

NON FICTION

The Wedding

JULIE REZA

The weather was getting hotter, the days steadily getting longer, yet there was still so much to do for the wedding.

First, the invitations had to be written. Despite planning for a small wedding—fifteen or twenty people at the very most—hours and hours were spent mulling over the guest list.

We had decided that we definitely had to invite Boro Mama-Mami, and cousins Jasmine and Nargis. They were pretty girls with silky long hair and charming smiles; no doubt it wouldn't be many years before they, too, would be getting married. At fourteen and sixteen respectively, they were excitable young things, and would appreciate all the painstaking preparations that we had made. Moreover they could both sing, so they could provide some entertainment for the evening of festivities. We needed every bit of help that we could get!

Then there was Binu Khala; college-educated, and with her bob-cut hair tinged a slight reddish hue, she was our most glamorous relative. Binu Khala had a gentle way about her, and everything she ever said or did seemed fragrant with her charm; she had no airs and graces, and always had kind words to say to us. She definitely had to be invited, if only to add a touch of class to the proceedings.

Our little white bungalow fell between that of Afrin Khala and Farhad Mama, so of course their families would be invited. Afrin Khala had three children—a baby boy and the twins, Maya and Monalisa, while Mama-Mami had six-year old Suraiya, who would love the celebrations.

After much deliberation we agreed not to invite Sharmi Khala; while Layla was lovely and caring and would have enjoyed the evening, her young brother, Mintu, was a restless, boisterous child who never behaved well and was bound to upset the solemn proceedings in some way. We categorically decided that we weren't going to invite Nana and Nanu, and Juntu Mamu (who still lived with them) to the proceedings. We'd miss Mamu and Nanu of course, but Nana was an old-fashioned, orthodox man, and would thoroughly disapprove. Imagining the look of fury on his face if he found out about it, it was definitely best not to let him know that the wedding was going ahead!

No other relatives were invited, although we did decide to invite the entire family from over the other side of the street; with four girls and two boys, they were poorer than us, but they were very friendly and the children always came to play in our garden. We thought we'd make handmade cards for the invites; there was no way that our limited funds would spread to cover the expense of having cards printed. So we had spent an entire evening cutting card, ribbon and beads to make our cards unique and worthy of some admiration. The following evening the cards were distributed to the guests (each hand-delivered, of course, as tradition dictates).

The wedding decision had only been made a few days ago, and it had to be said that, despite our best endeavours, the rush had meant that some of the preparations were slightly more shambolic than we'd



artwork by amina

hoped. We'd managed to find a suitable sari only yesterday morning—by much luck. It wasn't a conventional red-and-gold sari, but this, we supposed, wasn't a conventional wedding. So the bride would be wearing a pink sari embroidered with tiny silver sequins. It flattered her figure—accentuating her curves and highlighting the beauty of her regal poise. With all the expense of the wedding—the sari, the fabrics, the ribbons, the cards and the flowers, we had been stretched to find money for the bridal jewellery. Fortunately, at rather a last minute, Binu Khala (bless her) had donated an elegant gold necklace, studded with red stones. Gold and red bangles dangled from each of the bride's hands, and a matching tickli and earrings would set her outfit off beautifully.

The wedding party would be held in our front room. All the furniture had been rearranged to leave rows of chairs from which the guests could sit and watch the proceedings. Tinsel, colourful decorations and balloons hung from nails in the walls. Vases were filled with flowers. A cassette player played some background music.

Afrin Khala and Nina Mami had volunteered to make the food themselves. The scent of lamb biryani cooked with ghee and cardamom pods hung in the air, tantalising us, our guests, and anyone who happened to pass by the path behind our houses. Plump, red gulab-jams floated in bubbling syrup; orange jorda trimmed with flowers made of pineapple murebba sat beautifully arranged in large, blue and white dishes alongside bowls of creamy firni.

So what of the blushing bride during these prepara-

tions? A few minutes before the arrival of the guests we had covered her face with a veil and had solemnly taken her to the stage, sitting her down between two large cushions embroidered with tiny golden flowers. Like all shy, coy brides, until then she had been hidden away in a back room. We had made her up beautifully. Her soft, creamy complexion had been enhanced with a touch of rouge (the colour of hibiscus) on her cheeks; a smudge of red lipstick had been added to her lips, and a line of pale blue eyeshadow had been applied to her eyelids. All the time she continued to look down demurely, exactly as a true, good bride should.

The guests finally arrived, one family at a time, carrying envelopes of money or parcels of gifts (saris, furnishings, even haari-pathil). Full of expectation, they took their seats in front of the stage that we had decorated so enthusiastically, if rather hastily, with swathes of red, green and gold brocade sari fabric, and giant pewter vases full of flowers from the garden. Occasionally a guest, particularly the female guests, would get up to take a sneak peek at the bride beneath her veil and then, with smiles on their faces, sit down again. Everyone remarked to us how beautiful the bride looked, with her thick hair tied into a big black kopa and decorated with a single, pink flower from the garden.

We had arranged for a harmonium to be bought in, and Jasmine-Nargis sang a few popular wedding songs from the movies; the mood was light and full of fun, and some of our guests, especially the youngsters, joined in with the sing-song.

We decided that we were going to have the food before the celebrations proper began, so watched nervously while the guests lined up for their food. Luckily—and how could we have doubted it—the food was greeted with much praise. We were pleased to see that the guests ate heartily. They not only commended the food, they flattered us with kind comments about the room, the stage, the entertainment.

Everything was going so well. Our elaborate plans had come to fruition, despite the lack of time to get things ready.

The guests took their seats again for the main function. We had prepared a mirror, two garlands of red and pink flowers, a milky drink and some sweets to be exchanged between bride and groom. The voices in the room hushed slightly as we approached the stage.

But, just as we were laying the ceremonial items carefully in front of the bride, a spine-chilling, horrific thought came to us. Our dread-filled eyes met. How on earth hadn't we foreseen the terrible situation we now found ourselves in? It must have been all the excitement of making the arrangements! For, as we looked at the bride, sitting so elegantly between her cushions, it suddenly occurred to us: There was no groom!

Oh! The shame, the embarrassment! In front of so many people! What would they think? What would they say? Any moment now the guests would start commenting to each other! We were furious with ourselves. This is what becomes of hastily arranged wedding plans! We should have predicted this situation and never allowed it to arise. How, we asked ourselves, could there now be a wedding—without the groom? How had we overlooked such an

obvious matter? We looked at each other in dismay.

But all was not lost. Luckily for us, Binu Khala saw our distress. Sensing something was seriously wrong, she rushed over to ask us what the matter was. So, our hearts pounding, and tears of broken pride and humiliation welling up in our eyes, in low voices we explained the situation.

Immediately taking the crisis in hand, Binu Khala beckoned us to the room next door. She sat on the big bed and opened her handbag. Rummaging inside it for a moment, she stopped to pull out a clean, cream-coloured handkerchief (embroidered with her initial in blue on the corner). Then she pulled out a large black, fine-tipped pen, a reel of dark embroidery thread, and a needle. She asked us for a pair of scissors, and also made us hand over our own handkerchiefs. What on earth was she going to do? She looked up and smiled at us, told us not to worry, and shooed us back into the main room.

Fifteen tense minutes passed whilst the guests, unaware of the calamity that had been about to befall the bride, happily chatted amongst themselves; the little girls played clapping-hands, the boys chased toy cars around the floor. From behind the curtain that draped the door I saw Binu Khala usher Jasmine to the adjacent room. And then, two minutes later, Jasmine started to sing a teasing song about the groom.

And sure enough, there came the groom—accompanied by our saviour, Binu Khala. The guests turned to look at him. Sitting rather stiffly on a white cushion, his arms stretched-out somewhat awkwardly to his sides, he just looked straight ahead. His black hair, thick moustache, and heavy browsed eyes were all as dark as ink. He wore a simple punjabi of cream cotton, and in his hands he held a small handkerchief.

At last, after two frantic, anxious days, the time had come, the nuptials were to begin. The guests hushed. Khala sat the groom next to the bride, and we joined them all on the stage.

We noted that the groom looked different from behind; his punjabi didn't quite fit him and had been stitched poorly and was rather crumpled; the edges of the handkerchief were unfinished. And, if we looked very carefully, only just visible on his back and embroidered in pale blue, was the solitary letter 'B'.

But his looks, his clothes, his stiffness didn't put us off. For finally our plans had come together. And so it was, with the help of so many others (both family and friends) that Tina putul, with great ceremony, was wed to the rather handsome, if unbending, handkerchief groom with the cotton face and ink-drawn moustache. So what, we asked our young selves, if he was so much shorter, less elegant and shabbier than our doll—he was a groom wasn't he? After all, that was all that mattered today! If we were honest with ourselves, in our fickle heart-of-hearts we knew that the following day, although we would continue to carry on playing with Tina (our favourite doll) we would both have totally forgotten about pale-faced yet handsome, straight-backed little Mr Handkerchief Groom.

Julie Reza lives and works in London.

Two Poems

(Translated by Khademul Islam)

Let's Go, Comrade
Mohor Chattapadhyay

Hey, Comrade? Working too hard? Headache ah, stuff it!
Let's go have some fun. I am free
nowdays. For the time being. Three weeks. Want to go to Joka? Take
a shower, slap on some aftershave, get ready. Go ahead take a lick-
Capitalist-imperialist, creative artist my arse
so much fangdangle on this tiny planet. The outlines
of Marxist philosophy you once knew, and then naturally
forgot - once we get to Joka I'll make you go thru them
all over again - yes, you! At the end what will
you do with influence-power? There is no end to the vileness
of kings-queens-ministers. So my chortles, check it out
from the corner of your eyes. Then hold my hand and speak up.
What you'll say I won't coach you. I feel giggles welling up
in me. Once we get to Joka I'll laugh so hard that...
Anyway, screw all this! Free yourself of all your acres and piles
Of land and inheritances; piss on all stupid political games.
Prepare yourself. Free for three weeks. You get me?

Excuses

Poulumi Sengupta

I'll be serious about work I tell myself
No cheating!
On waking up say to the mirror, "Here I am!"
Though the grumpy mirror will scowl
Reflect back at me a maiden
With oiled-up hair and a snub-nose

But I won't care about those things
And dive into my work. Household,
Baby, office, husband, laundry list,
Books, sewing buttons, shoe shine--
No shortage of work.

The whole day will speed by
I'll blow off stacks of calories
And forget to eat at midday

Evening, stand before that same mirror
Bring out from the bag the work list
Flick off with a finger all laziness, all short-cuts
And then like a flower in full bloom
Lift to hold up to the mirror
My fistful of robust excuses.

Wine-ing

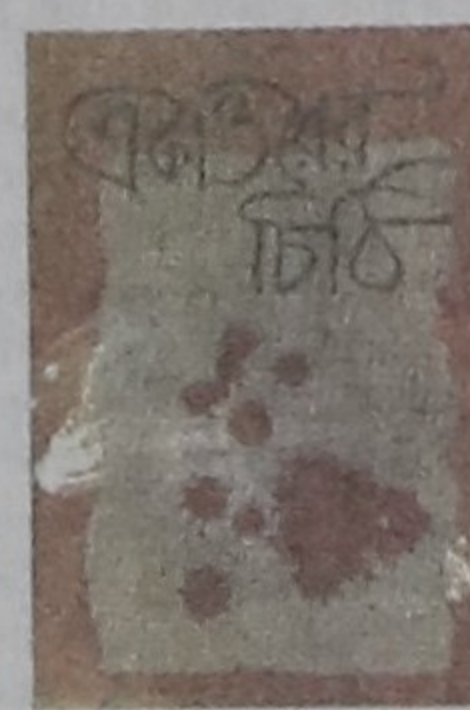
PATNAIK DAAR

I accidentally came across this book on wines written by an Indian in a Kolkata bookshop, and then found to my surprise that it has actually been well received in the country. Magandeeep Singh, a sommelier who's a consultant with hotels and restaurants, writes with humour and a light touch. In his introduction he confesses that he "was not a 'wine man' to begin with", but persistence, curiosity and patience in the quest to understand what "it was about wine that was so mesmerizing" paid off at the end. The book is arranged in fourteen easy-to-read chapters, and clues in South Asians starting to develop a taste for wine, or even ones who have been regularly drinking it without knowing much about it, about the fine art that lies behind selecting, palates, varieties, vintages, reds, whites, tasting, storing (the chapter is titled 'zen and the art of storing wine'), and even ways to handle the stress of surveying snooty wine lists. And much more. White wines, for example, should be served about one-third of the glass (never more!), and reds about two-thirds. Why? So that each sip is at the right temperature! Pour too much and halfway through "the wine starts to taste awful." For South Asians... well, for a transplanted one like me, however, the most interesting and informative parts are the chapters that deal with



which wines to serve with Indian food whites, a floral Chenin Blanc goes best with saag-palak, while the tandoori preparations need full-bodied reds with oak aging. There is also a chapter on Indian wines ('the desi shelf'), a field which, though still a "toddlers" is apparently now starting to spread wings with French (who else!) help, away from the traditional popular sparkling wines into a wider range: cabernets and sauvignon blancs, and where the Dindori Reserve Shiraz from the Sula Vineyards actually receives a high rating from Singh. The writing is witty, deft and the knowledge carried lightly, so that even people who do not go near wines can pick it up and have an enjoyable read. And as for ones who do, they'll be amazed at how much info Magandeeep has packed into such a slim volume, like the gigabytes one gets in wafer-thin Mac laptops out there now.

Patnaik Daar is fond of reds.



Two Muktijoddha Letters of 1971

(Translated by Mohamad Shafiqul Islam)

(Abdur Rouf alias Bobin from Sector 6 wrote this letter to his mother Rafia Khatun on 16 July 1971. At that time he was on the Indian border near Panchagarh, Bangladesh.)

16.7.71

I am writing from the Freedom Fighters' camp. It is raining very heavily outside now. I can see it through the opening of the tent that the whole horizon is overcast with clouds. Every so often thunderbolts flash. Since it's been raining all morning, I haven't been feeling well. Listen, Ma, have you noticed how, when the scarlet sun rises in the eastern sky after heavy showers the whole night, its fresh light is so iridescent, isn't it? Right now my thoughts are going back to my childhood. You would not allow me to go out in the rain; one day I sneaked out without telling you and slipped and fell down and hurt my leg, at which you screamed out and shed tears. Our table was covered with medicines I can clearly remember it. After that I wouldn't dare to go out alone, I would feel scared of falling down again. But today, today I am fairly courageous! I have learnt to how to handle rifles. I have to spend night after night in bunkers, and yet I do not feel at all frightened. In the face of enemy attacks and in the midst of our counterattacks my veins and arteries throb with rising blood pressure. Ma, I really can't make you understand. When I recall my childhood days I find it impossible to express how I feel. But I feel an amazing change in me, this love I feel for my motherland, this love for my Bangla language. Ma, when I was a teenager Father one day took me to Syedpur, to show me a special train. There I got lost. Then, all alone, by myself, I wandered around a long time. Slowly the evening darkness began to descend, and for unknown reasons somehow I felt like crying. I felt I was lost. I thought I would perhaps never return to you. Then, crying, wet with tears, I began to walk towards the station. That day, finding me on the street, Hye from Hazari Belpukur took me to his home. Sometime later I saw Father coming there. The next day no sooner had you listened to the whole story that you cuddled me in your lap and wept. But you didn't cry the day, Ma, that I left for the battlefield. My life is spent with bullets, shells, mortars. We have taken oaths to resolutely stand up against the heinous genocidal atrocities of Yahya. Now we have to pass sleepless nights in bunker after bunker. Or from time to time in the dead of night launch fierce attacks against enemy camps. This war is a war for justice, Ma, and victorious we will be.

Oh, Mother, I remember very well that evening. It was not cloudy and overcast like it is today. The whole sky was full with stars. You were sitting in the kitchen slicing vegetables. I told you, "Ma, I am going." You looked up at my face. I said, "Ma, I am going to join the Muktijoddhas." By the light of the stove's fire I could see plainly see your face. Your two eyes shone. You stood up and looked at me in a gesture of benediction. A few leaves of the wood-apple tree behind my room frolicked in the breeze for a while before stopping. Ma, that very evening you bade me goodbye with a smiling face. Ma, it seems as if ages have gone by; each day seems to be a page from history. So many hopes, so many wishes have been turned into ashes by the fires of injustice.

But Ma, at the end of an exhausting day won't that evening return again?

Yours with affection



(ABM Mahbubur Rahman of Chand Bualmari, Faridpur, dated 5 April, wrote this letter from Bashirhat Subdivision, the headquarters of Sector 8 in 24 Parganas. He returned home alive from the war to a free and independent Bangladesh.)

5 April 1971

Dear Ma,
By the time you get this letter, I will be very, very far away from you. Ma, I know you wouldn't have allowed me to go and so I left surreptitiously without telling you. But the day when I have avenged fully the disgrace visited on my mothers and sisters, when I have freed my motherland Golden Bengal from its enemies, that day will your son return to your lap.

Pray for me, Ma, that my wish be fulfilled.

Sincerely
Your luckless son

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