

SHORT STORY

Mrs Dutta of Jackson Heights

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The smell of food being cooked for the wedding was all over the apartment building. As Mrs Dutta entered with her shopping cart, she thought, "Polar with ghee, chicken korma to be sure...that's a staple, a vegetable dish? At one time I could cook all that in one afternoon."

She had overheard the women of third floor discussing the wedding of Tarek, the eldest son of the Islamic family. It was to be tomorrow evening.

And they had forgotten to invite Mrs Dutta.

Mrs Dutta lived alone in a two-room apartment on the first floor of this building in Jackson Heights, New York and she had been living here longer than any of the other residents. Even till a few years back she owned one of the two telephones in the building where the residents were all immigrants from South Asia. Whenever someone came to make a call, Mrs Dutta would tell them about how she came to the United States from Bangladesh, with only one suitcase and a husband she had known for two days. As they talked into the phone, Mrs Dutta would continue, "They said my groom is a journalist, works for a good newspaper in America. You know what he used to do? He used to sell newspapers on the pavement. My father was a landowner in Khulna. We had rice fields and sugar cane crops and vegetables in our garden. We never had to buy our food."

Sometimes during the religious festivals like Eid or Diwali, *desi* acquaintances would invite Mrs Dutta to their houses. She would sit in a corner, munching sweets, in the crowded kitchen where the women gathered. She would pour the tea in her saucer to cool it and slurp it up, going on about her past, "My husband got lucky and got the DV visa. It was easier thirty years back, you know. He gradually became a 'senior regional supervisor' of the newspaper distribution department."

"We did put our son through college," she'd say, but the women were usually busy helping the host. Even though Mrs Dutta knew nobody was paying attention to her, she liked to sit there among the women, their voices, and their clanging utensils. It was better than being in her quiet apartment.

It was twelve o'clock on a

Sunday morning. Time for the news and NY Lotto's winning numbers. For years Mrs Dutta has been buying these lottery tickets. They helped her to look forward to the next day. She turned on the TV in the drawing room and sat on the old sofa.

NY Lotto came on and as usual, began with a short clip about yesterday's winner. When the box began to roll, Mrs Dutta matched the numbers one by one. The farthest she had ever gone with matching numbers was half way through the eight digits. But today she continued calling the numbers aloud with the anchor and her heart beat faster as she came to the last number.

"And a five! Congratulations to the winner," the anchor said in a smooth voice.

Mrs Dutta was sweating. She sat still, clutching the ticket to her chest. Forty-two million dollars. She couldn't even remember how many zeros went to a million.

Mrs Dutta sat in the same spot for a long time as the TV went on babbling. So what do I do now, she thought. Call them? Oh yes, forty-five days to take the ticket to a...to a, yes...Lottery Claim Center, she recalled. Forty-two million, forty-two million...the words jumped around in her mind. What will I do with all that money? Mrs Dutta's heart began to beat faster again.

She closed her eyes and saw green paddy fields stretching into the horizon. She saw herself as a young girl running to school through yellow mustard plants as the sunshine warmed her shoulders. Mrs Dutta took a deep breath and calmed down. When her husband was alive, he used to talk about going back Bangladesh one day, but he never saved up enough money. Now she was free to go anywhere she liked.

It was almost two in the afternoon when Mrs Dutta got up from the sofa and called the 1-800 number on the back of the ticket. They told her that the nearest claim center was in downtown Manhattan. She got her overcoat, put the ticket in a crisp yellow envelope, and put it inside her blouse.

She called the Islam family to see if they could give her a ride. "We are actually very busy with our son's wedding. Why don't you call a cab?" Mrs. Islam suggested.

Mrs Dutta called Mexicana Cabs and checked the cash in her purse. Twenty-nine dollars.

That was for next week's grocery. Well, she should have more money by next week, she reasoned. The cab arrived in ten minutes and she was on her way.

The apartment building on 76th street had lines of little white bulbs hung from the roof for the wedding. Tarek's friends had suspended them that night, making passers-by wonder what was happening since it was February, and Christmas had long gone. The children of the building came out to see the lighting even though it was windy, and felt an unusual sense of celebration and belonging. They ran about on the lawn, chasing one another, as the men fixed the length of the wires, some of them shouting from below at those on the roof.

When Mrs Dutta returned she hardly noticed the lights. Forty-two million dollars was all that was in her head. At the claim center, a golden haired lady in a green suit had explained to her that the forty-two million would be paid over a period of twenty-five years. They would put the yearly amount in her bank account and she was entitled to any interest that might accrue. She didn't understand a lot of the legal things she had said. She had stared at the lady's green eye-shadow and had asked "How much per year did you say?"

"After tax and all, around a million dollars will be deposited every year. If you want, we can help you set up an appropriate account in a good bank that is affiliated with us, since you said you only have one account where your husband's social security money comes in, right?"

Mrs Dutta thanked the lady and said, "Let me think about it. But for now, just put the money in my present account."

Next morning Mrs Dutta was awakened by loud knocks. She looked around for her glasses and walked to the door with a hand on her hip that was sore from yesterday's walking. When she opened the door, there were flash lights going off from all directions, and before she knew what was going on, she was almost carried to her sitting room by the crowd. Reporters were asking her "How long have you been in the US? Do you have children? How old are you? How do you plan to use the money?"

Mrs Dutta was on the mid-day news and the local tabloids proclaimed, "Mrs Dutta, from Jackson Heights, Queens wins NY Lotto." Immediately she began to get phone calls from real estate agents, banks, insurance companies, car dealers and all sorts of businesses. She couldn't figure out how everyone had gotten to know so quickly. She sat in front of the TV sipping tea, wondering what she should do with the money. She knew she'll visit Bangladesh soon. But what about the rest of it? She was going to be seventy in a few years. Occasionally she had heart problems. She had to be realistic...how many years did she have left?

Her thoughts went to her son Shojol, who she had not heard from for more than ten years. He grew up in the US, and Mrs Dutta felt she understood him less and less as he grew older.

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Just came to see how you're doing. Today is my son's wedding in the evening. We are having it right here in the house, you know, what with all the financial constraints we can't book a restaurant," Mrs Islam explained. "You must come and bless the newly-weds. Mrs Dutta, being our elder. No no, we won't hear a no from you. You'll be able to take the few steps up to the third floor. Mr Islam will help you. And we heard you won the lottery! We are so happy for you." Mrs Dutta smiled and said, "Ok, I'll come."

Mr Islam came in the evening and took Mrs Dutta up to their apartment. They introduced her as "our neighbor who was on TV today." People sat down and listened to her for a change, as she recounted her childhood and her journey to America. Mostly people asked her about the lottery. "Millions of dollars!" they gasped. "What will you do with it, Mrs Dutta?" One woman
