

SHORT STORY

Saleha Chowdhury
(Translated by Sabreena Ahmed)

Father is reading in the study. Rumki brushes aside the curtain and peeps in. He is absorbed in a book. The coffee cup on the side table is empty. A burning cigarette butt is lying there in the ashtray. Father smokes four to five cigarettes a day. He smokes a cigarette after breakfast in the morning, after lunch, after tea in the afternoon, and the last one after having dinner at 8 p.m. Father is a man of strict principles. His aristocratic bearing is stricter than that. Rumki cannot make up her mind if she should enter the study or not. Perhaps Father has noticed that she is standing here. He does not take his eyes off the book as he asks: "Rumki, do you want to say something?"

Rumki enters into the room, a smart and sophisticated woman. She is wearing trousers and a t-shirt with the motif of a cat drawn on it. The hair is drawn and tied up high above her neck, a touch of *kajal* in the eyes and perhaps a smidgen of facial cream -- that's it. She looks beautiful -- unsurpassable! Actually Rumki is twenty-two years old. A wonderful 'twenty-two' -- unlike the 'twenty-two' of Rumki's mother's life when she had been tired, exhausted and weak because of the disease in her uterus.

Rumki pulls up a chair beside her father. Father places the bookmark in the book and looks up at Rumki.

"What's the matter, Rumki?"

Rumki does not speak.

Father asks, "How is your thesis progressing?"

"Three more months," answers Rumki. Father becomes happy on hearing that. After finishing her honours in biology Rumki is writing her thesis on a difficult subject. Only Rumki and her father live in this house. Her mother had not died at the beginning, though; she died when Rumki was sixteen.

Looking at Rumki's face, her father realises that she has come to him with a special purpose.

"You will like him this time."

"Who's he?"

"He is from Uttar Pradesh, Abinish."

"What does he do?" Father is not bothered about where someone is from. He is interested in the man's speech, manners and behaviour. He sees if he is intelligent or not, and surely the husband of his daughter has to be courteous and gentle. Father had rejected some of the men before. He had been displeased with their talk. Some had

no ambition in life and some others were just blockheads! But Rumki will not marry without her father's consent. Yes, Rumki will marry, and Father has given her permission to search for a bridegroom. He wants Rumki to get married as soon as she has finished her thesis. But the bridegroom has to fulfil all the criteria given by Father; he has to meet Father's approval. This is an unwritten agreement between Father and Rumki.

Rumki grew up and studied in Britain. Now she is doing her thesis. Maybe she will get a well-paid job. Father told her to complete the marriage bit before that. He had said: "You search for the man you like. Then bring him to me once."

A few were rejected. Father did not like the philosophy of life the first one believed in.

He asked, "Give the definition of life."

The boy answered: "Speed." He thought that he had given an appropriate intellectual answer.

But Father took a little time and said: "Do you know that sometimes life has to learn to take a break?"

The boy searched for another intellectual answer. Father inquired about his family. The family history was not very pleasing to hear. His father was a wholesale rice trader in Dhaka. Rumki was ready to give the boy two extra points for his honesty, but not her father.

The next one was so dull-headed that Father bade him goodbye after talking for only five minutes.

He asked: "What is love?" The boy started on such a long lecture that Father became annoyed and said, "Can't you just say it in short? Something like, 'Man's love is only a part of his life. But it's a woman's whole existence'."

The boy wanted to write a draft of his long lecture,

Father said, "You may go, but do have a cup of tea before leaving."

The third one had made him angry by confessing that he did not like reading books. He was a computer wizard.

"How will you become a human being if you don't read books?" Father asked him directly.

"What do you think I am?"

"Human."

"Then?"

"I have to think of Rumki's future. That responsibility is mine. I want a human being for her, a thoughtful human being who has imagination in him. Someone who won't buy things according to a shopping list. He would be capable of thinking beyond the list. And his thoughts should revolve around reading--not reading for academic studies, but reading for himself."

That was it. This one was dismissed also.

Thank heavens that all of them were Rumki's friends, classmates in fact. Or else Rumki would have died of the pain inside her heart. After all of them had left, Rumki stood in front of her father with a smile on her face. "I'm bringing some more. You will definitely like this one."

Father has retired from the executive post of a multi-national company. He reads and sometimes plays golf. Rumki says, "Father, you have been alone all your life."

"Your mother was not with me. I live better without her. I am selecting bridegrooms for you so that you don't feel as she used to. But the best gift of my marriage is you." Saying this, Father goes back to his book.

No, Rumki will not get involved in an affair. Rumki will choose a man approved by her father and marry him. Her father has sacrificed everything in his life for Rumki's sake. She will make him happy in return--this is her decision, a contract. Father also expects that from her.

When Rumki was a rippling eighteen, a boy popped up in front of her out of the blue and then sank like a stone. The boy did not like Rumki's father.

He said: "A woman can have only one man in her life at a time, not two. Both the men will have equal influence on your life. I don't like the way your father controls you."

Rumki watched him go away. She did not say anything.

Rumki is as bright as the stars!

"What will you hold on to if I go away?"

"Books," was Father's answer. Books are everything to him.

He asks about Abinish, "What does Abinish do?"

"A job."

"What kind of job?"

"Executive post in a bank. You'll like him. I met him when I was withdrawing the scholarship money for the thesis. I told him that only pleasing me won't do. He has to please you also."

"Did you tell him to come?"

"Should I?"

"Of course."

Abinish will come on Sunday. Abinish Iyer. He is the son of a professor of Uttar Pradesh.

"I might have to live in India for a few days after the marriage."

"That's not a problem."

So the man Rumki has chosen has promised to come on Sunday. Father and Rumki decorate the table together.

Plates, forks, teaspoons, dessert spoons, napkins.

A bottle of red wine.

A bottle of water.

The big red carnations with green leaves in the Ikebana style.

The table is glowing with some other things. The table has been covered with the lacework tablecloth. Placemats. The plates have a Wedgwood shine on them.

"Father," says Rumki, "if you don't like him, I want to take a break for some time in this matter. I want to do some other work. After that we can resume this play of ours again."

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