visit. Try to get out and socialise. Your lucky day this week will be Friday.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

Put your energy into behind the scenes activities. Join a club to work off that excess energy; but consider ways of doing that without spending the money. You should get into some of those creative hobbies that you always said you wanted to do. Your self esteem will come back if you take part in organisational functions that allow you to be in the lime light. Your lucky day this week will be Wednesday.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 20)

Financial limitations are likely if you take risks. Try not to skirt issues if you think you'll hurt some one's feelings. Entertainment could be pleasing if it is of an energetic nature. You need time to rejuvenate. Your lucky day this week will be Wednesday.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 21-Feb. 19)

You will be full of energy and you need to find something constructive to do. Love relationships will flourish. Do something that will be stimulating and creative. You won't be able to keep a secret. Your lucky day this week will be Saturday.

PISCES (Feb. 20-March. 20)

You can open up to your mate and let them know what you expect out of this relationship. Your lover may be annoyed if you have been flirtatious or not attentive to their needs. Children may pose a problem if they don't like suggestions. Get involved in jobs that require creative input. You can win points with both peers and superiors. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.