



SIGNS

MAISHA NAZIFA KAMAL

Rehnuma, from her early teens, had absolutely loved cooking. After she got married, and the task became a duty, she loved it more.

She loved how the small cube of butter melted in the oil in which she would roast delicate chicken. She sniffed the smell of crushed cumin seeds whenever she cooked, the way onions and chillies simmered in a slow broth. Never did she get tired of beating eggs so that she can bake the shortcake her two children loved. The sizzling sound as she sautéed vegetables and fish for her husband always delighted her. And whenever guests came to their home and left with praises about her special mutton kebabs and *kacchi*, she genuinely smiled.

This love for cooking and presenting dishes, especially Bengali ones, intensified more over the years and when Rehnuma was thirty-five years old, she decided that she might take a culinary profession now for she had a lot of free time.

On one Wednesday night, as Rehnuma laid out dishes (she never let the help do this), she was thinking of how to bring up the matter while they would dine. She had cooked a feast and presented them impeccably like the You-

Tube videos she watched nowadays, as if the sheer beauty of the food and its taste right in front of their eyes could speak of Rehnuma's plan.

Once all the interesting TV shows were over for the evening, the family of four started their dinner. Rehnuma's husband wanted second helpings of everything though she chided him not to go for the *shemai* again, and her daughter, a pretty little 6th grader, asked her mother to pack her some of the saffron rice and lemon chicken gravy for school tomorrow. Her son ate quite a lot after a really long time and even praised the salads.

Rehnuma, happy for her family, was still on edge. Should she just phrase it as her choice or ask for their votes? What will Imtiaz say? Imtiaz was a jolly guy, but sometimes trivial things set him off dangerously. In the end though, as they were almost about to get up, Rehnuma cleared her throat decisively.

Imtiaz arched his eyebrows at her. She suddenly felt tiny, trying to speak to a family of giants.

"Well, I have something on my mind –"

"Is it about my grades again? Mom really, I'll buckle up," her daughter, Ridita piped in.

Rehnuma shook her head. "No, it's something about me. All of you know how good I am at cooking and how I

love it. And dear Mrs. Akhter also suggested it and I..." she blushed, "Well, I want to open up a small food business, you know. Like I would cook because I –"

"Who is Mrs. Akhter again?" Imtiaz inquired.

"The lady from 7C."

Imtiaz still had a frown on, "Isn't she Mrs. Chowdhury?"

"That is hardly the point here," Rehnuma replied a bit steamily.

"Ma, you love cooking, you cook for us. How much more do you need? And we're a well-off family and you doing that would be so stupid and cheap."

Rehnuma's eldest son, Tahmid, who was in the 11th grade this year studying in the best school in Dhaka, for whom Rehnuma stayed up late whenever he pulled off an all-nighter because he had to maintain such excellent grades, for whom Rehnuma cut off all sorts of conversation with Mrs. Hussain as she had claimed that Tahmid ridiculed and bullied her daughter because of course Mrs. Hussain was lying, told her to her face that her plan to start a business was stupid and cheap, and slouched straight back to his room.

Imtiaz's gigantic black phone buzzed, vibrating the whole table and the crockery and cutlery clinked.

"Hello Amzad Bhai," Imtiaz got

up, "What brings you to call this poor man?" He walked into their bedroom, his laughter receding.

Rehnuma got up too, calling Bilkis to take the dishes. She rushed in and cradled all the dishes back to the kitchen exclaiming, "*Khalamma*, you rest, you rest." Ridita, stayed where she was; her eyes fixated on the glossy wooden polish on the table.

Rehnuma went to the kitchen and made herself a pot of coffee and a cup of tea for Imtiaz as per schedule. Imtiaz was still busy talking as she softly padded onto the balcony and sipped her coffee.

She stayed awake, till the lights in Tahmid's room dimmed down after he studied overnight. "He is getting the best education there is, and also making good use of it," Rehnuma thought as she herself went to bed too. He must not have understood what I said, she thought. He was still growing up. He respected his mother and women and couldn't possibly bully a girl. He didn't mean to disrespect me, he didn't mean it really.

Right?

Maisha Nazifa Kamal just doesn't get why all the black cats meow at everyone else but her. Send her ways to communicate with them at 01shreshtha7@gmail.com