

Arrangements

By

B. A. Varghese

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My dad sat next to me on the couch and spoke to Mr. Thomas, a man I had never met before in my life. He was thin, bald except on the sides, and frequently stroked his bushy mustache. My mom sat on a small chair near the dining table and listened to their conversation. Mrs. Thomas walked in from the kitchen and stood before me.

“Rajiv, how much sugar do you want in your chai?”

This was just the first of many questions I would have to answer tonight. The Thomases were expecting that by the end of this visit, I would have an answer to their main question. An acceptance of their offer would change the rest of my life. But if I declined, would it still affect me like an echo of regretful memory, or would I just forget it much like the choice of putting one or two spoons of sugar in my tea. Or would I regret that too?

“Only one spoon, aunty,” I said.

“Only one?” Mrs. Thomas asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

Mrs. Thomas, smiling, returned to the kitchen, and my eyes followed her until they fell on the bookshelves that held various Bible concordances, wooden carvings of walking elephants, and stick-like cranes looking upward. A picture of Jesus praying by a rock hung on the far wall of the dining room. The house was filled with the aroma of potpourri and a light smell of fried

fish. I fidgeted on the couch, dark beige with an explosion of lighter beige flowers and stems covered in plastic for protection. My hands moved across its cold and pliable surface.

Mr. Thomas noticed that I wasn't participating in their discussion of Bill Clinton's acquittal by the Senate earlier this month. I was in my own world.

"So, Rajiv," he said. "So you are an engineer?"

"Yes," I replied. "But I don't work as an engineer. I decided to work in computer science, and I'm a systems analyst at Prudential Life Insurance in the Newark office."

"Oh. I see," he said and displayed a frown.

Mrs. Thomas walked in with a tray of snacks and set them on the glossy coffee table. Her light pink sari was plain without embroidery. It was more for cooking and cleaning around the house than for show. She looked at me, smiled, and then went back to the kitchen.

"Eat, eat," Mr. Thomas said. "You like Indian snacks?"

"Yes," I said. "Mom makes this at home, and I love it. I can eat a whole bowlful." I can, but I wasn't going to do that here. It would be embarrassing for my parents as well as an indication that they had not taught me manners.

"Good," he said with a smile.

I looked at the bowl of fried banana chips sitting on the table. I grabbed a small handful and placed one chip into my mouth. I could tell the chip was homemade because of its crispy edge and its softer chewy middle where the water vapors had collected as the chip cooled. The salty sweetness swirled in my mouth, and I decided to finish off the rest of the chips in my hand. With each crunch, my thoughts crackled with memories of my grandmother in India frying thinly sliced plantains in a large pot outside her house. She sat squat on the dusty ground in front of the fire, moving the chips around in the hot oil with a wooden spoon, and the smell of freshly fried

banana engulfed the yard. I chomped and chewed and jumped to the memory of how my mom made her own version by flavoring them with different spices. It was the only thing I ate for lunch or dinner. My dad, returning home from work and excited from the aroma, would rush to the kitchen only to discover that there was only a handful of chips left. I could still hear him yelling from the kitchen.

“Rajiv!” my dad said. “Are you listening?”

I stared at my dad, wondering if I was in a dream or if I was waking from one.

“Rajiv,” my dad said. “Mr. Thomas asked if you’re finished with your studies.”

“What?” I asked.

My dad had a stern look on his face. “Are you going to get your Master’s?”

“Oh,” I said. “No. I’m totally done with school right now. I just want to work for a while.”

Mr. Thomas was not smiling. I should have said that I was considering a Master’s after I worked for a little while. My words were irretrievable, and I was afraid to take more chips from the bowl.

Then she came out of the kitchen. Her name was Sophie, and she was Mr. Thomas’s daughter. She was the reason why our parents made this arrangement.

I had to decide if I wanted to marry her.

She held out a tray and offered me a cup filled with chai. She wore a nervous smile, and her brown eyes were fixed on me. Her dark blue salwar dress peppered with gold and silver embroidery hugged her slim form. A thin gold necklace dangled around her smooth brown neck. I reached for a cup, and my hands shook. I smiled, and I thanked God I didn’t spill chai on myself in front of her.

“Thank you,” I said.

She nodded and moved the tray toward my dad, her father, and then my mom. She looked at me again and walked into the kitchen.

“Would you like to talk to her?” Mr. Thomas said.

There was no other choice so I nodded yes.

“Sophie!” Mr. Thomas yelled. “Take Rajiv to your room and talk for a few minutes.”

Sophie walked out of the kitchen, smiled, and motioned for me to follow her down the hall. I placed the cup on the coffee table.

“Thank you, uncle,” I said. He was not my uncle, nor was Mrs. Thomas my aunty. It was just our sign of respect, elevating them to the status of our kinship.

Mr. Thomas smiled, and I rose from the couch. I followed Sophie down the hall, and my eyes fell on the swaying of her long black hair. There were many photographs of Mr. Thomas, Mrs. Thomas, Sophie, and her older relatives that hung sporadically all along both walls. Her hair swung back and forth, and a feeling grew within me that her whole family was watching my every step and movement as if all her ancestors were waiting for this one moment. Waiting for my answer.

When we got to the front door of her room, Sophie turned around, and her black hair bounced side to side. It reminded me of how Neeli’s hair would bounce as she walked. She was a coworker of mine, and she was beautiful, but nothing ever happened between us and nothing will. It was strange. Why did she pop into my thoughts now? I stared at Sophie’s face and was unable to do anything else. She gave me a puzzled look, and I snapped myself out of it.

“After you,” I said.

We entered her room, and she offered her bed for me to sit on. I decided to stand. She sat down on her bed and looked toward the red rug in the middle of her room. Her wall was peppered with various pictures of her and her friends. I stared at the pictures and stood still for a long time until Sophie's soft voice pierced the silence. At the sound of her voice, my heart raced, and I was afraid she would hear it beating against my chest.

"Is this your first time?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Don't worry. It gets easier after your fourth or fifth time."

"Isn't this strange? Such a weird custom. I don't think I can get used to it."

Sophie smiled. "I don't think you're supposed to get used to it. It's just a means to an end."

"I feel weird doing this. This is not how I pictured—you know."

"I know what you mean. My parents have been telling me not to talk to boys all my life and then all of a sudden go find some boy and marry him."

"Why would you want to do this then?"

"It makes them happy. It still hurts when you get rejected but who knows, I might get lucky."

I couldn't help but smile. We looked at each other and laughed. A small comfort within all the strangeness.

* * *

Back at home, I wanted to hide in a closet. But my dad grabbed me when we entered the house, eager to know what I thought.

“So,” my dad said. “She comes from a very good family.”

“I don’t know.” I walked into the kitchen, and he followed me.

“Mr. Thomas is a manager at J.P. Morgan. Good company. And his wife is a registered nurse. Sophie has a degree in business and is working for Chase Manhattan.”

“I just don’t know.”

“What is there to know? They go to church. They are very nice people. She is a very nice girl.”

“She was okay.” I opened the pantry and looked around for something to munch on, but my thoughts fell on Neeli’s face and how I was thinking of her while I talked with Sophie.

“She’s very pretty. What are you looking for? Did she say something you didn’t like?”

“Dad, no, she didn’t say anything wrong. She was nice, but I’m just not interested in her.” I spotted the container of banana chips that sat next to some cans of soup.

“What’s wrong with you?” my dad said.

I turned around to face him. “Does something have to be wrong with me for me not to like her?”

“I don’t understand why you don’t like her. She is nice. She is educated. She comes from a good family. She goes to church.”

I didn’t know how to explain it to him. What about that spark that people talked about? That flicker of intensity when eyes meet that ultimately ignites a supernova. That moment when you look her in the eyes, and they swallow you whole, and you know that this is the one. I didn’t think he would ever understand. It was different for my parents. They had an arranged marriage back in India. My mom’s uncle was the one that suggested that my dad go see her at her family’s

house. The parents from both sides talked, and my dad visited her family. My mom was so shy, she ran out, served the chai, and ran back into the kitchen. My dad only caught a glimpse of her.

That was it.

Soon after, they got formally engaged and then got married. They didn't even get a chance to talk to each other on that day they met. That chance to converse was actually a luxury that our generation received, my dad once explained.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I said. "I'm not interested. I wasn't really attracted to her."

"Is that all you look at? How good she looks? Nothing else matters?"

"Well, yes, at first. I need to find her attractive first, then everything else."

"I talked to her dad after your talk with her. She likes you and is interested."

I was silent.

I left the banana chips sitting next to the soup and closed the pantry door.

"Now, I have to tell them that you are not interested," my dad said.

"I shouldn't have said yes to this whole thing," I said.

"What?"

"I didn't want to do this. I only did this for you and Mom. I didn't mean for Sophie's feelings to be hurt."

"You shouldn't worry about Sophie. Not anymore, anyway. Rajiv, listen, all your friends your age are getting married. And we want you to get married soon."

"It's not too late for me, Dad."

"You're 25 years old, Rajiv. You are getting too old. No one will want you if you wait longer."

Too old.

The words rang in my ear like a cracked bell. Its resonance cut through my body and nicked all hope. I *was* too old.

* * *

The work that we neglected to do on Friday became work that we must do on Monday. It became a constant reminder of my laziness. But instead of having the chance to catch up on work, I was required to sit through this meeting. Mondays were staff meeting days where the technical leader on each project would meet with all staff involved for a status report or a staff debriefing. But it wasn't all that bad. It was on those days I got to see Neeli.

Her name rolled off my tongue like nectar. I wasted hours during the day thinking about her smile and the many ways I could say hi when I saw her. We occasionally talked in passing, and we had worked on a few projects together. But I knew that actually going out with her would be an impossibility. She was older by two years, and any request for a date would be an invitation for an imminent marriage proposal. I felt the same way. I didn't want to waste time dating without a purpose. Besides that, we were opposites. She worked as a fitness instructor in the evenings. I went to the gym once every two weeks. She was a strict vegetarian. I could eat a whole cow. And last, she came from a Hindu family. Mine was Christian.

Like mixing oil and gasoline. Highly flammable.

We were just friends. That's all.

I saw her enter the meeting room. Her jet-black hair bounced as she moved, and I was reminded of Sophie. I had told my parents that I wasn't interested, but there would be many more Sophies to come. Many more awkward meetings. Many more rejections and hurts.

The meeting began, and I focused my attention on the speaker, but my mind wandered. Do our customs that bend neither for the passage of time nor for the space we occupy become our prisons that we cannot break free from? I rubbed my eyes and looked at the speaker who pointed at some Gantt charts on the screen. He talked about schedules, project deadlines, and how certain tasks needed completion before the opportunity was missed. I glanced over at Neeli and noticed that she was staring at me. When she noticed me, she looked away, lowered her head, and smiled. Her eyes peered toward my direction, but she kept her head forward. She continued to smile.

I sat there in silence. I found this discovery unnerving. The air became heavy, and a shadowy haze was cast over the whole room except around her. I tried not to look at her, but she was all I could see. Everything changed and time split in two. That was then and this was now. I retraced my memory, trying to find key words in our conversations that I overlooked, which would have implied her interest in me. I wondered whether there was meaning behind her smiles. If there was intent when she held my hand. If there was purpose behind those casual glances.

There was now a force. A force that defied sound judgment or logic.

A force that compelled me to ask her out.

* * *

I sat in the kitchen and imagined different scenarios that I could have performed instead of the awkward way I asked Neeli out to a movie. I was glad she said yes, but it was still awkward. I watched my mom sauté chicken in a large pot with a spatula. I felt like a fool. My mom added some chopped garlic, ground ginger, and diced onions. I wondered if I had talked too much or if maybe I didn't say enough. She threw in coriander, cumin, turmeric, chili, black

pepper, and a few cloves. Maybe suggesting *The Matrix* was a bad idea; I should have picked something romantic. The aroma of chicken curry filled the kitchen, and the sizzling from the pot brought my attention to a bowl of salty-sweet banana chips sitting on the table. Some chips were thick, and some were thin, and each had its own particular taste and texture. Together they created a delicious pleasure as a whole.

“Rajiv,” my mom said. “Papa asked to give these photos to you. He is working late.” My mom reached into her pocket and took out three photographs.

“What is this?” I asked.

“You had no interest with Sophie, so Papa got photos for you to look at. One girl is from India.”

“Come on, Mom. I told Dad I wasn’t interested in this. You expect me to choose my wife from a photograph?”

“Take it seriously. Pick one you like. We arrange the meeting.” My mom poured some water into the pot and covered the pot with a lid.

“I am not getting married in India. No way. That’s out of the question.”

“Rajiv, pick one, please.”

I wished for a picture of Neeli. I wished that I could show it to my parents. But I didn’t want to hurt them.

I looked at the first photograph and then the second. The first photograph was worn, but the girl’s face was blurry. Her fuzzy black hair hung down to her shoulders and rested on what seemed like a white top. I couldn’t tell if the lighting was bad or if she was that dark. The second photograph was clearer, and I saw that the girl was thin in her brown-red lehenga, but her face was a mystery.

“Mom. The first picture is just a headshot. What about the rest of her? Besides, it’s not a clear picture of her.”

“You are picky,” she said.

“And the second one,” I said. “The second one is a full-length picture, but I can’t even see her face. Is this girl the one from India? How am I supposed to choose from these? Who the heck would take pictures like these?”

“What are you looking for? Supermodel?” she asked.

“Well, it couldn’t hurt.”

My mom jerked in front of me and poised the curry-coated spatula in the air as if to strike me on my face. Startled, I sat back in my seat.

“You make the joke?” she shouted. “You make the joke? Be serious, Rajiv. You need to get married. Please!”

I nodded, and my mom returned to her cooking. I looked at the third photograph. The girl wasn’t so bad. It was a nice picture of her. Her skin was light, and her hair sat a few inches above her shoulders. Her face leaned to one side, and her hands were folded over each other in front of her earth-tone sari. She was smiling.

“How about the third one?” I asked.

“Ah, good,” my mom said. “She is from Chicago. She is a medical student and active in church. I will tell Papa.”

I placed the photographs on the table and stared at the bowl of chips.

“Eat something, Rajiv.”

“Mom. I’m not hungry.”

* * *

I parked the car near an old black mailbox and checked to see if the address was correct. I got out and walked toward Neeli's house. The house was an old American colonial with an attached garage in the back. It was surrounded by oaks, but the yard was well trimmed and kept clean. I noticed that off to the side, peeking over a wooden fence, was a trellis with long beans and bitter melon hanging from the vines. Behind it was tapioca plants with long green leaves and purple stems. From the garden, I guessed that it was her parents' house and not her own. I never understood why the culture in the states was for grown children to exit the house by eighteen, whether by parental force or on their own accord. It felt natural for immigrant parents to let their children stay until they got married or at least found a house of their own after marriage. A preservation of family which was foreign to others in our new world.

I rang the doorbell and waited. The curtains behind the window moved, and then the door slowly opened. It looked like Neeli's mom.

"Hi, aunty," I said. "I'm here to see Neeli."

"Yes. Yes. Come in," she said. The white and black wisps of her hair floated as she moved backward and motioned for me to come inside.

"Neelimma, there is someone here for you," she yelled toward the back of the house. "Please sit down. She will be here soon."

Neeli's mom left the room, and I sat in the living room on a plastic-covered brown sofa. I looked around on the walls, and among the pictures of Neeli and her family were pictures of gods and goddesses. There were some with many heads, some with many colors, some with many hands pointing in various directions, and some with hands holding different objects like a

lotus or a scepter. Some of them I recognized as Vishnu and Shiva, but others were foreign to me.

“I brought you something to eat,” Neeli’s mom said. She appeared before me and set two bowls on the wooden table. One bowl contained fried pakoras and the other, my favorite, banana chips. My eyes fixed on the snacks, and I stared at the pakoras for a moment.

“Would you like some tea?” she asked.

“I’m fine, aunty. Thank you,” I said.

“Eat, eat,” she said and walked out of the living room.

I thought I’d try something new, so I reached down and picked up a pakora. I chewed the soft crispy treat and noticed that in one corner stood an idol of Ganesha. In front of him, near his feet, sat a small bowl of water, various fruits, flowers, and burning incense. The spices inside the fried dough raced in my mouth, and I pictured how Neeli would pray every day, bowing down in front of her inanimate god and serving it food for its pleasure. It was so odd and foreign to me.

“Rajiv,” Neeli said. “I’m so sorry for keeping you waiting.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Your mom brought out some snacks. They were good.”

“We should get going. The movie will start soon, and we need to get good seats.”

“Neelimma, please come here,” her mom shouted from the other room.

Neeli ran out of the room, and I ate another pakora. I chewed and popped another one in my mouth. Above the noises of my chewing, I overheard Neeli say, “Mamma, it’s just the movies. It’s nothing. Don’t worry. Nothing will happen.”

Neeli ran back into the room and grabbed a small black sweater that sat on a chair.

”Let’s go, Rajiv,” Neeli said. “We’re going to miss the movie if we don’t go now.”

* * *

We sat in the car, talking about *The Matrix* and what we thought of it. I leaned back and listened to Neeli's observations.

"It messed with my head," she said. "Imagine waking up and finding out that the perception of reality was being controlled by something else and the real world was where you rose up in freedom out from the control, out of its laws, out of its rules."

It was nice to go out with Neeli, and I saw a side to her that I wasn't able to see at work. She was more relaxed and focused. Focused on me. But the movie left us with an uneasy feeling.

"Strange," I said.

"Yes, strange," Neeli said. "But I had a great time." She reached over and held my hand. It felt more like an awakening than a first date. We both looked out the front shield window searching the dark parking lot for an understanding to this mysterious awareness we felt.

"Neeli," I said.

"Yes."

"I'm glad that you went out with me. It's been a year that we've known each other, and I never thought we would be here."

"I know," she said.

"Neeli."

She looked away from the window and looked at me. In the dim light that seeped from the street, I watched her lips curl into a smile. Her skin was light and soft. Her dark brown eyes rushed out, and they engulfed me.

"I really like you," I said.

“I feel the same way.”

I squeezed her hands and moved toward her. I wanted to kiss her.

I pictured her radiant face bowing before her god in a temple. Her arms leaned forward with an offering of flowers. Her parents, through a window, scowled at me. I was standing far outside the temple.

I looked into her face. Her lips were soft.

Our worlds as we knew them would end with a kiss. It would kindle a fire that would consume us. It would surround us and burn everything. Our parents, our families, our way of life. In this inferno, we would bond to each other, but our worlds would collide and crash all around us. Could we live in the aftermath? Is there life in the ruins?

“I really like you,” I said. “But I wish our lives, our world, was a dream. I want to wake up, and there I could be with you.”

“I know.” I saw in her eyes that she thought this too. “My parents would not allow it. I would be cut off from them if I did. For an instant, I saw myself with you, but what about our children. What would we teach them?”

I pondered this, and we both became quiet.

Silence should be banned or outlawed. It spoke in volumes, weighing us down, and we longed to wake up from this world. We wanted the doubt of our reality to be true.

I pulled her closer, and we hugged.

We stayed friends.

* * *

Over the next few days, Neeli's face appeared less and less in my mind and was replaced with thoughts of hopelessness. I came home from work, and my mom greeted me then ran off to do the laundry. I sat in the kitchen, and the smell of chicken curry and chapati hung in the air. I wondered about the girl in the third photograph, and I remembered her face.

She was smiling.

Her smile grew into a possibility, and I saw her holding my hands while we got married. Beyond her veil, her eyes were hazel brown, and in them, I saw the first house we bought together. Within the house, the sound of children and their laughter echoed through the halls. My son and my daughter ran and jumped around the house, and in their faces, I saw their spouses and their children. It was Thanksgiving, and I saw myself as an old man, laughing with my grandchildren as they ran around and hugged my beautiful gray-haired wife who was the girl in the third photograph.

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard the front door of the house open and close. My dad was home. I was eager to know about the girl.

"Hi, Rajiv," my dad said. "Where's Mama?"

"I don't know," I said. "Probably somewhere around the house. Can we talk?"

"Let me grab something to eat." He opened the pantry and looked around.

"I was just wondering about that girl."

"What girl?" His focus fell on the container of banana chips that now sat next to the bag of rice.

"Dad, the girl in the photograph," I said. "You know, the one with the smile."

"Oh, the photos," he said. "Which one are you talking about?" He grabbed the container of banana chips and closed the pantry door.

“Mom said she was from Chicago. The medical student?”

“Oh, her. Don’t worry about her.” He opened the container, grabbed some chips, and placed them in his mouth.

“What? Why?” I asked.

My dad was going to explain, but he stopped chewing when he looked into my eyes.

“I’m sorry, Rajiv,” he said. “She wasn’t interested in you. She liked your picture, but she wants to marry a doctor.”

I was quiet, and I slumped in my seat. My dad placed the container on the table and sat down near me. I looked at my dad, and I saw Mr. Thomas in his face. This is what Sophie went through. The feeling of being unwanted while hope floated away.

“Why do you do this, Rajiv?” he asked. “Why do you give your heart so quickly?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Don’t worry, your time will come.”

“I don’t think this arrangement thing will work out for me. How can you love someone without knowing them?”

“My son,” my dad said. “Sometimes, when people fall in love, they will fall again; fall out of it. When I met your mother, I did not give her my heart. I only knew that she would be good for me. Good family. Good person. After we got married, we sparked love and worked hard on creating this passionate fire between us. There was no falling. Only a constant rekindling because sometimes it does go out.”

How complex it was. I nodded, but I understood so little.

I reached over and grabbed the container to taste the one thing that I was sure of; a love both salty and sweet.