

THE BIG FAT BENGALI WEDDING GRADUATION

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If one believed in alternate dimensions and parallel worlds, they'd assume that somewhere, in one of those other worlds, lies a Bangladesh where most women are not treated unjustly to have them married off when they come of age, instead, the celebrations entail her following her ambitions. In this alternate reality, Srijita Chowdhury, a Bangladeshi girl, is about to go through all the steps of the classic big fat Bengali wedding. Except, the cause for the festivities is the attainment of her doctorate degree, and not for her capabilities of proving to be the perfect "patri".

Unlike other days, Srijita woke up almost half an hour before her alarm rang. She knew this week was going to be one of the most exciting weeks of her life, so she was not going to let herself mess it up by oversleeping and running behind schedule like she did too many times. She had been looking forward to this since she first saw all the photos of her mother's congratulatory reception, so now that it was finally happening, it all felt like a fairy tale.

THE PREPARATIONS

The rituals had already begun six months ago. Since she grew up in a very traditional household, it was expected that all the ceremonies would take place in an orderly manner. So, when she had officially turned in the final draft for her dissertation, her family made no delay in throwing her a thesis proposal party and the preparations have been going on ever since.

Today was the final day for her to complete all last-minute errands as the graduate isn't supposed to leave the house for a few days before the auspicious event. With the preparations in full swing, Srijita decided to start her day with the first task on her checklist: the dress fitting. While her sister had already claimed her mom's graduation gown, Srijita wasn't completely unhappy with the custom Kavyasachi bedazzled gown for the event and her traditional outfit for the reception after.

Between salon appointments and multiple meetings with the graduation planner (a personal guide to a perfect big day), the day seemed to have gone by in a haze. On her way home, Srijita checked off all the tasks from her to-do-list and let out a sigh of relief as she sank into the car seat to wander off to her happy place, thinking, "Not too far from reality now, huh?"

It wasn't just Srijita whose day went by without any sense of time, it was the entire Chowdhury family preparing in full swing to organise a grand affair to acknowledge and honour their daughter's achievements. After all, she had put in years of dedication and diligence into pursuing her passion and making something of herself.

THE REHEARSAL

The next day was arguably the most exciting part of the ceremony. The flowers, the colours, the overall theme of the *holud* was definitely one stands apart, at least to most people who attend. The rituals of *holud* were fairly simple but meant more than what met the eyes. Each little part of the night was planned extensively keeping Srijita's tastes and efforts in mind.

The night initially started off with the application of turmeric to "make the skin glow" for her special day but Srijita only applied a little bit for the sake of the

tradition, as she believed her complexion should have nothing to do with the celebration of her talents.

The rest of the event was planned to involve sharing quips about Srijita's quirks and habits but had somehow turned into competing grounds for uncles to bolster their children's accomplishment. Before they could turn it into an actual fighting ring, all the kids were conveniently sent to the stage to present the performance they had been preparing for.

THE BIG DAY

"How much sleep did you get last night?" the makeup artist asked as she dabbed a thick layer of concealer under Srijita's eyes to minimise the visibility of the dark circles

Entering the venue felt so intimidating that Srijita couldn't feel her legs. Looking around, she noticed hundreds of fellow graduates with their families and friends, cackling about and posing for photographs, and realised how important this day was to each and every person there and how all of their hard work (like hers) had brought them all here today.

"Are you just going to stand there?"

Her train of thought was interrupted by her best friend performing the duties of the maid of honour by dragging her to the seat as she had just heard that the ceremony was about to start and everyone was requested to take their respective seats. "I flew halfway across the world to make sure

the sheer number of photographers hired by the students' families initially, as the ceremony commenced, the flashes going off incessantly had started to blur her vision. Luckily enough, right before the cap-tossing ritual, people had started to get impatient and started to make their way to the refreshments section which led the photographers to realise their true calling to take pictures of people gobbling down their food.

THE RECEPTION

This was the day Srijita personally looked forward to the most. Not only was she going to be addressed as "Dr Srijita Chowdhury" for the first time, she was also going to be sharing her thesis paper with everyone who would be present to congratulate her. This thesis meant the world to her, after all, it was the applications of carbon nanotubes that made her fall in love with Chemistry in the tenth grade.

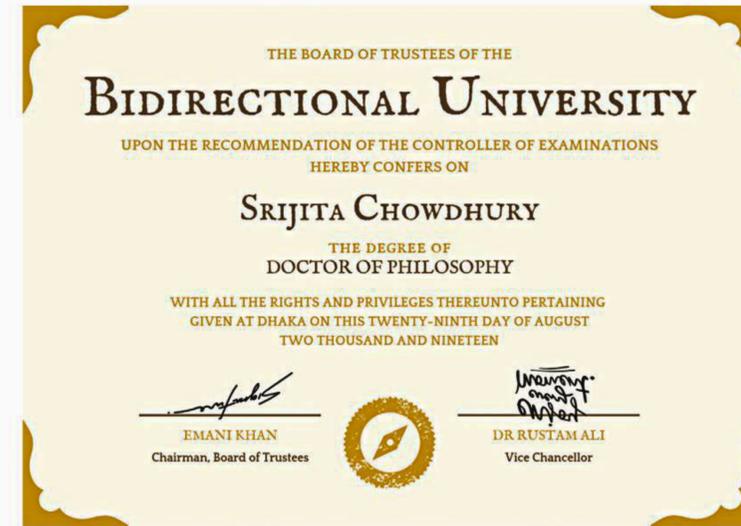
All set in her dazzling but outrageously heavy outfit, the night seemed to be going great. She had so far met six aunties who would persistently remind her mother of Srijita's age and how she had yet to complete her post-doctoral unlike their daughters. Some had even gone far enough to offer the mercy of suggesting degree consultants and matchmakers to "help". All of them had one thing in common to say, "I never doubted your capabilities for a minute dear. You always shone bright!"

Sure. Thus, the next time she heard the same line it took her a while to recognise who it was.

The familiarity of the reassuring voice that came with the person standing in front of her brought the biggest smile on Srijita's face. Since high school, if Srijita trusted anyone's counsel more than her own, it was that of Miss Shama, her high school college advisor. While she had helped many students find their ideal college and university matches throughout the years, her relationship with Srijita went far beyond the years in high school as she continued to help her through all her puzzling career decisions.

After receiving blessings, constantly smiling for what seemed like a never ending queue of well-wishers, starting from her thesis advisor to her kindergarten teacher and her first cousins to her father's former colleague's nephew's daughter, the event had finally come to an end. With the bittersweet feeling all goodbyes comprise, Srijita finally bid her family farewell to move on the next chapter of her journey.

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that had developed over time. As Srijita struggled to smile in response to the lady's question, she remembered the last time she had felt this nervous and shuddered at the thought of freezing during her Valedictorian speech much like she did during a poetry recital in kindergarten. She quickly pushed the horrid thought out of her mind and started to go over the notes for her speech.

Where Srijita was dealing with her nervousness, her parents had been panicking over a whole other issue that they did not want to bother her with. Somewhere in the house full of guests, the receipt for her gown and hat was nowhere to be found; they didn't have time to look around as they had to be at the venue in less than an hour. Her sister's quick thinking and persuasive skills saved the day before Srijita came to know about the incident.

you do not mess up anything on your big day. Please don't make this harder!" her friend shrieked.

"She is just trying to help. She is doing this for you," Srijita repeated to herself as she let herself be dragged through the crowd.

"Srijita Chowdhury!"

Her heart skipped a beat. She felt a gentle squeeze on her shoulder and turned to see her graduation planner. He nodded and gestured her to get on the stage with a reassuring smile, and so she did. She walked onto the stage, shook hands with the Vice Chancellor, accepted her diploma and finally turned her sparkling tassel from left to right. Glancing over into the audience, she witnessed her parents to be the most joyful she had ever seen them to be.

While she hadn't been bothered by

