

Kajal's Story

A novel

by

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PREFACE

This manuscript represents original work done by the author and has not been otherwise submitted in any form for any degree or diploma to any tertiary institution.



N. Ramkisson

Place: DURBAN

Date: 14/05/04

DEDICATION

To my parents: Arunthi and Chaithram Ramkisson.

Thank you for your never-ending love and support. I remain eternally grateful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- To my supervisor Professor. Michael Green: I am very grateful for your patience and assistance in the editing of this work. Thank you for teaching me how to write and, for being so positive and enthusiastic about my writing.
- To my parents: Thank you for all the sacrifices you've made so that your children could be who they are today. You are truly two of the finest human beings I have ever met.
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- Acknowledgements go to the South African Indian community at large.

Chapter 1

Rain pelted down on the streets of Durban, turning them into rivulets carrying floating garbage. Kajal rushed through an alley, the bottom of her jeans now soaking wet. It was Friday, which meant there would be a long queue at the taxi rank.

She held her breath as she rounded the corner at the top of the street.

“Damn,” she mumbled, “I’ll have to wait for at least half an hour.”

She took her place behind a chubby man with several heavily laden shopping bags at his feet who was desperately trying to prevent their contents falling into the rain. Since there was a shelter above her, Kajal decided to put her umbrella away, and was so involved in shaking it dry that she did not feel the tap on her shoulder. “Hey, Kajal,” shouted someone behind her. She turned around to look right into the face of her cousin Shanthi.

Ironically Shanthi, whose name meant peace in Hindi, was very loud and outspoken.

“Hi,” Kajal replied as softly as she could, blushing because people were staring at them.

“What are you doing here?”

“I just finished my wedding shopping,” Shanthi replied at full volume. “I went looking for a blouse for my sari, but everything I tried is tight.”

Despite her embarrassment, Kajal looked at her cousin with sympathy. Both of them had just finished high school, but their circumstances were very different. Kajal expected good results from her matric exams and was planning to go to university. Shanthi had fallen pregnant towards the end of her matric year and was now rushing around preparing for her wedding. She did this apparently unhindered by her prominently swollen stomach. Surprisingly, she had changed roles from schoolgirl to expectant mother and future wife without any complaints. Circumstance has a way of aiding development, thought Kajal to herself.

By now the queue for the taxi had shortened and Kajal could see the conductor sorting people by their destination. Shanthi had become uncharacteristically quiet and was

scratching around for something in her packets. Finally Kajal reached the end of the line. The conductor looked up at her. "Where you going?" he asked.

"Palmview," she replied.

"Then take that one," he said, pointing to a blue taxi with tinted windows.

She climbed in and waved goodbye to Shanthi as the taxi drove off.

The ride home was one she had gotten used to. Loud music and being packed like sardines in a can was part of the taxi experience.

When the taxi finally reached Palmview the rain had subsided, which made her long walk the rest of the way home much easier. Uncle Kala's tuck shop at the corner of the road was busy as usual with children buying sweets and bread for their mothers. The 'regulars' were also there - the boys who just hung around, drinking cool drink and annoying people going by.

One of them stepped forward as she walked past. "Hey, aren't you Shane's cousin from up the road?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. As she did so, she remembered seeing him a few months ago at Shane's wedding.

"How's he?" he continued. "Since he got buckled he forgot all his friends."

"Well, he shifted to Chatsworth," she replied. "Anyway, I'll tell him I saw you."

With that she walked away. She was glad that Shane kept away from these guys. They were hooligans who made no attempt at finding jobs.

As she approached her house, she could see her mother speaking to their neighbour over the fence. Her mother looked tired, and Kajal wondered why she was not in bed, resting, as the doctor had ordered. The two women turned her way as she opened the rusty old gate and walked up to them. "Hi, Ma. How you feeling?" Kajal asked, leaning forward to peck her mother on the cheek.

"I'm fine," came her mother's reply, but Kajal could see that she was still unwell. The wrinkles around her eyes had become more prominent and her skin looked pale.

“Hello, Aunty Saras,” she said to their neighbour.

“Hello, girl,” Aunty Saras replied. “Your mother was just telling that you going to ‘varsity next year. You know my nephew Kuben also went huh, now he’s a doctor in Khan’s Hospital. You know Kuben, huh Geetha?” she asked Kajal’s mother. “My sister Aruna’s son, that sister of mine whose husband ran away with his secretary. Shame, that boy worked so hard, so much hardships.”

“That’s really nice, Aunty Saras,” Kajal replied. “I’m going inside to change out of these wet jeans. Mum, you coming?”

If Aunty Saras was not stopped she could go on talking forever. They had nicknamed her the Grasshopper because she was always ‘hopping’ around from one neighbour’s house to the next. She knew everybody’s stories, and would then make it her duty to tell them to the entire neighbourhood. This was the main reason Kajal tried to avoid her.

As they entered the cosy three-bedroom house, the wonderful aroma of chicken soup greeted them. “Mmm, Mum, that smells great,” Kajal said, her big brown eyes lighting up instantly. “I’m sure that it’ll soon have you better and ready for work again.”

Her mother avoided her eyes and changed the subject.

“Go change your clothes quickly and then tell me about this ‘varsity application,” she said. Kajal hurried to her bedroom and returned minutes later wearing her favourite tracksuit. She sat down at the dining room table while her mother brought in two bowls of soup.

“So,” her mother asked, joining her, “what did you do at the ‘varsity?”

“Well,” she began, “there isn’t much to tell. The campus is huge and it was so busy. I had to fill in an application form and I also made an application for financial aid. But I don’t know if I’ll get it because so many other people also applied.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll sort that problem out when it comes,” her mother replied.

“By the way, I saw Shanthi at the taxi rank,” Kajal said. “Her stomach is huge. No wonder Naani is having a fit. You know how old fashioned she is.”

Kajal’s Naani always complained to her that the young girls of today had lost their morals. “See how they dress,” she would say to her, “half-naked, man, that’s why they

getting pregnant so young. I grew up your mother plus my other children as a widow, still they so decent.”

The telephone interrupted their conversation and Kajal ran to answer it, almost tripping on a piece of vinyl that had come loose from the floor.

A familiar voice greeted her on the other side of the receiver.

“Howzit, Kaj,” said her best friend, Melanie. “I was wondering if you want to come with us to the mall? We’re just going to do some shopping.”

Kajal thought for a moment. It would be great to go shopping and maybe even for ice cream. But then reality set in and she realised that her parents were saving up all their money to send her to university the following year. It would be silly to waste it on unnecessary items. With her mother being sick, the hospital bills were an extra strain on them.

“Kajal, are you still there?” Melanie asked.

“Yes, Mel. I’m sorry, but I can’t come. I just got home from town and I’m very tired. I went to apply at ‘varsity. Go without me, I’ll speak to you tomorrow.”

“Okay then, talk to you later,” Melanie replied, putting the receiver down.

When Kajal returned to the table, her mother asked, “Why didn’t you go with Melanie?” She shook her head. “I’d rather spend quality time with my mother,” she said with a quiet smile.

The two women started to make supper. Fridays in the Raman household usually meant fish and chips or hot dogs. Today it was fish and chips. As Kajal peeled the potatoes, she glanced at the clock on the wall. Her father was due to arrive soon.

Just then the handle on the kitchen door turned and to her surprise her brother Suraj walked in, cricket bat in hand and a friend trailing behind. This was a friend that neither Kajal nor her mother had seen before and Kajal noticed a look of concern on her mother’s face. Suraj greeted them and walked straight to his bedroom. The friend followed.

“Who was that guy?” Kajal whispered to her mother.

“I don’t know,” her mother replied softly. Kajal was surprised because her brother was quite reserved, and she wondered how he had managed to make a new friend.

Kajal's father, Anand, entered a kitchen that was filled with the pungent aroma of masala-fried fish. He was armed with several packets and dropped them on the floor as Kajal ran to kiss him. Every Friday, for as long as she could remember, he would come home with treats for both Suraj and herself – a packet of chips for him and a chocolate bar for her. "Wow, Dad," she said, "you look as if you bought the whole shop out." He turned toward his wife and said, "I saw your mother on my way to work. She said that she and Baboo are coming to stay for the weekend, so I bought extra vegetables and meat."

Kajal was glad that her Naani was coming to stay; even though she was a bit old fashioned, she always told the most interesting stories. On the other hand, her Uncle Baboo was coming too. He was the least favourite of all her relatives. Thirty-five years old and unmarried, he still lived with his mother. He was also obese, but thought nothing of it and continued to overeat. Kajal and Suraj called him Burper Baboo because he had a terrible gas problem. If he was not living up to the name they had given him, he was farting.

Kajal thought back to the day they gave Baboo his nickname. It happened during the Christmas holidays when they were younger and her cousins Nishaal and Nirvana had come over to stay. One night she was sound asleep when Nirvana, who was sleeping next to her, woke her up. "Kajal," she whispered, "wake up. I think there's a burglar in the house. I'm sure I heard something moving."

Kajal listened carefully and she could also hear the sound. They agreed that it was coming from the room in which Uncle Baboo slept. As they approached the door, the sound grew louder. Suddenly they heard a loud ripping noise. Then they realised that it was Uncle Baboo's farting and snoring that had woken them up.

Kajal burst out into laughter, much to the amazement of her parents.

"What's wrong, Kajal?" asked her mother.

“Huh?” she asked, coming back to the present. “I’m sorry, Ma, I was just thinking about something really funny.” She decided not to go in to any further detail, and help her mother prepare more supper instead. Burper Baboo and Naani would be arriving soon.

Naani arrived at six o’clock that evening, with Baboo in tow. As they came in he complained about how they would have been earlier had Naani not watched her soaps.

She greeted everyone and asked, “Where’s that Suraj?”

“He’s in his room with a friend,” Kajal replied. She avoided looking at her father, who up until then had assumed that Suraj was still at cricket practice.

“Well, Kajal, go call him,” he said. “Tell him Naani came.”

Kajal reluctantly got off her chair and headed for Suraj’s bedroom. He was behaving strangely and her father would be furious if he was rude to their visitors.

She heard gangster rap music as she approached the door. “Suraj,” she called out. There was no answer, so she turned the door handle and peered in. Suraj and his friend were sitting on the far side of the bed so entranced by the music that they did not hear her come in. “Hey, Suraj,” she said shaking him back to reality, “Naani came and Daddy’s calling you.”

He looked at her for a moment, as if he was trying to comprehend what she was saying. Then he stood up and turned to his friend. “I think you better go,” he said. “I’ll check you Monday, okay.”

Kajal hurried to the lounge while Suraj let his friend out the back door. She said to her father that he was on his way and went back to her seat.

Suraj walked in and everybody paused to look at him. He walked over to Naani, wincing slightly as she kissed him loudly on the cheek. “Where you were, Lal?” she enquired.

He forced a smile, probably because he could feel his father’s eyes on his back. He hated the pet name she had for him. It made him feel like a little boy.

“I was doing homework with my friend,” he answered.

Kajal casually turned towards her father, who was now staring at Suraj. She knew that he did not believe Suraj's story, and her mother's worried look left a nervous twinge in her stomach.

Chapter 2

Silence at last, thought Kajal as she watched Naani and her mother walk down the path that led from her house to the main gate. It was Sunday and they were on their way to Shanthi's house to help with the wedding preparations.

She smiled to herself, as she could not imagine how much of a difference the pair of them could make. Her mother maybe, but Naani was more of a supervisor than a worker. With the wedding a week away, Kajal knew that their visit was just an excuse to meet with the other relatives and chat. Her father and Uncle Baboo were at the barbershop down the road and Suraj had told her that he was going to a friend's house to finish a school project.

Delighted to have the house to herself, she went to her bedroom and decided to get her outfits ready for the wedding. In total she would need three different sets of clothing: one for the cleansing ceremony on Friday night, another for the flag hoisting prayer on Saturday, and a third for the wedding itself on Sunday.

As she took the first hanger out of her wardrobe, the telephone echoed through the silent house, causing her to jump in astonishment.

"Hello," she answered, still recovering from her shock.

"Hey, Kajal. How's it going?"

She broke into a smile when she recognised the voice on the other end. "Hi, Mel, how are you?"

"I'm fine, I was just checking if you were at home," Melanie said. "My parents are coming that side and I wanted to visit."

"Wow, that would be great. See you just now," Kajal replied.

"Okay then, bye."

Even though they had been friends for many years, Kajal and Melanie were quite different. Kajal was the introvert of the pair and was modest about everything, including her good looks. Melanie was the opposite. She spoke even when she was not spoken to, and was always the first to get the latest in any fashionable item. They met when they were eight-years old, on their first day at a new school. Since they were both new pupils they instantly became friends. They later discovered that they lived near each other and this lead to them spending all of their free time together.

When they were about sixteen, Melanie's family moved to a house they had bought at La Mercy beach. It was a huge house, which Kajal gauged was roughly five times the size of her own. The girls still saw each other at school, so their friendship continued.

Kajal was busy tidying the house when there was a knock. Opening the front door she said, "Mel, that was quick."

"Ya well, my dad drives like a maniac," her friend replied, turning around to wave goodbye. Kajal also waved, and watched Melanie's parents drive off in their sleek green Jeep.

"What have you been up to?" asked Melanie, as she sat on a sofa.

"Well," said Kajal, "I was just going to make lunch. How about fried egg sandwiches with lots of tomato sauce?"

"Sounds great to me. I'll make the tea," Melanie replied. "So, how did the whole 'varsity thing go?"

"Okay, I'll just have to wait and see if I get accepted," Kajal said, sighing softly.

Later as they were eating, Melanie asked, "Kaj, what are you wearing to Shanthi's wedding?"

"I don't know," Kajal replied between bites. "I was considering my red and gold shirara, the one I wore for Shane's wedding, remember? With the long skirt and straight fitting jacket? But everyone will notice that I am repeating my outfit."

Melanie took some time to respond. She hardly ever bought Indian outfits, so the names were difficult to remember. Then she said, "Hey, why don't you wear my uhm... what's it called?"

“Chanya Choli,” Kajal said quickly. “That’s what it’s called.”

“Yes, why don’t you wear my Chanya Choli? The short blouse will look stunning on you ‘cos you have a flatter stomach than me.”

“Oh no. Are you crazy? That outfit is far too expensive, I’ll just damage it.”

Secretly, Kajal would have loved to take up Melanie’s offer, but her mother would be really upset if she were to borrow an outfit, instead of using the ones that she had.

“Nonsense Kaj, we’re like sisters and....”

Just then the kitchen door opened and Suraj walked in. He had some packets in his hand and turned red in the face when he saw them.

“Hi,” he said, “I didn’t know y’all were in here.”

Without waiting for them to reply, he hurried off to his bedroom and shut the door.

“What’s up with him?” Melanie enquired. “He’s acting weirder than usual.”

“Oh, you know him,” Kajal replied. She was unsure about her brother and needed time to figure out what he was up to. By now Melanie had forgotten their discussion about the outfit. Relieved at this, Kajal remained quiet about it.

They had just finished washing the dishes when Kajal heard her mother and Naani at the front door.

“Kajal, open the gate,” Naani said. “This house is locked up like a jail.”

Kajal ran to the gate before Naani got hysterical.

“So,” she said when Naani and her mother had settled down and were having tea, “what have they done so far?”

“You know Aunty Premi,” answered Kajal’s mother. “She has put the wedding sari and the jewels away and said that she’ll only take them out on the wedding day. We helped them make the mango and vegetable pickles, and Uncle Raj has finally finished painting the house.”

“Wow,” Melanie exclaimed, “Shanthi must be so nervous.”

“That girl got used to the idea a long time ago,” Naani replied cynically.

To change the subject, Kajal's mother asked, "Has Suraj come home from the library yet?"

"The library?" Melanie asked, "It's not open on a Sunday. I know because my cousin Lee is a librarian."

Her mother looked concerned, so Kajal said, "Yes, Ma, he is in his room. He must have come home when he realised the library was closed." She could not believe that Suraj had lied. If Naani found out anything about Suraj she would go straight to their father.

Somehow Kajal and Melanie's conversation had gone back to weddings.

"So what foods are they serving?" Melanie asked.

"The usual of course," Kajal said. "You know, vegetable breyani with dhal and salad. And soji for dessert."

"That sounds delicious," Melanie replied. "But I don't understand why they don't serve mutton breyani at Hindi weddings." Coming from a very modern family, Melanie had little knowledge of traditional Hindu practices, so Kajal decided to explain.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Naani responded instead. "You see my girl," she said, "the reason for vegetable fasting is that we do the Katha and Jundha..."

"That's the flag hoisting prayer," Kajal interjected.

"...the day before the wedding," Naani continued with a scowl at her granddaughter. "So, the family starts fasting a week in advance. We only break our fast three days after the wedding."

Melanie gave a rather confused smile. "Thanks," she said to Naani. "At least now I know."

Kajal's father and Uncle Baboo arrived as Melanie was leaving. Since it was already late, Naani and Uncle Baboo had to leave as well. As Melanie drove off in her 4x4, Kajal watched Uncle Baboo trying to squeeze himself into the front seat of their car whilst her mother and Naani sat at the back.

Chapter 3

The week prior to Shanthi's wedding went by quickly and Kajal's mother went over every day. Kajal was not happy with this arrangement because her mother was supposed to be resting instead of leaving home early in the morning to help her aunty with the final preparations. Kajal's mother suffered from wheezing and the fact that she worked at a paint manufacturing company only worsened her condition. As a result of the paint fumes, she had developed lung infection - a condition that, if not treated properly, could lead to lung disease. Kajal had always wanted to become a doctor and her mother's sickness had been her main motivation. She hated the fact that she felt so helpless and useless every time her mother fell ill. All she could do was stand back and pray that everything would be okay. She decided that by becoming a doctor she would be able to understand illnesses and help others like her mother.

With her mother at Shanthi's house, Kajal had to do the cooking, which was something she dreaded. No matter how much she tried, she still got it wrong. There was either too little salt or too much curry powder. While she learned, her family was subjected to salty bean curry and really stiff roti, amongst other not particularly well-prepared foods.

She saw the postman go past, and she looked over at their post box. To her surprise there were several letters crammed into the tiny space. She raced outside. Without waiting to go back in, she sorted through them. Her heart sank; they were mainly hospital bills. Then she saw one addressed to her. She tore the white envelope open and pulled out a single page letter. It said:

Dear Miss Raman

We are delighted to inform you that you are one of the winners of the Inter-Schools Essay competition. You and your family are invited to an award ceremony where you will receive your prize cheque of R1000 as well as a certificate of your achievement.

"Oh my God," she shouted, not bothering to read the rest of the letter. She had forgotten about this competition, which she had entered months earlier. Kajal could not believe her

eyes and re-read the letter just to see if she had understood it correctly. In all her excitement, she did not notice Aunty Saras leaning over the fence, trying to get her attention. As she turned to go back inside, Aunty Saras shouted to her:

“Kajal,” she said, “where’s your mother?”

Kajal turned around. “Oh, hello Aunty Saras,” she said. “She’s not here. She went to my Aunty Premi’s house in Unit 21.”

“Oh ya, your cousin’s getting married, huh?”

“Yes,” Kajal replied. “Mummy will be back later this afternoon.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to her later.” With that Aunty Saras went back into her house.

Kajal’s jaw dropped with astonishment. This was probably the shortest conversation Aunty Saras had ever had with anybody.

Although she was ecstatic about her letter, the news would have to wait till the afternoon. Her Aunty Premi did not have a telephone, so she could not tell her mother, and her father was not contactable either, because he was only allowed to receive emergency calls at work. She did try to phone Melanie, but there was no answer.

It was almost two o’ clock, and Suraj would be home soon. Then she thought about Suraj and the packets he had brought home on Sunday afternoon. “What was in them?” she asked herself, biting her lower lip. She walked down the passage and into Suraj’s room. Snooping was wrong, but she needed to know if he was in any sort of trouble. On the surface everything looked normal, and there was no sign of packets or parcels. She looked under the bed and was welcomed by the stuffy smell of old cricket shoes. “Definitely nothing down there,” she muttered. “If there was, it’s already dead.”

She was tempted to look into the cupboards, but stopped herself. After all, she would be furious if he pried in her cupboards.

Suraj arrived from school and was hungry as usual. She waited for him to settle down in front of the TV.

“Guess what, Su?” she asked.

He looked up from his peanut butter sandwiches.

“What?”

“I won a competition. One thousand rand.”

Suraj’s eyes lit up.

“Are you serious?” he asked.

“Ya. Remember that essay competition I entered at school?”

“Wow, that’s great. Did you tell Mummy?”

“No. I’ll tell her later,” she replied. “Aunty Premi and them don’t have a phone, remember.”

She left him to watch TV and went into the kitchen. It was time to make supper. Being a Thursday, she could cook meat instead of vegetables. Had it been a Tuesday, the situation would have been totally different. For as long as Kajal could remember, her family had kept a vegetable fast on Tuesdays. She and Suraj had been taught that Tuesdays were dedicated to the Hindi God Hanuman, and since Hindus considered eating meat a pleasure, it was forbidden on Tuesdays, either at home or away.

Kajal decided on baked beans and sausages. This was easy, quick, and something that she had been successful with in the past. As she cut the onions, she heard whistling coming from outside. She peered through the kitchen window and saw a boy standing at their driveway gate. Somehow he looked familiar. “Suraj, just see there’s someone at the gate,” she shouted. She heard him run to his room and then back to the lounge.

“Kaj, I’m going out for a while, see you later,” he said, as he ran out the front door.

Then Kajal realised who the boy was. It was the same boy who had come home with Suraj on Friday.

Her parents arrived later that afternoon and Kajal was worried because Suraj had not yet come home. While her father was in the bathroom she whispered to her mother.

“Ma, I don’t know where Suraj is,” she said. “He left home so long ago.”

Her mother looked worried, but neither of them said anything to her father.

As they set the table for supper, Kajal’s father came into the dining room.

“Is Suraj in his room?” he asked.

Kajal began to attempt an explanation, but just then Suraj walked in. Their father stared at him.

“Is this the time for a child of mine to come home?” he shouted.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Suraj apologised. “I was at my friend’s house.”

Their father was furious. “Well, couldn’t you phone?” he asked. “Listen my boy, you better shape up. I noticed that you are acting a bit strange these days. This behaviour must stop. Now go bath, it’s suppertime.”

Everyone was silent at the supper table. Kajal had almost forgotten about her essay competition until Suraj looked up from his plate. “Did Kajal tell y’all she won a competition.” he asked bravely.

Her parents looked surprised.

“For true, Kaj?” asked her mother.

“Er, yes,” she said. “It’s for that essay I wrote about the life of Mahatma Gandhi. I won a thousand rand. They are giving out the prize money at the University of Natal’s graduation. I’ll have to phone and tell them if we are going.”

“We all are.” her mother said firmly.

That night Kajal lay in bed thinking about the money she had won. She could use it in so many ways. Maybe she could buy her parents something nice, or save it for university fees, or she could use some of it and save the rest. Soon she had fallen happily asleep.

She had to wake up early on Friday morning because she and her mother were going to Shanthi’s house. Suraj and her father would join them later that afternoon. Since her father had already left for work, they had to take a taxi. The taxi ride was very long because they drove around several streets looking for passengers. As a result, a ride that would take ten minutes by car took half an hour.

They eventually got to Unit 21, and had to walk another five minutes to Shanthi’s house. The house was very noticeable with the huge red tent outside, and Kajal could see some of her relatives. After greeting all of them and being kissed several times, she went in

search of Shanthi, only to find out that she had gone to the maternity clinic for a routine check-up.

They spent most of the day preparing vegetables for the night's supper and the following day's lunch. Shanthi arrived towards the afternoon, and was immediately put into a sari because the Hurdee was about to start. Kajal loved the excitement that surrounded the whole ceremony. Glancing at her watch she realised that the groom's family would be performing the same ceremony over at his house. The Hurdee, which was performed by women only, involved the bride and groom's legs, hands, and face being covered in a turmeric paste. Technically, this was done for cleansing purposes, but Naani had once told Kajal another reason. She had explained that long ago products such as make-up were not available, so turmeric was applied to give the skin a lighter complexion. Since then it had become a tradition. Kajal had fun joining in on this and at the end of the ceremony Shanthi looked like a little sun.

Then supper was served to the several guests who had arrived. Kajal looked for her father and saw Suraj sitting with their cousin Nishaal. As she walked over to them she tripped on a loose brick in the paving and lost her balance. Trying desperately to regain her stability, she fell on one of her relatives who was seated at the supper table and was about to pour a ladle of dhall into his plate. He poured the hot dhall onto himself instead, and jumped up.

"Ow, look what you did!" he shouted.

She was highly embarrassed because all the guests were looking at her.

"I'm really sorry, Uncle Praveen," she said and ran off, thinking that the toilet would be an ideal place to escape to at that moment. She wanted to stay in there, and probably would have if somebody had not knocked on the door.

"Very nice, Kajal," she said to herself. "You go to a crowded function and try hiding in the toilet, like nobody's going to want to use it!"

"Are you alright?" asked a familiar voice. It was her cousin Nirvana.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said, opening the door. They hugged each other. "'Vana, stop smirking like that," Kajal said.

“What?” Nirvana asked. “I didn’t say a word. But it was totally hilarious. Uncle Praveen looks like he peed in his pants.” Trying hard not to laugh again, Nirvana continued. “Anyway.” she said, “your mother's calling you. They’re leaving.”

“Hey, aren’t you all coming to stay at my house tonight?” Kajal asked.

“Nishaal and I wanted to come,” Nirvana replied, “but my mother wants us to stay with Naani tonight. We’ll stay at your house tomorrow night.”

Since Nirvana’s family lived in Pietermaritzburg, they had come down to Durban for the weekend and would only drive back after the wedding. Kajal was disappointed they were not staying at her house both nights because she rarely saw her cousins. She knew however that Naani would be very upset if they did not spend a night at her house.

Chapter 4

Kajal awoke the next morning feeling a little better than the night before. Her parents had already gone to Shanthi's house, but her father had said that he would return later to fetch her and Suraj. She decided to make her bed and then have breakfast.

To her surprise, Suraj was all dressed up and eating his breakfast despite the fact that he had come in later than the rest of her family the night before.

"Hey, Kajal, nice fall," he said. "What were you trying to do?"

"Oh shut up Suraj, it was very embarrassing."

"Anyway," Suraj said, "I'm off to the Plaza, and from there I'll go straight to Aunty Premi's house."

"Did you tell Daddy that?" she asked.

"No, you can tell him," he answered as he walked out the kitchen door.

Kajal sat down with a biscuit and a cup of tea. Her mind slowly drifted to the night ahead. There would be tons of relatives present, most of whom they had not seen in years. Her mother had also said that there would be a band performing. This meant that everybody would be dancing till the following morning. She did not realise how fast time had gone by until she looked at the lounge clock. She left her tea and ran to get changed. She wore her sleeveless Punjabi outfit. Kajal hardly ever wore make-up, but today she decided to put on lipstick and eyeliner to bring some colour to her pale face. She heard her father hooting in the driveway, and quickly locked the house.

"Hi, Dad," she said as she slipped into the front seat.

"Where is Suraj?" he asked.

"He said that he was going to the Plaza and he'll meet us at Aunty Premi's house."

"What has gotten into that boy?" her father asked. "He still crept out, even though I scolded him the other day."

As soon as they got to Aunty Premi's house Kajal rushed down the stairs to find her mother. She saw her in the backyard speaking to two relatives.

“Hey, Mum, how are you?”

“I’m fine, just a bit chesty,” her mother replied. “Oh, I see you’re wearing make-up. I told you to wear it more often. See how nice you look.”

She introduced Kajal. “This is my daughter Kajal,” she said. “She’s my eldest.”

“You got a son too, huh?” one of them asked.

“Yes, he is around somewhere.”

They then went over to the tent, as the Katha and Jundha prayer was about to start. They found a row of seats at the back and Kajal was glad that she did not end up next to the two relatives to whom they had just spoken. Instead, she sat with her mother on one side and an empty seat on the other. The priest asked them all to rise, because he wanted to say a prayer before they started. Kajal stood up, bowed her head, and closed her eyes. Halfway through the prayer, she felt someone come and stand next to her at the empty seat, but she was too scared to look. What if she opened her eyes while everybody else had their eyes closed, and the priest noticed?

Just at that moment the priest said, “Thank you ladies and gentlemen, you may be seated.”

Kajal turned to see who was sitting next to her. It was a relative who looked vaguely familiar. She smiled at the lady, who smiled back and then leaned forward to get Kajal’s mother’s attention. “Namaaste, Geetha,” she greeted. “How you?”

Her mother smiled and motioned for her to swap seats with Kajal. The lady stood up abruptly and looked at Kajal, who obliged, not wanting to cause a stir.

Kajal decided to pay attention to the prayer. She could see Shanthi and her parents sitting at the front with the priest. Her cousin wore a light pink sari and looked very tired and uncomfortable. Aunty Premi wore a purple sari and had her head covered with part of her sari, a practise that all married Hindi women have to follow to symbolise respect. Kajal looked around her. All the guests sat in neat horizontal rows; they all were focusing on the prayer taking place at the front of the tent.

When the prayer was almost over, her mother was called inside to help serve the food, as it was time for lunch. Kajal got up to join her, but her mother turned around and whispered. "No, you wait till they finish, I'll go inside."

The lady who had been speaking with Kajal's mother turned to Kajal. "You know who I am?" she asked. Before Kajal could answer, she went on. "I'm your Daddy's cousin sister, Jyothi, from Glendale." Kajal smiled, trying hard not to show that she hadn't had a clue who she was. "The last time I saw you, you were this big," her newfound relative said, raising her hand about half a metre from the ground.

Just then Suraj called out to her, "Hey Kaj, come eat with us."

She turned to see that most of the chairs had been moved aside, and tables and chairs had been set up for lunch. Suraj, Nirvana, and Nishaal were seated at a table, waving at her to join them. She got up. "That's my brother and them," she said. "Why don't you come and eat too?"

Jyothi smiled, showing a set of beetlenut-stained teeth. "No, go you," she said to Kajal, "I'll eat with the old aunties."

The group at the table was grinning as she approached them and sat next to Nirvana. "What's so funny?" she asked.

Nirvana was the first to speak. "Do you know who that aunty was?" she asked.

"No," Kajal replied, trying to understand what they found so amusing.

"Well," Nishaal explained, "she's the one that organises people. You know, finds them a husband or wife."

"So what does that have to do with me," Kajal asked.

"Vana thinks you're her next victim," Suraj replied.

Kajal looked at Nirvana. "Really, that is so ridiculous," she said.

Kajal's father, who was serving food to the guests, interrupted their conversation. "Breyani, anyone?" he asked.

They each took a helping of the steaming hot vegetable breyani, and had soon forgotten their conversation.

When lunch was over, the girls went to the kitchen to help with the cleaning up. The guys helped serve lunch to the guests who had not yet eaten. Before the night's dancing could start, there was another custom on the pre-wedding list that had to be performed, the Thiluk. This is when the bride's family, usually her parents and immediate aunts and uncles, go to the groom's house. The bride however, has to stay at home. Her family take along sweetmeats, gifts, and a set of clothing to present to the groom. Customarily, the bride's family would be entertained with tea and snacks and the two parties agree that everything is going according to plan. They also confirm that the wedding will take place the following day. Kajal and the other youngsters stayed behind at Shanthi's house while their parents went to the Thiluk.

More guests arrived throughout the afternoon, ready for the night's festivities. Kajal and Nirvana found themselves at the centre of the preparations and helped. Nirvana was really annoyed because she had gone to the kitchen sink to wash her hands and got stuck there washing dishes. Kajal was luckier; she had bumped into Shanthi who asked her to help her pack. Shanthi would spend her wedding night at the husband's house.

A Hindi bride and groom do not consummate their marriage on their wedding night. The bride merely goes to the groom's house to acknowledge that she is now a daughter-in-law there. Shanthi would return to her parent's house the following day, where she would live apart from her husband for a week. The bride and the groom together with their families would keep their vegetarian fasts for three days after the wedding. At the end of that week, Shanthi's husband and his family would fetch her from her house in a ceremony known as the Bhedai. At the Bhedai the groom's family would be treated to lunch before the bridal couple departed for their honeymoon.

"So, Shanthi, where are y'all going on honeymoon?" Kajal asked, a little embarrassed, given her cousin's condition.

Shanthi smiled. "Nowhere really exciting, just a chalet on the south coast. We need to start saving for this one," she said, patting her swollen stomach.

"You know what," Kajal said suddenly. "We might not come for your Bhedai."

“Why?” Shanthi asked.

“I forgot to tell you,” Kajal replied. “I won that essay competition. Remember the one that I entered at school. Anyway, the function takes place next weekend.”

“Oh, no,” Shanthi said with disappointment. “I really wanted y’all to be there. But I’m happy for you. You are so smart.” Kajal sensed sadness in her cousin’s tone and was about to speak when the door suddenly opened and their cousin Anitha walked in.

“Are you finished?” she asked. “The band has arrived and everyone is going out to the tent.”

“Has the Thiluk party come back yet?” Shanthi enquired.

“Yes, they just came. So make fast, you two.”

The two of them finished the packing and went outside to the tent.

It was now dark and the lights were switched on. This added to the occasion because the light made the ladies’ saris look even more sparkly and extravagant. Shanthi was called to sit with Naani at the front while Kajal joined Nirvana two rows behind.

“Where’s Suraj and Nish?” she asked as she sat down.

“Nishaal went with my father to the shop,” Nirvana replied. “And I haven’t seen Suraj.”

Kajal looked around, noticing the tent was almost full to its capacity. The band had set up at the front and was warming up. These bands were very common on the eve of a Hindi wedding. They provided entertainment by singing traditional songs as well as songs from Indian films.

“So,” Nirvana asked, “you ready to dance till you drop?”

“Are you crazy?” Kajal responded. “There are so many people here.”

From the corner of her eye Kajal could see some boys at the back of the tent. It was Suraj and a group of boys she had never seen before. Suddenly someone else caught her eye. Nishaal looked very uncomfortable as he waded his way through the already-seated guests to get to them. “Wow!” he said as he sat down beside her, “that was pretty hectic. No matter how many times I apologised for disturbing them in their seats, they still looked pretty irritated.”

“Nish,” Kajal asked, “who are those guys with Suraj?”

He was about to answer when he saw Suraj heading their way.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” he replied.

Suraj made his way through the crowd and sat down. “Hello everybody,” he said to them.

“This place is packed.”

Kajal turned to face him, but he avoided her eyes. “Suraj,” she asked, “where have you been all this time? And who are those boys you were with?”

“Those guys are my friends,” was all he could say by way of reply.

Kajal decided to speak to Suraj about his behaviour when the wedding chaos was over. She focused her attention on the band. By now several of her relatives were dancing to the vibrant beats of the music. Shanthi’s parents, Aunty Premi and Uncle Raj, were also on the dance floor. Kajal burst out laughing when her father decided to join them. However, her laughter stopped when he walked over to where they were sitting, and pulled her and her cousins out to dance. Suraj did not go with them because he hated dancing. Kajal blushed as she tried to get into the rhythm – there were so many people watching them.

Her shyness soon faded and she realised that she was really enjoying herself doing the bhangra with her cousins. Many other guests joined them and the dancing continued till the early hours of the following morning. Shanthi also graced the dance floor, with moves so intense they’d put any other pregnant woman to shame. When the band finally left, after several requests for ‘just one more for the road’, the guests also went home. They had to attend a wedding in a few hours time, after all.

Kajal was extremely tired as she dragged herself to their car. Her feet ached, and she was all sweaty, but she had had a great time.

Chapter 5

Kajal awoke to the sounds of a hair dryer and took a second to clear her mind. Glancing over to her watch on the table next to her bed, she realised that it was time to get up. As she got out of bed, she knew that there would be a line for the bathroom. “Kajal!” she heard Suraj shout through her half-opened bedroom door, “Mummy said you must get up.”

She went over to her chest of drawers and took out a bath towel and a set of lilac underwear, which she placed on the undressed bed before rushing out the door. As she walked down the passage she saw Suraj and Nishaal in the lounge.

“Howzit Kaj.” Nishaal greeted. Suraj did not look up from his bowl of breakfast cereal and she knew why. He was still sulking about the way she had interfered the night before.

She heard laughter as she approached the kitchen. She had not heard her mother laugh so loud in a long time and this brought an instant smile to her face. “Morning, you two,” she said to her mother and Aunty Rita. The women smiled at her.

“Geetha, see how bright she looks,” said her aunty. “You’ll never say they slept so late.”

Her mother smiled. “That’s the good thing about being young and beautiful,” she said.

Kajal ignored their teasing and poured herself a cup of black tea. The excitement about the wedding gave her butterflies in her stomach, so tea was her only option.

As she sipped the dark hot liquid, she asked, “Ma, did y’all finish bath?”

“Yes,” came her mother’s reply. “Now why don’t you check if ‘Vana is finished, otherwise we are going to be late.”

Nirvana strolled into the kitchen with a striped towel wrapped around her head. Kajal burst out laughing, “‘Vana, you look like a Rasta,” she said.

“Ha, ha. very funny; now go bath,” Nirvana replied.

The rest of the morning was hectic. Kajal was furious with Suraj and Nishaal who had got caught up watching television and had lost track of time. Kajal’s father complained about the boys and how long they took to get dressed. “You know, in our days we just wore anything to weddings,” he said to Nirvana’s father, Ashley, as the two of them sat

in the lounge waiting for the others. “Now they want fancy clothes and will put one ton of gel in their hair.”

“I keep telling Nishaal that one day he’ll be bald because of the gel,” Uncle Ashley added. “Boys today got too much style,” he continued. “Women too huh, no matter how much time you give a woman to dress up, she’ll still be late.”

Kajal, who was on her way from the bathroom, heard this and was quite irritated.

Why didn’t they help lock up the house? she thought. It was always the women who had to organise breakfast, iron the clothes, get themselves dressed, and then lock the doors and windows.

She went back to her room and quickly put on her shirara and combed her hair.

“Vana,” she asked, “are you finished at the mirror, yet? You’ve been there for twenty minutes.”

“Just a minute, Kaj,” she answered. “I’ve just got to sort these eyebrows out.”

After what seemed like an eternity for Kajal, Nirvana parted with the mirror. Just then Kajal’s mother shouted to them. “Come on girls,” she said, “we are leaving.” Kajal hastily applied some lipstick, grabbed her shawl, and headed out the room.

The drive to the hall was chaotic because Uncle Ashley continuously got lost. This meant that Kajal’s father had to pull over to the side of the road and wait for the others to find their way. Nirvana explained on her father’s behalf that the roads in Phoenix were confusing. Kajal smiled to herself because she knew that the main reason for them getting lost was her uncle’s forgetfulness. When they reached the hall, Kajal noticed that Aunty Rita was annoyed. She slammed the car door and stomped out of the parking lot. The other three women looked at each other knowingly and followed her. She was angry with her husband, but it was only temporary. Everybody knew that they were inseparable; his carelessness irritated her, but she loved him dearly.

As they entered the hall, the sweet pungent aroma of incense welcomed them. Two girls stood at the entrance, holding colourfully decorated baskets. They handed out little square boxes to the guests. Kajal and the others made their way down the aisle to the front. Unfortunately, there weren’t enough seats for them to sit together in one row, so Kajal and Nirvana sat in the row behind their mothers.

Kajal opened the box and looked inside. There were different sweets, varying in colour. Kajal picked a purple one and put it into her mouth; it was a candy-coated peanut. She looked around her to spot anyone familiar and saw Jyothi, the old lady she had spoken to the day before. The lady smiled at her, once again revealing her beetlenut-stained teeth. Kajal smiled back and turned her gaze to the opposite aisle. She saw ladies and children, some looking more familiar than others.

All of the women were dressed either in saris or some other type of Indian cultural dress. There were brilliant colours ranging across the rainbow, from radiant red to vibrant violet. Kajal also noticed that there were mainly older men seated in the hall with them. This was characteristic of many Indian weddings. For some unexplained reason the younger men preferred to sit outside the hall whilst their wives sat inside and witnessed the ceremony. This had no religious or social significance; it was just something that tended to happen. The guests chatted amongst themselves whilst some children fussed about being bored and hungry. Kajal picked up on some of their conversations about sick relatives, babies that had been born, and relatives that had passed away.

The priest sat on the stage at the front of the hall. He set up the prayer place where Shanthi and Aveen would join him and perform their marriage vows. Suddenly the chattering stopped and everybody turned to the back of the hall. Kajal also turned to see what was going on. The groom had come and he was walking down the aisle. She and Nirvana peered curiously into the aisle as well. Even though her cousin was marrying Aveen, Kajal had only seen him twice before.

The first time was about a year ago when they went to visit Aunty Premi, and Aveen was there. He just smiled at them and left shortly after they had arrived. The second time was a few months ago when Shanthi found out that she was pregnant. Kajal went along with her parents to Aunty Premi's house to discuss Shanthi and Aveen's plans for the future.

Aveen was also there, together with his parents and a few other relatives. At this meeting, the two decided that they wanted to get married and have the baby. Kajal remembered the day very clearly; Aunty Premi, who was furious with Shanthi at the time, was upset and cried continuously.

Today, Aveen looked much older. He wore a beige suit, a maroon tie, and a maroon turban as he walked slowly down the aisle. Since it is customary at all Indian weddings for both the bride and groom to be escorted down the aisle with a few of their close relatives, Aveen was accompanied by his parents and his grandparents. His granny caught everyone's attention because she wore so many flowers in her hair that she looked like a mobile decoration. Nirvana giggled as they walked past and Kajal, who wore a huge grin on her face, nudged her to be quiet.

On reaching the stage, Aveen's grandparents took their seats amongst the guests, whilst he and his parents went on to the stage. Aveen sat on the wedding stool with the priest sitting cross-legged on the floor next to him. His parents sat on two chairs further behind. Aveen was to perform certain rituals before the bride could come in. The priest had started the havan, a small fire into which the bride and groom would put various holy spices throughout the wedding ceremony.

Nirvana turned to Kajal. "This is going to take so long," she complained. "Why do we have to do so many customs?"

"Well, it's part of our culture, it's what makes us Indians," Kajal answered in her best impersonation of Naani. "No, seriously 'Vana," she continued. "I once asked Naani why all this was necessary and she gave me a very long lecture. It was around Shane's wedding time. She told me that our ancestors had performed these rituals and it was our responsibility to continue with them, especially since we are so far away from our motherland."

Nirvana rolled her eyes and slouched in her chair.

The guests started to talk amongst themselves while others paid attention to the rites that Aveen performed. After some time there was a hush at the back of the hall and everybody knew that the bride had arrived.

They were awestruck as Shanthi walked down the aisle wearing a red and gold sari. Following her were her parents, Baboo, and Naani. Baboo and his mother joined the guests in the audience whilst Aunty Premi and Uncle Raj sat on the stage. Shanthi took her place next to Aveen on the wedding stool. As she faced the audience, Kajal noticed that her stomach had been well concealed by the way in which the sari was tied.

The priest then made his way to the microphone and greeted the guests.

“Naamaste, ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “Will you please rise in prayer?”

Everyone stood up and bowed their heads. When the priest had finished praying, he asked them to be seated and began with the wedding ceremony.

Kajal and the other guests watched carefully as the couple took their marital vows. After each vow, Shanthi and Aveen put various holy spices into the havan. Eventually the bride and groom were asked to stand up and the priest tied a piece of Shanthi’s sari to Aveen’s shirt. This signified that the two of them were now one. The final part of the wedding ceremony was the exchanging of garlands, the tying of the mangal sutra, and the application of the sendhoor on the bride’s forehead. They watched as Aveen took the red powder and applied it to Shanthi’s forehead and the path through her hair. He then took the black and gold beaded mangal sutra necklace and tied it around her neck.

At that point the Master of Ceremonies announced that lunch was to be served in the lower hall. He also mentioned that people who wanted to congratulate the bridal couple could do so. As the guests made their way to their preferred location, Kajal and Nirvana waited for their mothers who were sitting in front of them. They decided that they would eat first since there were several well wishers who had accumulated around Shanthi and Aveen. As they entered the dining hall, Kajal could smell the delicious aroma of vegetable breyani and dhal. She saw her father, Uncle Ashley, Suraj, and Nishaal seated at the far right of the hall. They were already eating. She looked around for empty seats and was nudged in the ribs by Nirvana. “Let’s sit there,” she said to Kajal, pointing to

four seats next to two attractive guys. Aunty Rita had already seen the seats and was making her way to them. The rest of them followed her. Just as they sat down the two guys got up, and headed for the exit. Kajal winked at Nirvana. "Sorry girl," she said. "Better luck next time." Nirvana stuck out her tongue teasingly.

They dished up from the bowls of breyani and dhal that had been neatly arranged by the caterers. There was also salad, mango pickle, and vegetable pickle. For dessert there was soji served with cream. After the filling meal they went to wish the bridal couple.

There was a long line of well wishers in the main hall, so they joined in. Kajal looked at the front of the line. Shanthi, who was now sitting, looked as if she was about to faint. By the time they reached her however, she was still smiling dutifully. Kajal shook Aveen's hand and hugged and kissed Shanthi. As she did this, she felt sad. With her petite frame adorned in that sari, and her face done up with lipstick and make-up, Shanthi looked like a little girl playing 'dress-up' in her mother's clothes.

Kajal and the others then went to the parking lot where they found Anand, Nishaal, and Ashley. They decided to go back to the wedding house where the bridal couple would soon join them. As they got into the car they realised that Suraj was missing. Anand was about to say something when Nishaal spoke up.

"Y'all wait here, and I'll go find him," he said.

They waited for a while and then they saw the two boys returning.

As they reached the wedding-house, Kajal saw that many other guests from the wedding had come there as well. They went down to the house and waited for the bride and groom. Aunty Premi had also returned from the wedding and was making sure that the guests were taken care of. She had bought sweetmeats which Kajal and Nirvana helped hand out to the guests. Kajal looked around for Suraj, but she could not find him. After asking other relatives about him, she gathered that he was last seen in the tent. She took some sweetmeats and went outside.

She called out to him, but there was no reply. Just as she was about to go back inside, she heard voices coming from behind the tent. One voice distinctly belonged to her brother.

She went behind the tent and was shocked to see him squatting around a bottle of cold drink and some other clear-looking liquid.

He got up as soon as he saw her. "Hey Kaj, what you doing here?" he asked, flustered.

She looked at him in disgust. "What are you doing here?" she asked, pointing to the polystyrene cup in his hand.

"Oh, this is just cold drink," he started to explain, but she was already stomping off furiously.

Just then she heard hooting, signalling that the bridal couple had arrived.

Shanthi and Aveen did not stay long. After a lot of hugging and crying, the relatives finally bid the couple goodbye. Since there was nothing else to do, Kajal and her family left for home.

Kajal and Suraj sat in the backseat, not looking at each other. He stared out his window into the approaching dusk while she looked straight ahead. "What's wrong, Kaj?" her mother asked with concern.

"Nothing, Ma." she replied, still not bothering to look Suraj's way. His recent strange behaviour had been bothering her for some time, but the drinking incident made her furious. She knew that he was drinking, but he had lied to her saying it was just cold drink. Did he think she was stupid? What exactly was she going to tell her parents?

She mulled over these questions and only realised that they were home when her father pulled up to their driveway gate.

As usual, Suraj got out and opened the gate for them to drive into the yard. As she got out of the car, Kajal saw the curtain move in the house next door. It was Aunty Saras, signalling to her to call her mother.

"Mum," she said, "I think Aunty Saras wants to talk to you." Then, remembering their encounter two days ago, she added, "She came looking for you on Friday."

By now Suraj and their father had gone inside the house and switched on the lights. Kajal did not go in but waited at the front door for her mother.

Her mother went to the fence as Saras walked across her front yard to meet her. Saras was quite short so she had put a hollow block on her side of the fence. This enabled her to speak to her neighbour without having to stand on her toes.

“How you Geetha, how was the wedding?” she asked in one breath.

Without waiting for a response, she continued, “I came to see you on Friday, but Kajal said you not at home. But at least the wedding is finished, that girl Shanthi must stay nice now.”

Geetha looked at her wearily. “Ya, it was a nice wedding,” she said, “but also very hectic. Anyway, I’ll see you tomorrow. Anand must be gone in the bathroom and I have to give his towel and all.”

Saras, who never got the hint when someone was trying to get rid of her, said, “I got something very important to tell you, but I’ll come tomorrow. Anyway, this Ravi said he wants to eat, so I’ll go make the food hot.”

The rest of the evening was quiet. Kajal’s parents went to bed early and Suraj stayed in his room, getting his school things in order for the following day. It had been a tiring weekend and a new week lay ahead.

Kajal was not sleepy, so she opted to watch TV. She switched it on and sat on the nearest settee, legs folded underneath her. The figures on the screen danced about and their mouths moved, but she was too deep in thought to even notice that her favourite music video was on. She had to talk to Suraj and find out what was going on.

When she had mustered enough courage, she got up and walked down the passage. On reaching his room she noticed that the volume of the music had been lowered. Maybe he had fallen asleep with the light on. Not wanting to make a noise, she tapped on the door lightly, but there was no answer. Since it was ajar, she went in. There was Suraj with his back towards her, looking for something in his cupboard.

“Err... Suraj,” she said, uncertain as to how to get his attention.

He was startled and dropped the box in his hand. It fell to the floor and opened, revealing several neatly folded fifty rand notes.

“Hey Kajal. man,” he shouted, frantically grabbing the box and its contents, which he then shoved into his cupboard. “You don’t know how to knock?”

Although she was taken back by his tone, she decided to confront him. “Suraj, where did you get that money from?” she asked.

“Why don’t you mind your own business?”

“Suraj, what has happened to you lately?” By now her voice was cracking as she was on the verge of crying. “Why are you acting like this?” she asked. “Do you know what will happen if Mummy and Daddy find out?”

“Y’all don’t know anything,” he said in a desperate tone. “It’s my friend’s money. I’m just keeping it for him, okay! It’s my business anyway.”

“And the drinking?” she asked.

“Listen, Kaj” he explained. “I just took a few sips, that doesn’t mean that I drink. Oath, I don’t drink. Please don’t tell Mummy and them.”

By now her anger had brimmed and hot tears streamed down her face. She turned and walked out the room, shutting the door behind her. This was too much for her. She could not understand why he was being so stubborn. She felt totally helpless.

When she was halfway down the passage, she heard her parent’s bedroom door open. Not wanting them to see her crying, she quickly wiped her face with the back of her palms. Her father emerged with his eyes still tightly shut. He felt for the toilet light, switched it on and went in. She decided to speak to her mother the following morning, when Suraj and her father were not at home.

Chapter 6

Kajal spent most of the morning tidying up. There was a lot to do since they had spent most of their weekend at Shanthi's house. Her mother did not feel well and went straight to bed after breakfast. Kajal took this as a sign not to discuss the Suraj issue with her until she felt better. She was in the kitchen washing dishes and singing to her favourite tune on the radio when she heard an urgent knocking on the front door.

"Who's there?" she asked as she approached the door. When she had been sweeping earlier that morning, she had locked the front gate but not the door, so that light could come in. Now as she got to the door, she found Auntie Saras trying to stick her head through the burglar guard gate, obviously in an attempt to see where Kajal and her mother were. Saras' large eyes protruded in her thick glasses, bearing a striking resemblance to the bulging eyes of a grasshopper. This made her nickname even more appropriate. On seeing Kajal, she pulled her head out. "Open the gate," she said. "So long I'm knocking." Kajal smiled as she unlocked the front gate, trying hard to get the grasshopper image out of her head.

Auntie Saras walked in. "Where's your mother?" she asked.

"Shush, Auntie Saras," Kajal said softly, raising her index finger to her lips. "She is sleeping." Without another word, Saras made her way straight to the main bedroom. Kajal rushed after her, but she had already seated herself on the edge of the bed and Kajal's mother was awake.

She looked up at Kajal. "Please make tea for Auntie Saras and warm some rasam for me," she said.

"Oh no," Saras replied. "I just had tea."

In the kitchen, Kajal opened the fridge and gazed in, searching for the rasam. She found the dark brown liquid in a container on the top shelf. Opening it, she inhaled the spicy concoction of tamarind juice, dhal, and spices that her Naani had made especially for her mother's tight chest. She poured some into a cup and replaced the container in the fridge.

While the rasam heated in the microwave, she wondered why Aunty Saras was so excited. It probably had to do with some kind of gossip that she had come across.

When Kajal returned to the room she almost bumped into Aunty Saras, who was leaving. Aunty Saras turned around. "I'm just telling what I saw, Geetha," she said. With that she walked down the passage and out of the front door, closing the gate behind her.

Kajal turned to her mother, who looked pale and was evidently upset. "What's wrong, Ma?" she asked as she sat down on the bed.

"You know what Aunty Saras just said," she mumbled, "about Suraj."

Kajal felt the colour run from her face. "What about Suraj?" she asked.

Her mother took a deep breath and continued. "She said last week she saw Suraj with those boys that stand by Uncle Kala's shop. They gave him some money. She was going to go talk to him, but he had already walked away."

"But, Ma, it could be money that they owed him or something. You know how much Aunty Saras can exaggerate." Silently, Kajal hoped this was the case.

"No Kaj," her mother answered. "It was a lot of money, notes. Where Suraj would get money like that from?"

Kajal looked at her mother's sad face. With all the problems of her illness, Suraj should have been the least of her concerns. She felt uncertain as to whether she should tell her mother about the previous night's incident or not. The words were at the tip of her tongue and before she knew it her mouth opened and she blurted out, "I think Suraj is in trouble." Her mother's expression made her realise what she had just said.

"What do you mean?" asked her mother.

Kajal told her mother about Suraj's strange behaviour and their argument the night before. She listened in amazement. When Kajal was finished, her mother shook her head ruefully. "What is wrong with Suraj?" she asked. "You know if Daddy only finds out..." She broke out in a fit of coughing and Kajal went to her side.

"We'll talk to him when he comes from school," she said.

It was time for her mother's lunch and medicine. Kajal went back into the kitchen and reheated the rasam. She decided to heat the breyani they had brought back from the

wedding-house as well. They did not speak much during lunch. The breyani, which Kajal usually savoured, had to be forced down, and even the spicy mango pickle did not tempt her appetite.

The clock ticked slowly towards three o'clock and Kajal grew anxious about confronting Suraj. She was in the kitchen preparing supper and her mother had gone back to sleep. The past week had given her an opportunity to improve her cooking skills, but they were still far from perfect. She tasted the curry several times as she added the various spices.

Kajal did not notice that the time for Suraj to return home from school had come and gone. She only became aware of the time when her mother hurried into the kitchen.

"Kajal," she said, "why didn't you wake me up? It is quarter past four, where is Suraj?"

"Just wait, Ma, you know Suraj," Kajal reassured her. "He'll come soon."

However, she was also concerned; her father was due home in less than an hour.

The telephone rang and Geetha rushed to it, expecting bad news as she always did when someone was late and the phone happened to ring. But it was only Naani.

As the two women chatted, Kajal heard the driveway gate creak, and she ran to the lounge window. She saw a lanky figure ascend. It was Suraj: head hung, backpack on slouched shoulders, cricket bat dragging behind him. Somehow the bully from the previous night now resembled an eight-year old after a rough day on the playground.

She opened the front gate and he walked in, went straight to his room, and shut the door behind him.

Her mother breathed a sigh of relief as she spoke to Naani. The telephone conversation did not last long and as soon as she put down the receiver, she said to Kajal, "Let's go talk to him." Kajal nodded and followed her mother down the passage. Her mother knocked on the door. "Suraj," she called.

He opened the door and was startled to see to see the two of them standing there.

"Yes, Ma," he answered.

"Come in the lounge please, I want to talk to you."

Kajal started for the lounge and the two of them followed. Once they had sat down, their mother spoke softly. "Suraj, Kajal told me what happened last night," she said. "Tell me what's wrong?"

Suraj quickly turned to Kajal and then back to his mother. "What she told you?" he asked. Without waiting for a response he added, "She probably over exaggerated."

Kajal wanted to comment, but her mother said simply, "She only told me because she is worried about you. I'm also worried."

He stood up. "If she is so worried why doesn't she mind her own business instead of carrying tales," he asked.

"Suraj," their mother said, raising her voice, "talk to her properly. You know what will happen if Daddy finds out. Please tell me what's the problem. You know how sick I am. Don't give me worries."

As if he had heard them, Anand pulled up in front of the driveway and hooted. Kajal went to open the gate for her father and Suraj returned to his room.

Kajal worried that her father would sense that something was wrong, but he did not.

Suraj was silent at supper. He sat slouched and swallowed his food in small bites. The two women tried their utmost to keep the conversation going. They spoke about the wedding as well as what Shanthi's new baby was going to be like.

Then Geetha said, "Sometime this week I'm going to work to sort out my sick benefit claim." The others seated at the table looked at her in amazement because up until then she had constantly put off making the claim.

"Wow, Ma," Kajal exclaimed, "That's great."

Her mother just smiled.

After supper, as Kajal washed the dishes, the telephone rang. She answered it, but did not recognise the voice on the other end. "Hello," she repeated.

"Ya, Hello. Who I'm speaking to?"

"It's Kajal here, who do you want to speak to?"

"Oh Kajal, call your father please, Doll," said the voice.

She put the receiver aside. "Doll?" she muttered quizzically. Frowning, she went outside to find her father. He was in the front yard speaking to Saras' husband, Ravi.

Unlike his wife, Ravi was a reserved man, with mousy features. Kajal greeted him, and he smiled and nodded. She turned to her father. "Dad," she said, "there is a phone call for you." She then left them and went back inside.

While dressing the beds for the night, Kajal could hear her father on the phone and was curious to find out who he was speaking to. He did not say much. Most of the time he just agreed with what the other person was saying. As she walked past the phone she caught the last bit of his conversation. "Don't worry about it," he said. "Geetha will tell her. It will be fine." He put down the phone and joined her mother in the kitchen.

Kajal really wanted to know what was going on, but decided to ask her mother the following day.

On her way to her bedroom she bumped into Suraj as he came out of the bathroom. He looked at her. "Blabber mouth," was all he said, and went on his way.

She felt awful, but knew that she had done the right thing by telling her mother about him.

During the night Kajal was disturbed by voices. She woke up enough to realise that it was her parents, but she could not make out what they were saying, and she soon fell asleep again.

Chapter 7

The next morning Kajal found her mother looking very depressed. Seeing her this way, Kajal chose not to ask her about what she had been discussing with her father the night before. She had breakfast alone since her mother stayed in bed. Kajal worried because now that she thought about it, her parents seemed to have had an argument. Maybe it was about Suraj? But she had no way of finding out for sure, so she decided to occupy her mind with some reading.

She went to her book cupboard and scanned the shelves for something interesting. A little beige-covered book caught her attention. It was the novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, which she had bought from a stall at the flea market a year ago. She opened the book and was soon lost in another world.

Before she knew it, it was almost lunchtime, so she tore herself away from the book and went to the kitchen to organise something for them to eat. First, she stopped by her parent's room to check on her mother. To her surprise she was getting out of bed. She looked much better after her sleep. "Ma, are you okay?" she asked.

"Yes," her mother replied. "I was just coming to eat with you."

They went into the kitchen. Kajal made cheese toast for the two of them and her mother prepared the tea. While they ate, she was tempted to ask her mother about the argument she had overheard, but something prevented her. They ate in silence for a few minutes and then her mother looked up at her.

"Kajal," she said, "there is something I need to talk to you about."

Kajal took a deep breath. The cheese toast had become a lump in her throat and she took a gulp of tea to aid it on its way. "What is it?" she asked, trying to contain her anxiety.

"Well, Daddy wanted me to tell you something," she said, smiling uneasily.

Her mother's tone unsettled her, but she waited for her to continue.

"You remember Daddy's aunty, Jyothi, the one we met at Shanthi's wedding?"

Kajal frowned slightly, but indicated that she did with a nod.

“She told him that she knows this nice family in Verulam who are looking for a girl for their son to marry, and after she saw how pretty you are she asked if she could organise it.”

“What!” she asked. “Are you joking?” She laughed in disbelief, but the grave expression on her mother’s face made her realise that it was no joke. Kajal sat back in her chair, stunned by the news. The blood rushed to her face, forcing tears to well up in her eyes. Her head swirled and she felt sick. Her mother understood her shock and did not say anything further. They sat in silence.

After some time Kajal looked up and asked, “What about my studies, Ma? I thought y’all wanted me to go to ‘varsity.’”

Her mother tried to explain. “Daddy thought that...” she began, but she stopped.

By now Kajal was crying, fat silent tears rolling down her cheeks. Quickly getting up, she rushed to her room. She shut the door and flung herself on the bed, crying herself to sleep.

She awoke in a semi-confused state. Her head ached and her face felt tight from the tears that had dried on her cheeks.

“How could they do this to me?” she asked herself.

Someone tapped lightly on her bedroom door. “Come in,” she said from her parched throat. The door opened and Suraj peeped in. “Hey, Mummy told me what happened,” he said. “You okay?”

Kajal forced a smile and nodded. Her brother must have been very concerned to break the vow of silence she had taken against her. Instead of going away, he stood there and, taking on a harsher tone, he said, “It’s that lady’s fault, that connection of Daddy’s. Why can’t the old thing mind her own business?”

“Suraj,” she said, “Keep quiet. If Daddy hears you, he will kill you.”

“Well, it’s the truth,” he mumbled.

“You know.” Kajal continued, “what I can’t understand is why Daddy won’t wait to see if I get the bursary.”

“I’ll tell you why,” Suraj replied. “It’s because he wants to please his relatives.”

“Shut up, Suraj.” Kajal said. “Don’t say things like that.”

He looked at her and left the room.

Glancing over to her dressing table, she saw that it was a quarter past five. Her father must have come home and was probably in the shower. This meant that supper was to follow and she had no idea how she was going to react to him. Her mother interrupted her thoughts by coming into the room. She looked distressed and Kajal felt sorry for her. “Kajal,” she said, “Please come and eat. Daddy is going to ask where you are.” She got up and followed her mother to the dining room table, which had already been set for supper. The pungent aroma of sugar bean curry wafted through from the kitchen and she knew that her mother was trying to make her feel better.

Her father approached the table and she got up and went to him. After kissing him on the cheek she returned to her seat, and he smiled as he sat down. Everyone remained silent as they ate, and just when Kajal thought it was safe to relax, her father spoke.

“So, Kaj,” he said, “Mummy said she told you about the arrangement?”

She looked at him blankly and then turned her gaze back to her plate.

“Well,” he continued, “I think it’s a good idea. Parents know what’s best for their children. See what happened to Shanthi.”

Suraj, who had been silent, decided to speak. “You know, Dad,” he said, “at least she chose someone she knows and loves.”

“What you know about love, huh?” their father asked. “For you young people love is enough. It’s not, my boy! Marriage is really about financial security. Let’s see how long Shanthi and Aveen can live on love and fresh air.”

“But Dad,” Suraj started. The stiff look that came from his mother’s direction made him change his mind and he kept quiet. They were all quiet until the meal was over.

After the supper dishes had been washed, Kajal watched TV and her parents soon joined her. Once again her father initiated the conversation. “Kaj,” he said, “about this arrangement thing. We are only interested in your future.”

She turned away from the TV and looked directly at him. Taking in a deep breath she said, "I want to go to 'varsity, Dad, not get married." To her surprise, he did not get angry. "I know you want to study," he said, "but where will the money come from? You know what our money situation is like."

"But I applied for financial aid, Dad," she pleaded.

"You and how many other people?" he asked. "You can't bank on that and throw away your future of a happy life. Aunty Jyothi has already made the arrangements, we can't change our minds now."

Then her mother spoke. "I'm sure she'll get the bursary," she said. "Her trial marks were good and she felt the exam was easy."

"That's enough!" her father shouted. "I am the head of this house and this case is now closed. Kajal, you will not refuse this proposal and embarrass our family. He is a good boy from a nice well-off family. And Geetha, you take the children's part too much. You are spoiling them."

Both the women were shocked by his tone and were quiet. Kajal's heart pounded and her eyes filled with tears. Her father stared at the TV for a few seconds and then went to his bedroom. Geetha went to Kajal's side and held her hand. "Don't worry, my baby," she said. "We'll sort something out."

That night Kajal sobbed herself to sleep. Her head felt heavy as several thoughts whirled around. She had always wanted to be a doctor. More importantly, she wanted to be different from Shanthi and some of the girls in her community, who did not care about a career and focused more on boyfriends and partying. She knew that they didn't get far. Most of them fell pregnant and were now married and pretending to be happy. She thought of running away from home, but where to and for how long? Realising that this would simply bring her parents shame, she shut her eyes and prayed for a miracle.

Chapter 8

The following morning Kajal was awoken by a commotion, but decided to stay in bed. Her headache was back and her nose felt blocked. From what she could hear, she gathered that their car would not start. The tension between her parents was obvious from the tone in which they spoke to each other. Soon they woke Suraj to help, but the car still refused to start. Her father eventually asked Saras' husband, Ravi, for a lift into town. Kajal forced herself out of bed when things had quietened down.

She could not remain angry with her mother for long and eventually spoke to her as they were having breakfast. "Ma," she asked, "what are we going to do? Daddy is really serious about this proposal."

"He thinks that by doing this he can make sure that you have a good life," her mother replied.

"But he wants me to get married to a total stranger! Suraj was right when he said that the only reason Daddy won't wait to see if I get the bursary is that he feels bad to refuse Aunty Jyothi."

"Suraj said that?" her mother asked. "You know he has such a big mouth. Did you hear how he argued with Daddy during supper?"

"Honestly, Ma, I don't know what's going on with him," Kajal said. "But I hope that he has decided to change. I don't think we can handle any more drama."

Her mother smiled, showing her beautiful white teeth. Her hair was still jet-black since she had dyed it for Shanthi's wedding. She may not have been a size eight supermodel, but to Kajal she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Her mother's next comment, however, brought her back down to earth.

She reminded Kajal that she had to go to work to apply for her sick benefit. She would have to take a taxi to town and then one to Gale Street, where the company she had worked for was based. Kajal wanted to go with her, but her mother refused.

Since she had the house to herself, and nothing to do, Kajal decided to read the newspaper. Her horoscope predicted that something good was going to happen. She

hoped that it would somehow be related to her unwanted proposal. She thought about phoning Melanie, but changed her mind. She would have to explain her embarrassing dilemma to her friend and Melanie would not really understand. Her parents were so modern and would never dream of arranging a marriage for their daughter. She also thought about the guy, her future husband. Why did he need someone to find him a wife? Couldn't he do it on his own?

She spent most of the day reading and was surprised to see that Suraj had come home directly after school. He had written his last examination paper that day and chose to spend the entire afternoon watching TV. Before leaving for town, their mother had marinated the chicken they were going to have for supper. All Kajal had to do was switch the oven on. She did this and joined Suraj in the lounge. They talked about school and about the programme they were watching.

Then Kajal heard someone whistle from outside. She looked through the lounge window and to her disappointment she saw Suraj's friend. By now Suraj had rushed to his room and he emerged carrying two packets. She stood there dumbfounded as he ran out to the front gate. She went back to the settee and lay down. Kajal felt helpless and irritated at everything. Shutting her eyes, she tried to forget about her concerns and slowly dozed off to sleep.

The knocking on the front door startled Kajal back to reality. She looked up to see her mother standing in front of her, looking very angry. That was enough to get her on her feet and to the gate. "Hi, Ma." she said, smiling nervously.

"Kajal, why was the door left open while you were fast asleep?" her mother scolded. "Do you know how dangerous it is?"

Her mother would have gone on, but the smoke coming into the lounge caught her attention. "The chicken," she shouted as she dropped her packets and rushed into the kitchen. Kajal froze, unsure of whether to follow her or to pick up the packets. Her mother's shriek on opening the oven door cleared her uncertainty and she ran to the kitchen.

In the baking tray lay the charred remnants of what was once a chicken. Geetha stared at it and then at her wristwatch, which told her it was too near suppertime to roast another. Trying to be helpful, Kajal opened the windows wider so that the smoke could escape faster. "I'm sorry, Mum," she said. "I fell asleep."

Her mother was very cross. "Peel me an onion and open a tin fish," she said to Kajal. "I'll braise that for supper. Daddy will be here just now."

They quickly set out to make a replacement supper. Kajal cleared away the burnt chicken and chopped the onion while her mother started the roti. With the tinned fish almost cooked, Kajal helped her mother with the rotis. She turned them on the pan and her mother rolled them out.

They worked in silence and were quite alarmed when Anand stormed into the house. Without even greeting them he bellowed, "Suraj, come here now!"

Kajal and her mother rushed to the lounge to find her father pacing anxiously. On seeing them, he asked, "Where is Suraj?"

Her mother spoke. "I don't know," she said. "I just came now and was making supper."

"He said he was going to a friend's house to return some notes," Kajal quickly interjected. She had to lie because her father would be furious if he found out about Suraj's recent strange behaviour.

"Notes, huh!" he father snorted. "Geetha, do you know what he has been up to? As I was coming home Ravi told me that last week Saras saw Suraj with those hooligan boys from two roads away."

His wife remained quiet. She felt guilty because she should have told him when she had first found out.

Her husband continued to speak. "Wait!" he said. "I think we should phone this friend's house and tell him to come home right now. Kajal, who is this friend he is visiting?"

Kajal was uncertain on how to respond. "I don't know, Dad," she said softly.

"Can you see?" her father exploded. "We don't even know where he went!"

The telephone rang, breaking the tension that had built up in the lounge, and Kajal went to answer it. She listened for a moment and then said, "Yes, please hold on."

Putting the receiver aside, she said to her father, "Dad, someone called for you. Actually they asked for Mr. Raman." Kajal watched as her father made his way to the phone and then she returned to her seat.

"Who's that?" her mother asked impatiently.

"I don't know," Kajal replied. "But they sounded very formal."

They could barely hear the telephone conversation and each one tried to figure out who the caller could be. Suddenly, her father raised his voice as he spoke. "What? What do you mean?" he asked. Then after a few seconds he said, "Yes, I'll come there now." With that he put down the phone and returned to them. The look on his face told them that something terrible had happened.

Geetha jumped to her feet, "What happened? Is it Suraj?" she exclaimed.

Her husband nodded. "He is in jail, I have to go get him out," was all that he could say.

Geetha burst into tears as she slumped back into the sofa. Kajal went to comfort her as her father fetched his wallet from the bedroom.

He returned to the lounge and said to Kajal, "I'm going to ask Uncle Ravi for a lift. Stay with Mummy, I'll be back just now."

Kajal held her mother as she sobbed loudly. "It's all my fault, Kajal," she mumbled. "I should have told Daddy when I found out."

"No, Ma," Kajal replied. "it's Suraj's fault."

The shadow in the doorway distracted their conversation. There was Aunty Saras, clad in a pink housecoat and bedroom slippers.

"Oiyu Geetha, don't cry, everything will be alright," she said, rushing in to sit opposite them. Kajal was extremely annoyed. It was bad enough that they were having a family crisis, but having Aunty Saras at the centre of it all made things worse.

Her mother stopped crying and wiped her eyes but she remained silent. They sat together for some time until Saras got up to go home. "You should make your mother some tea," she said to Kajal. "I'm just going to check up on the children. I'll be back when your father and them come."

Kajal gave her a fake smile and watched in relief as she left their house and closed the gate behind her.

“Ma,” Kajal asked, “you want some tea?”

“No. Let’s just wait for them to come back.”

It was getting dark outside, so Kajal lit the prayer lamp. Everyday either she or Suraj had to light the lamp before any of the electronic lights in the house were switched on. Her father had once explained this Hindu custom to them saying that this was done to ensure that God was the first light in their house. She struck the match and lit the wick that sat in the brass ornament. After saying a quick prayer, she drew the curtains and switched on the lounge and kitchen lights.

At seven o’clock a car pulled up outside their house and Kajal went to see who it was. She saw Suraj and her father emerge. Suraj waited while their father spoke to Uncle Ravi. Then they walked up the driveway towards the house.

“Mum, they came,” she said softly. Her mother directed her eyes towards the door, but she did not move in her seat. Suraj was the first to enter. Without looking at either of them he headed for his bedroom.

Her father followed, wearing an expression of anger and shame. He also remained quiet as he sat down. Kajal and Geetha looked at each in confusion, but silently agreed to set the table for supper. When they were done, Anand took his place at the table. Geetha was about to dish his food when he said, “Wait for Suraj. We need to talk about this drama we just had.” When Suraj had joined them, Geetha dished out each of their helpings and sat down to eat.

“Geetha, do you know why this boy went to jail?” her husband asked.

She looked up at him. “Why don’t we eat first and then talk about this?” she asked.

“No,” he replied sharply. “That is the problem in this house, always leaving things for later. Suraj tell Mummy what happened.”

Ashamed to look directly at her, he said, “We got arrested for selling stolen cell phones.”

“What?” asked his mother raising her hand to her mouth in awe. “Where did a child of this house learn to steal?”

“Ma, I did not steal or sell the phones. Oath! I just kept the phones for them.”

“Oh, and that is supposed to be better! And you have been keeping those phones in this house all along. I can’t believe it, Suraj.”

Kajal listened as her parents bounced questions off her brother. She could do nothing to help because he was totally in the wrong.

“So,” their mother asked, “do you have a criminal record now?”

“No,” her husband replied quickly, “because those boys were threatening Suraj to keep the phones for them. The police let him go as long as he testifies against them.” Their father paused for a moment, glaring angrily at Suraj.

“Tell me, Suraj,” he continued, “how long has this been carrying on for?”

“Only for a few weeks. But today I went to tell the guys that I can’t keep the phones anymore. I felt really bad after Mummy found out about the money I was keeping,” Suraj said.

On hearing this Kajal felt sick. She wished that she could have taken back Suraj’s words, but it was too late. Anand turned to his wife. “You knew about this?” he asked.

“Ya, but I did not want to upset you.”

He was furious. “And now you think I’m not upset?” he asked. “I have never been to jail in my entire life but I had to go there today, to fetch this idiot. That’s the problem in this house, nobody tells me anything.” He got up from the table and headed for the front door.

“What about your food?” his wife asked.

“I’m not hungry anymore,” he said as he walked out into the yard.

Kajal sprang to her feet and went outside, “Dad, where are you going?” she cried. He did not answer her and walked out the front gate and into the night. She stood there as tears streamed down her face. “This is too much to handle,” she said to herself.

Things had gotten out of control. This was the first time that one of her parents had ever walked out of the house. It was also the first time anyone she knew had gotten arrested. Things like this happened in other people’s houses, not hers.

She could hear Suraj and her mother inside the house.

As she walked back in, Suraj was saying, “I’m sorry, Ma, it’s all my fault.”

“No,” their mother replied. “If I had told Daddy at the beginning, all this wouldn’t have happened.”

Since none of them were hungry, they decided to put the food away and tidy up the kitchen. When they had finished, they went to the lounge and Suraj switched on the TV. The three of them looked blankly at the screen, each lost in their own thoughts.

A knocking on the front door awoke Kajal, who had dozed off on the settee. She looked around her; Suraj and her mother had also fallen asleep. She went to her mother and shook her gently. "Ma, wake up. There's someone at the door," she said.

"What's the time?" her mother asked sleepily.

"Half past eleven," Kajal replied.

They went to the door. "Who's there?" Kajal asked.

"It's me," came the slurred reply. She opened the door to find her father hanging onto the front gate, his eyes glistening strangely.

"Open quickly man," he shouted. He stumbled in and almost fell on Kajal as he made his way to the nearest settee. They looked at him in amazement: he was drunk.

The commotion that he made had caused Suraj to stir in his sleep and soon he was also awake. Kajal sat down next to Suraj. "Dad, are you okay?" she asked.

He looked at her. "No, I'm not," he answered. "This family is gone to the dogs."

Then, pointing an unsteady finger at Suraj, he said, "This fella here got arrested. Can you believe it? I never set foot in a jail, but my son gets arrested."

Suraj did not look up. Their father continued. "You giving me problems too," he said to Kajal. "So depressed because your parents fixed a boy for you. Not one bit grateful that they care. Look around and you'll see how many girls are suffering today, but no... " he broke off.

She opened her mouth to respond, but realised that it would be fruitless. After all, there was some truth in what he said.

He remained silent for a while, but as he turned to his wife, he started again. "She too, your mother. She keeps secrets from me," he said. "She lets y'all take advantage of her.

So anyone thinks I'm wrong to make noise?" he asked. "Come on, tell me."

Kajal began to cry. She wished that this was all a nightmare and she would wake up soon.

“No, Kajal, don’t cry,” her father said. “I have found the answer to these problems. I am the man of this house, I wear the pants,” he said, pointing to his shorts.

“So what I say goes. You, my boy,” he said to Suraj. “Look at me when I’m talking to you.” Suraj raised his head and their father continued in his slurred voice. “You will never join those boys again, and if you do, I will break your legs,” he said.

“If you don’t like the idea, you know where the door is, go!”

Then it was Kajal’s turn. “Kaj,” he said. “we’re doing this for your own good. You will marry this Ajith fella. He got a good job, nice car, nice house. What is short? If you don’t like the idea, go.”

After he had spoken his mind he tried to get up, but needed his wife’s help to steady himself. Kajal and Suraj stared at him as he made his way to his bedroom. They sat in silence for a few minutes and then decided to go to bed. It was far past midnight.

The next morning Kajal lay awake in bed, thinking about what her father had said. Her bedroom door was shut and she could hear the muffled voices of her parents as they went about the house. She knew that her father would take a lift from Uncle Ravi to get to work and listened for the creak of the front door. When she was sure that he had left, she rolled out of bed and went to the bathroom.

She then went looking for her mother who she found sitting at the dining room table, deep in thought. “Morning, Ma,” she said.

Her mother snapped out of her daydream and looked at her blankly. “Morning, Kaj,” was all she said.

Kajal was not hungry, but she decided to have tea and a biscuit, which she took back into the dining room.

When she sat down, her mother spoke. “You know, Kajal,” she said. “ I was so happy when you were born because I finally had a daughter who I would give the opportunity to do all the things that I couldn’t. Things like finishing matric, studying at varsity, getting a good job, and going for overseas holidays.” As she spoke her voice became less steady and tears rolled down her cheeks. Kajal looked at her in bewilderment.

Her mother went on. "In our days, school was mainly for the boys," she said. "Parents were not interested in sending the girls to school. When I was in standard eight, Naani got very sick and she stayed in hospital for a long time. Because I was the eldest girl, I had to stay at home and take care of Aunty Premi and Baboo. That was when I learned to cook, clean and wash. When Naani came back from hospital, everybody said that it was too late for me to go back to school. So, I stayed at home. When I was older, I got work in a clothing factory. Then I met your father and we got married. But I still worked because we needed the money."

Kajal looked surprised. Her mother had never opened up to her in this way before. "I'm so sorry, Ma," she said.

"No, now I am happy. Kaj" her mother replied quickly. "Because I have a nice house and family. But I want you to do more with your life. I want you to work and be happy. I know that you really want to become a doctor. Remember when you were small you used to act like a doctor and I was the patient? You would also want to listen to everyone's heartbeat, including that dog that Aunty Premi had. What was its name?"

"Gemma." Kajal said, smiling.

"Oh, ya. Anyway, Daddy also wants you to fulfil that dream, but since there is no money to study..." She stopped there.

"I don't understand it, Ma," Kajal said. "How can Daddy expect me to be happy when I'm being forced into something?"

"Well, that's your father, Kajal," she said.

They sat in silence for a while and then tidied the house. Suraj was left to sleep. Kajal dusted the lounge furniture while her mother washed the bathroom. The telephone rang, and Kajal, who was closest to it, reached for the handset.

"Hello," she said to the unfamiliar female voice on the other end.

"May I speak to Miss Raman," came the reply.

Kajal spoke to her for a few minutes and put the handset aside. Then she went to her mother. "Ma," she said. "it's a lady from the essay competition."

"What happened?" asked her mother, as she wiped her hands on her apron.

"She called to ask if we are going to the ceremony. It is on Saturday."

“Okay, tell her we are coming, and Naani too,” her mother replied.

“But, Ma.” Kajal asked with concern. “what if Daddy scolds? Shanthi’s Bhedai is on Saturday.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell him.”

Kajal hurried back to the phone and confirmed that they were to attend.

The rest of the day sped by as Kajal was ecstatic; her head full with thoughts of the glitz and glamour of the function.

That evening, Kajal and her mother planned to tell her father about the awards ceremony as he watched TV. They decided that Kajal should remain in the kitchen whilst her mother spoke to him in the lounge.

Geetha waited for him to change the channel and then she spoke. “Those people from the essay competition phoned today,” she said.

“Hmmm,” he muttered, still staring at the screen.

“They wanted to know if we are going to the function. It is on Saturday.”

It took a moment for him to register what she had said. Then he turned around to her.

“I hope you told them that we can’t make it,” he said.

She inhaled and went on. “Actually, I said that we are going, even my mother.”

“What?” he asked, raising his voice. “And what about Shanthi’s Bhedai? You know this is a family thing.”

She tried to calm the situation. “Yes, it is important,” she said. “But the Bhedai is part of Shanthi’s life just like this function is a part of Kajal’s.”

He was furious. “I don’t know why Kajal has to go for this thing,” he replied. “She’ll still get the money. To me it’s just a bloody waste of time.”

She got up and looked him straight in the eye. “Kajal worked hard for this and it is only fair that she goes to this function,” she said. “You’re destroying her life as it is.”

Surprisingly, he did not respond. She then left the room.

Kajal, who had been listening to their conversation, smiled. “Well done, Mum,” she whispered to herself.

Chapter 9

The next day was spent preparing for Saturday. The first thing they did was phone Naani and tell her that she would be going with them. They also had to decide what each one of them was going to wear. Suraj, who had started to show some signs of improvement in his behaviour, joined in on the excitement.

As far as their clothing was concerned, it had to be formal because the award ceremony was to be held the following night at the City Hall. Suraj was going to wear the pants and shirt he had worn for Shanthi's wedding. Geetha had to search for her outfit among the several saris that she owned. Finally they decided on the yellow Benares sari she wore to Shane's wedding. The only alteration that had to be made was on the blouse; it was too big for her now and had to be taken in.

Kajal did not know what she was going to wear, and the fact that she would be asked to go up on the stage made her even more nervous. She did not want to wear an Indian outfit and risk tripping or falling on the long skirt.

She searched in her cupboard for hours, and finally found the black dress she had worn for her sixteenth birthday. After trying it on, she saw that it fitted snugly at the waist and chest. She showed the dress to her mother and Suraj and they agreed that it looked trendy. They then looked for accessories to go with the dress and settled on her mother's gold earrings and the gold chain Naani had bought her for her 16th birthday.

When Anand returned from work that afternoon, he was in a good mood. The car had been repaired which meant that he no longer had to travel with Ravi.

They decided that he, like Suraj, would wear the clothes he wore for Shanthi's wedding. They all went early to bed that night because the following day was going to be an exciting one.

Saturday finally came and Kajal, who had hardly slept a wink, was the first one out of bed. In her excitement she tidied the house, had a bath, and was busy making breakfast when her mother walked in, looking quizzically at her as she whisked some batter in a bowl. “Hi. Ma,” Kajal said, in a cheerful voice. “You’re just in time for breakfast. Go sit, I’ll bring your tea.”

Her mother went to the dining room and Kajal soon followed with a cup of steaming black tea. She settled the tea down in front of her mother and rushed back into the kitchen, only to return holding two saucers, a plate of crumpets, and the jam.

“Kaj,” her mother said. “After all this food I think I’m going to have to open the alterations I made to my sari blouse.”

“Oh please!” Kajal exclaimed. “Now eat up. There is more, you know.”

They enjoyed their breakfast together and were almost finished when Suraj walked down the passage. “Hey, I hope y’all kept some for me,” he said.

“And me,” Anand called out from behind, as he went into the bathroom.

When breakfast was over, Suraj said to Kajal, “I’m going to wash the car before I bath.”

He was almost out the kitchen door when their father looked up from his paper.

“Suraj,” he said, “connect the hose in the meanwhile, I’ll come and help you just now.”

Kajal smiled to herself. Their father had been ignoring Suraj since the incident, so any communication between them was an improvement. Suraj nodded his head and went outside.

After washing up, Kajal got out all their outfits for the night ahead and started to iron them. It was almost lunchtime when she finished and when she went to the kitchen she saw her mother beginning to prepare lunch.

“Kaj. please cut me some onion,” she said to her. “Since we had breakfast so late, I’m just making tuna sandwiches. Everyone is so excited anyway.”

All through lunch Suraj and his parents chatted about the night ahead. Kajal, however, remained quiet because the butterflies in her stomach had finally announced their arrival and she was suddenly anxious about the event.

“Hey, Kaj, what’s up?” Suraj nudged her.

“It’s nothing,” she replied softly. “I’m just a bit excited about tonight.”

The afternoon was spent getting dressed and ready for the function.

As she stared at herself in the mirror, Kajal had to agree with her mother and Suraj that the dress did look elegant. She put on her gold chain and her mother’s earrings and hurried to her parent’s room to have her hair styled.

She bumped into her father as he walked out. He was already dressed and ready to leave.

“Come on Kajal, and hurry up,” he said. “Did you see the time?”

Her mother, who was already dressed, was putting a dot on her forehead when Kajal plopped herself onto the dressing table stool.

“Wow, Ma,” she said. “You look so lovely in that sari, like a real married lady with your sendhoor and mangal sutra.”

“Well, isn’t that what I am?” her mother asked. “Now sit still or your hairstyle is going to get spoilt.” As Geetha got out the hairpins and hairspray, her husband popped his head in the doorway. “Geetha,” he said. “I’m going to fetch your mother and when I come back I’ll wait for y’all in the driveway.” With that he left, shouting, “You boys of today,” at Suraj as he passed his room.

Minutes later Geetha stood back and admired Kajal’s hair. “See how nice you look. Like a big girl.”

“Ya, but it feels so stiff,” Kajal said, touching the bun-shaped mound on her head.

“Just leave it to dry. Now let’s go lock up the house. Daddy will be back just now and Suraj must still be setting his hair.”

They walked down the passage, and just as their mother had suspected, Suraj was standing at the mirror making sure that each carefully gelled strand was in position.

“Suraj,” she shouted. “Daddy will be back just now and you’re still dressing up.”

“Okay, I’m coming,” he said, as he put down the hairbrush.

Kajal, who knew it would be faster to lock up the house on her own than asking her brother to do it, was almost finished when he emerged from his room.

“What must I do?” he asked.

She looked at him. “I am finished because you are so slow,” she said. “Just go and check if the stove and all are off, I’m going to the loo.”

When she returned, her mother and brother were seated in the lounge. Impatience caused Suraj to switch on the TV and he jumped with excitement. “Cool,” he shouted, “wrestling is on!”

Geetha looked over to Kajal. “Please open a window,” she said. “It’s so hot in here and this sari blouse material is making my skin itch.”

As Kajal opened the window, her mother went to the kitchen for a drink of water. They heard a familiar hoot come from outside. “Ma,” Kajal said, “it’s Daddy.” She shut the window and waited for them. Suraj still remained at the TV.

“Su,” their mother said, “let’s go. Daddy’s here.”

“Wait one second, I want to see who wins,” he said.

She reached for the remote and Suraj scowled with disappointment. “Now let’s go,” she said.

Kajal walked towards the car, while her mother rushed Suraj out and locked the front door. She and Suraj joined Naani in the backseat and their parents sat in front.

As they drove to town Naani said, “You know I can’t wait for Baboo to get married. At least then he’ll stay at home on the weekend and I’ll also have a daughter-in-law.”

Suraj smiled as he turned to Naani. “You mean he has a girlfriend?” he asked. His grin quickly disappeared when he noticed his father staring at him in the rear-view mirror. Luckily, Naani did not notice and she answered, “I think so. This lady, Shirley, keeps phoning for him.” Kajal smirked at Suraj with raised eyebrows. This meant that there was at least one person out there who liked Uncle Baboo!

Naani went on. "Anyway we need a decent wedding in this family after that shameful one Shanthi had," she said. "Never mind, Kajal will make us all happy when she marries Ajith."

Kajal secretly cringed at the thought.

Suraj quickly realised that Naani was going to pursue this topic and said to his mother, "Ma, put the radio on please. The R 'n B charts are on."

"What is this R and B?" Naani objected. "These children are throwing their culture away. Geetha, put the Indian station on, they have devotionals now."

Kajal knew that Suraj would usually have been very annoyed with Naani because she was always commenting on his choice of music. But on that day he seemed to welcome her lecture. She smiled to herself because her brother had come to her rescue. Naani had forgotten about her and had started on Suraj.

Their father looked at them in the rear-view mirror and smirked.

"Yes, I think Suraj must start Hindi classes," he said. "They offer it at the primary school." Everyone besides Naani burst out laughing at the thought of tall and lanky Suraj sitting among a class of primary school children.

Naani, however, was not amused. "Ya, carry on," she said. "Y'all think it's a big joke. Children these days got no culture, that's why their behaviour is so terrible."

Kajal thought back to their recent drama with Suraj and was glad that Naani did not know about it. She would never let any of them forget it if she found out.

They remained quiet for the rest of the trip to town, partly because they had managed to keep Naani silent, but mainly because each of them was trying to deal with their own anxiety.

They drove around searching for a parking space as close to the City Hall as possible, but the street was already full. Suraj thought for a moment and then suggested. "Dad, why don't we park at the Playhouse. There is always enough parking there."

Their father smiled at Suraj. "Good idea," he said. He then turned to his wife. "Geetha," he said, "you ladies get off here. Su and I will go park the car."

Kajal, her mother, and Naani stepped out into the warm summer evening and the two men drove away. The place was buzzing with photographers, graduates, and parents. There were several lines with graduates and their families impatiently waiting to have their photographs taken. Kajal looked at the graduates with admiration. They looked so elegant in their graduation garb. The three of them waited and were soon joined by Anand and Suraj. They then went inside.

The foyer buzzed with excitement and Kajal saw many more young people looking just as nervous and anxious as her. She saw a woman wearing an official's badge and approached her. "Excuse me," she said. "Could you tell me where the recipients of the Inter-schools essay competition awards are sitting?"

The lady explained to her that there were seats allocated on one side of the hall for them. She also explained how the function would proceed. "All the graduates will get their degrees first," she said. "After that, the winners of the essay competition will be called up on stage to receive their certificate as well as the cheques. The names will be called out alphabetically, so you must just listen out for yours."

Kajal thanked her and returned to where her parents were standing. She told them what the lady had said and then they all went into the main hall. After making sure they were seated, Kajal said goodbye to her family and went to find her seat.

She was nudged several times by graduates as they hurried about greeting their colleagues or trying to find their seats. Eventually an usher came to her aid and pointed her to her seat. Kajal sat down and smiled at the black girl next to her. The girl smiled back, revealing a gleaming set of braces. "God, I'm so nervous," the girl said.

"Me too," Kajal replied with an added touch of nervousness. Even though a democratic government ran South Africa, for some unexplained reason Kajal always felt uncomfortable around people of other races. She put her discomfort down to the fact that she lived in a predominantly Indian area. Kajal turned away to survey the graduates that sat to her left, but the girl continued their conversation.

"By the way, my name is Nandi. What's your name?" she asked as she extended her hand.

Kajal shook her hand. "I'm Kajal," she said.

Soon they were chatting as if they had been friends for a long time and they forgot all about their anxiety. Then Nandi asked, "So, what are you planning to study next year?"

Kajal felt the colour rise in her cheeks. "I want to study medicine at the Nelson. R. Mandela School of Medicine."

"No way!" Nandi replied. "I've also applied for medicine there. It would be so cool if we both get accepted."

"Well, hopefully I'll get a bursary," Kajal said.

Nandi smiled and patted her on the shoulder. "Don't stress," she said. "If you want something with all your heart, God will give it to you."

Somehow those words made Kajal feel a lot better.

Kajal was amazed by the procedures that took place at a university graduation. It was something she had never seen before. After the Academic procession had entered the hall, the Vice-Chancellor of the university declared the function open. A very regal looking man welcomed the guests and explained how the ceremony would progress. After that, it was time for the degrees to be presented. First the recipients of the postgraduate degrees were called out. One by one they went up on stage where they knelt down before the Vice-Chancellor of the university as he capped them, then they had their hoods placed on their shoulders by another executive member of the university.

Initially Kajal did not know what the hood was and asked Nandi about the colourful piece of material that each of the graduates carried onto the stage with them. Nandi explained that the hood denoted the particular degree that person received. The colour signified whether it was a Doctorate, Masters, or Honours. Kajal noticed how proud the parents of the graduates looked. They clapped loudly and some parents even got up and danced. She wished that her father could support her in that way.

Then the Bachelor's degrees were presented, after which it was time for the essay competition winners to receive their prizes. Kajal waited anxiously for her turn. Then she heard her name: "Kajal Raman, for her essay on 'The Life and Times of Mahatma Gandhi.'"

Her head swirled with excitement as she walked up to the stage to receive her cheque and certificate. She felt as if she had won the lottery. After smiling for the official photographer, she returned to her seat. The National Anthem was sung at the end of the graduation and the graduates joined the Academic Procession as they left the hall.

Kajal waited and watched as the graduates smiled at the onlookers.

She went in search of her family and found them in the foyer. She greeted them and waved her certificate and cheque. "Look, I'm rich," she said.

Her mother smiled. "You know Kajal, you looked so beautiful on stage," she said. "We are so proud of you."

Kajal blushed. "Thanks," she replied. "It wasn't that bad. Can you imagine how nervous those graduates must have been?"

She looked at her father and noticed that he was irritated. "Daddy, what's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm so tired," he answered. "This ceremony took too long."

She realised that it had been a two-hour long function. "Ya, I think we better go home," she said. "It's quite late." They were headed towards the door when Kajal felt someone grab her shoulder. She turned around curiously. It was Nandi with an elderly man and woman.

Kajal smiled at them. "Kajal," Nandi said, "I want you to meet my parents. This is my father Sibusiso and my mother Thandeka." Kajal greeted them and then introduced her parents. When the introductions were done, Nandi said to Kajal, "I told my parents that we have both applied for the same degree at the same 'varsity. I just hope we both get in."

Kajal just smiled at her, praying that her father would not say something about Ajith.

Nandi continued. "I think we should swap phone numbers so we can keep in touch during registration week."

Kajal nodded in agreement and avoided eye contact with her father.

But he said to Nandi, "You know my girl, registration is still very far away and what if you don't get accepted."

They all looked at him as if he was crazy.

"We are hoping that she gets in," Thandeka said to him. "I'm sure that you're doing the same for Kajal. Girls these days are so much luckier than we were. They have so many opportunities."

Kajal looked to her mother, hoping that she would say something to ease the situation.

"Exchanging phone numbers is a good idea," Geetha said, smiling sweetly at Nandi.

"Whatever happens, you girls can still be friends."

Nandi searched in her bag and found a pen and pocket notebook. Once their phone numbers were exchanged, the two families went their separate ways.

As Kajal and her family walked out, her father said to them, "Can you believe the cheek of that lady? Thinking she knows what is best for my child. People like that think because they have money everybody else does."

"They seem like nice people and it's nice for Kajal to make friends," his wife said softly.

They walked to the car. Kajal walked with her mother, Suraj, and Naani while her father walked ahead. Everyone, including Naani, remained quiet for the journey home. Kajal felt sick because she now knew that her father meant business. University was out of the question. She had to get married.

On reaching Naani's house they saw that the lights were on, which meant that Baboo was still awake. Naani got off and quickly disappeared through her front door.

When Kajal and her family arrived home, they did not speak much. Her father went to bed immediately while Kajal and Suraj sat in the lounge. Suraj was the first to speak.

"That girl Nandi seems really nice, huh," he said.

"Ya, but Daddy was so rude to them," Kajal replied.

“Don’t worry about him.” Suraj replied. “He is just irritated with himself. But that function was so grand. And did you see how all those students got along with each other? I mean you wouldn’t even say that they were from different races.”

“Ya, I was a bit shocked at first,” Kajal said. “But it seems like another world out there. It felt good to a part of that crowd, didn’t it?”

Just then their mother returned from the bathroom, all dressed and ready for bed.

“Why don’t you two go to bed? It’s really late,” she said.

Kajal lay in bed thinking about the amazing feeling of being on stage with bright lights and people cheering for you. It was something that she had never experienced before.

She played the scene over and over again in her head, contrasting it with her father’s anger and disappointment. She eventually nodded off to sleep, still wondering what to do.

Chapter 10

The tapping on her bedroom door awakened Kajal. It was Suraj, and he was still in his pyjamas. He came in and sat at the edge of her bed. The look on his face caused her to sit up. "What happened?" she asked.

He looked down at the bed covers. "Daddy asked Mummy to organise for Ajith and his family to come visit us today," he said.

"So, has she phoned them?"

"I don't know. She was on the phone when I came in here."

Kajal got out of bed and they were about to leave her room when they heard their parents talking.

"What did they say?" their father asked.

Their mother paused for a while. "Ajith is not at home," she said. "He went to Jo'burg for a course."

"Okay, then did you tell them about next week?"

"Yes," she replied. "They will come."

At breakfast Anand said to Kajal. "Mummy and me just want you to know that Ajith and his family will be coming here next week. Y'all will get a chance to meet."

She nodded her head and blinked her eyes to hide the tears that had welled up in them. Everyone ate their meal in silence.

As Kajal washed the breakfast dishes she heard her father say that he was going fishing with Baboo. He turned to Suraj and asked him if he would like to go with them.

Suraj smiled. "Ya, cool," he said. "I'll go fetch the rods."

An hour later, Kajal watched as Suraj and her father drove off.

The telephone rang and Kajal's mother answered. After a brief conversation, she put down the phone.

"Who was that?" Kajal asked.

"Naani. She is coming here now."

"Oh, no! You have to tell her that Ajith and them are coming here next week."

“Actually, she already knows,” her mother replied. “Aunty Jyothi told her.”

“Just great,” Kajal said. “Anyway, how is Naani going to get here? I hope she doesn’t ask Daddy to drop her off, because he will get so angry.”

“I don’t know,” her mother replied. “She said that she’ll take a taxi. But you know Naani. She will probably ask your father when he goes there to fetch Uncle Baboo.”

Kajal was miserable. “You know, Ma,” she said. “Naani is only going to upset us even more.”

“Yes, I know, but I couldn’t tell her not to come.”

They were still busy chatting when they heard Anand hoot in the driveway and Naani knocking on the front door. “Well, Naani’s here,” Kajal said as they went to open the door.

“I think Anand is irritated with me for asking him for a lift,” Naani said, as she walked in. “What else was I supposed to do? The taxi takes so long.”

Geetha smiled at her and changed the topic. “Come sit down. Do you want some tea?” she asked.

“Ya, I’ll have some milk tea, but don’t put sugar. Last week I went to the clinic and the doctor said my sugar is bit high.”

“Hello, Naani,” Kajal said as she kissed her on the cheek. Then turning to her mother, she said, “Ma, I’ll go put the kettle on.”

She went into the kitchen, switched the kettle on, and returned to the lounge. Naani spoke just as Kajal sat down. “You know Geetha,” she said, “I’m very upset with you and Anand.”

Both Kajal and her mother looked at each with surprise. Naani continued. “My own granddaughter is getting proposed and y’all couldn’t tell me. I had to find out from Jyothi.”

“No, Ma, it’s not like that,” Geetha said, explaining the situation. “Anand wanted Ajith and them to come here today, but he is in Jo’burg so they are coming next week. I didn’t have time to phone you because I had to make lunch for Anand and Suraj to take with them.”

“Oh, okay,” Naani said, still sounding a bit annoyed. “Anyway, we must start preparing for next week. We won’t invite too many people from our side, but at the same time you must not forget Anand’s relatives.”

“Yes, I understand,” Geetha replied. “But this is not a big thing. They are just coming so that Kajal and Ajith can meet each other.”

Kajal saw this as her cue to leave and went back into the kitchen to make the tea.

However, she could still hear their conversation and grew increasingly alarmed. It seemed as if her mother was happy about the arrangement. Maybe her mother had realised that there was no point in going against her father. She made the tea and took the two cups into the lounge.

By now Naani had decided on who they were going to invite, and the food they were going to serve was next for discussion. Kajal put the tea on the coffee table and sat down next to her mother.

Naani was saying, “Geetha, we’ll make some nice vegetable breyani with dhal, salad and pickle.”

“No,” Geetha replied. “It’s not a wedding or something, so I think we should just offer them tea and some snacks like samosas, bhajia, and biscuits. They are coming here around two o’clock.”

“Okay, that is fine because three o’clock is tea time anyway,” Naani replied, satisfied.

“We must see who is going to make the things,” she continued. “I think it must be shared between you and Premi. After all, you helped her when Shanthi got married.”

Kajal, who had been daydreaming, came back to reality. “What about Shanthi?” she asked.

Naani was about to repeat herself, but her daughter spoke. “Let’s talk about that later,” she said. “Drink your tea, it’s getting cold.”

As Naani sipped her tea Kajal thought about their lunch. She and her mother had planned to have cheese toast, but since Naani had come over they now had to prepare something more substantial. She looked over to her mother. “Ma, what must I take out for lunch?” she asked.

“Take out a parcel of chicken from the freezer and cut me some tomatoes and onions.” her mother replied. “I think I’ll make chicken curry.”

Kajal got up and went into the kitchen. She decided that she would rather cook than listen to her mother and Naani discuss her future as if she was not even in the house. So she popped her head into the lounge doorway and said to her mother, “Ma, why don’t you rest and I’ll cook the lunch.”

Her mother looked at her with surprise. “Are you sure, Kaj?” she asked.

“Yes, I just feel like cooking,” Kajal replied.

She went back into the kitchen and checked on the chicken that she had put into the microwave. Since it needed to be defrosted for a few more minutes, she went to the grocery cupboard and took out the rice container. She measured two cups of rice and put it into a pot. Next, she had to wash the rice and cut the chicken. Kajal hurried about the kitchen, trying not to hear the conversation that took place in the lounge. When she had braised the curry and checked on the rice, she attempted to sneak into her bedroom, but was caught out by Naani’s watchful eye.

“Kajal, where you going?” Naani asked, looking suspiciously at her.

She thought for a moment. “I just remembered that I left Suraj’s CD player on.” she replied.

“Come back quickly,” Naani went on. “Mummy and I are talking about what you are going to wear next week.”

Kajal rolled her eyes up in irritation and went towards the bedrooms. She went into Suraj’s room. After shuffling the books on his table, she returned to the lounge. As she sat down, they heard a gushing noise come from the kitchen. “Oh no,” Kajal said. “The rice must have boiled over.” She rushed of to the kitchen and sure enough the rice had boiled over and spilled onto the stove and the floor. Grabbing a dishcloth, she set about cleaning up the mess. Once that was done she checked on the curry and was glad to see that the chicken had cooked.

“Ma, the curry and rice is cooked,” she called out. “I’m going to set the table.”

“Dish it out into the bowls,” her mother replied. “I’ll set the table.”

They were soon ready to eat and Naani joined them at the table. Kajal passed the steaming hot bowls of curry and rice to Naani, then to her mother, and she finally dished for herself. She watched anxiously as Naani took her first bite, as she always had a complaint. Naani chewed her food and frowned. “Kajal,” she said, “this food has no salt in it, not one bit.”

“Oh damn,” Kajal exclaimed. “I must have forgotten to put it in.”

“You know,” Naani replied, taking on her lecturing tone, “salt is the most important thing in the food. It gives the taste.”

Geetha got up and went to the kitchen. She returned with some fine salt on a saucer.

Naani generously sprinkled the salt on her food and continued to eat.

“Ma,” Geetha said to her mother, “isn’t that too much salt. You know it will raise your pressure.”

“Ya,” Naani replied, “but this food got no taste, man. It’s terrible.”

They remained quiet for some time as each one gauged the amount of salt they needed. Then Naani broke the silence. “Kajal,” she said, “it’s so important for a woman to know how to cook. How else will you feed your family?”

Kajal remained quiet, but her mother answered. “Things are different these days, Ma,” she said. “The men also cook. Anyway, Kajal knows how to cook, it’s just that she forgot the salt.”

“Forgot the salt,” Naani mumbled. “Ajith’s family will think we are so stupid we can’t even teach our girls how to cook a decent meal.”

Kajal was furious. Naani was just too annoying with her old fashioned beliefs.

Geetha however said to her mother, “Ajith and his family are only coming here so that he and Kajal can meet each other. It’s not like they are going to get married. What if they don’t like each other?”

“What do you mean?” Naani asked. “In our day there was no such thing as you didn’t like the boy your parents arranged for you. You had to marry him.”

Geetha was about to speak when her mother continued. “Anyway, she’s your child,” she said. “Y’all can sort it out.”

Both Kajal and her mother looked at Naani and then at each other. They knew that even though she sounded as if she was no longer interested, she would still meddle.

Nobody spoke through the rest of the meal and Kajal was grateful for the silence.

After lunch Geetha and Kajal washed the dishes while Naani went to lie down.

Kajal was emptying the left over curry into a smaller container when the phone rang.

Her mother answered, and Kajal gathered that it was not for her because her mother continued to speak to the person on the other end. After some time she put down the phone and returned to the kitchen.

“Who phoned?” Kajal asked curiously.

Her mother thought for a while. “Oh, that was Cathy from work,” she replied.

“On a Sunday?” Kajal asked surprised.

“Yes,” her mother responded. “She said that there is some paperwork she needs to finish.

I must come in tomorrow. She was supposed to phone on Friday, but she forgot.”

“Oh, okay.” Kajal said, and washed the remaining dishes.

When they were done her mother yawned. “Looks like it’s time for my Sunday sleep,” she said. “Kaj, please get me up in an hour’s time.”

Kajal nodded. “Ma, can I phone Mel quickly?” she asked. “I haven’t spoken to her in a while.”

“Yes,” her mother replied, and went to her bedroom.

Kajal lifted the handset and dialled Melanie’s number. Melanie answered.

“Hi. Mel,” Kajal greeted her.

“Hello stranger,” Melanie replied. “Where have you been lost?”

“Oh, I’ve just been sorting out stuff. Listen why don’t you come visit me tomorrow?”

Kajal asked.

“That’s a great idea,” Melanie replied. “Wait a second, I’ll go ask my father.”

She put the phone aside and returned a minute later. “He agreed,” she said. “I’ll see you around ten o’clock.”

“Okay, see you.” Kajal replied and put down the phone.

Since the house was silent Kajal thought it would be the perfect time to complete the book she had been reading. She lay down on her bed and opened to the page she had book marked. Soon she too had dozed off.

The insistent knocking on the front door woke them up with a shock. Kajal leapt out of bed to answer. Her mother, who was already there, opened the gate for Suraj.

“Do y’all know how long I was knocking for?” he asked as he walked in. “Daddy is waiting for Naani. He said he’ll drop her off one time.”

Kajal just stood there, still in a daze, while her mother went to wake Naani who emerged several minutes later, evidently irritated. Her hair was in a mess. She said goodbye to them and walked out mumbling about what her neighbours would think if they saw her come home with her hair in that state.

As she left the front door, Suraj appeared once again, this time holding the cooler bag and the tackle box. He handed the cooler bag to Kajal. “Please sort this out while I put the fishing rods away in the garage,” he said. Kajal took the bag into the kitchen. She opened the bag and shrieked, throwing the lid on the floor. Suraj, who she had not noticed following her, burst out laughing and their mother ran into the kitchen to see what the commotion was about. She found Kajal backed up against the kitchen door as Suraj held his sides because he was laughing so much. Right in the middle of the floor was a huge brown crab.

“Suraj,” she said, “please take this thing outside.”

“No,” he replied. “It’s almost dead. Daddy said you must cook it with the other ones we caught.”

“What other ones?” Kajal asked, still keeping her place at the door.

“These ones,” he continued, as he tilted the cooler bag to reveal several other crabs.

“And come check this fish I caught,” he said, returning the crab to the bag.

Kajal and her mother moved in closer and peered into the bag. A fat red fish lay among the crabs and ice bricks.

“Wow, Su.” Kajal said. “This fish is quite big. Are you sure you caught it?”

He shot her an annoyed look and put the crabs into the sink.

Their mother left them in the kitchen and went back into the bedroom.

“So,” Kajal asked, “how was your fishing trip with Daddy and Burper Baboo?”

Suraj started to laugh, but then explained himself. “Baboo brought along a whole lot of drink and was piss drunk before we could even cast our lines,” he said. “Daddy had to keep an eye on him the whole day to check that he didn’t fall into the bay. It was hilarious.”

Their mother returned to the kitchen and interrupted their conversation. “You two can talk later,” she said. “Suraj, please finish up and go bath. You smell like a fish market. Also, Daddy will be back just now and he’ll want to use the bathroom.”

Suraj put the crabs into the sink and went to the bathroom. They were busy in the kitchen when Anand knocked on the front door. Kajal went to let him in.

“Did y’all see the fish Suraj caught?” he asked.

“Ya,” she replied. “It’s in the kitchen.”

They went back to the kitchen where her mother was putting the ice bricks into the freezer. He went over to the fish that lay on the sink. “Let me show you ladies how it’s done,” he said as he took a knife and began to scale the fish.

Kajal and her mother grinned at each other, but to their surprise he finished the job quickly and expertly. He proceeded to clean and slice the fish into pieces. The two women watched in amazement.

Suraj walked in. “Well done, Dad,” he said. “Now you can clean the crabs.”

Their father laughed. “I’ll leave that to these two,” he said as he walked out of the kitchen. On his way to the bathroom, he shouted to them, “How about some hot crab curry for supper?”

Kajal cut the onions and tomatoes whilst her mother cleaned the crabs.

All Kajal could do was watch as her mother cooked the crab curry because it was something that took a lot of practice. First she let the crabs simmer in a pot together with the onions and the ginger and garlic paste. She added chilli powder, tomatoes, and tamarind water, which Kajal had made by mixing the tamarind with water. The tamarind seeds were thrown away and the dark brown liquid added to the curry. As the curry

cooked. they made the roti. Suraj walked into the kitchen. "It smells tasty," he said, as he removed the lid of the pot. "When do we eat?"

"Hey," said Kajal, tapping him on the wrist.

Their mother turned around to them. "Suraj, if you want to make yourself useful, go and set the table," she said. "The food will be ready just now and Kajal, you can clean some dhania to sprinkle on the curry."

The two off them carried out their tasks as their mother finished the rotis. When the table was set, the food was brought in and they all sat down to eat. Everyone remained quiet and enjoyed the hot, slightly pungent crab curry with roti.

About half way through the meal Anand spoke. "Well, that's the end of another weekend," he said to his wife. "Tomorrow you and Kaj can start planning for next weekend."

Kajal just smiled at him, but oddly enough her mother objected.

"Not tomorrow," she said. "I have to take my mother to collect her grant."

Kajal raised her eyebrows curiously as she turned to her mother. Hadn't she said earlier that she was going to work? She, however, avoided Kajal's eyes and continued to eat.

Her father did not notice her confusion and accepted his wife's answer.

When they had finished their meal, Suraj helped them tidy the table and then he and their father went into the lounge to watch TV. Kajal washed the dishes as her mother dried and put them away. She took the opportunity to find out what her mother had planned for the following day.

"Ma," she asked, "why did you tell Daddy that you are going with Naani to collect her grant? Aren't you going to work?"

"Yes," her mother replied. "But you know how he is, he'll never stop asking questions."

Then, a bit more hastily, she said, "Kaj, please finish up here, I'll go make my bed. Daddy will want to sleep just now."

Kajal finished cleaning the kitchen and went to the lounge to see where everybody else was. She found Suraj watching TV in the lounge.

“Suraj,” she asked, “don’t you ever get tired of sitting glued to the TV?”

“No, not when there is a karate movie on.”

She said goodnight to him and went to the bathroom. As she ran her bath, somebody knocked on the door. It was her mother. “Goodnight Kaj,” she said. “I’m going to sleep.”

“Okay,” Kajal replied, still wondering about her mother’s secrecy.

Chapter 11

Kajal was restless the entire night and she eventually fell asleep in the early hours of the following morning. She awoke when she heard knocking on her bedroom door.

“Come in,” she said sleepily. The door opened and her mother walked in, dressed in a smart outfit.

“Morning, Kaj,” she said.

“Morning, Ma,” Kajal replied. “You’re looking very nice.”

“Thanks, baby. I’m going to work, but I won’t take long.”

“What time will you be back? Should I start supper?”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll be back by one ‘o clock.”

Her mother leaned closer and pecked her on the cheek. “Keep an eye on Suraj,” she said.

Kajal smiled. “Don’t worry,” she said, “we’ll be fine.”

Her mother turned and went out the door. Then Kajal realised that she had not told her about Melanie’s visit. She jumped out of bed and ran to the front door. “Ma,” she shouted, “I forgot to tell you that Mel is coming to visit.”

“That’s fine, just make sure that you cook lunch for her,” her mother replied.

Kajal watched as her mother walked down the road to the bus stop. Realising that there was no point in going back to bed because she no longer felt sleepy, Kajal brushed her teeth and began to tidy the house. As she dressed the beds, she thought about her life in a week’s time. Ajith would have already come and gone. Her fate would have been decided, and she would probably be very depressed.

She did not want to wake Suraj and shut his bedroom door instead. Kajal was determined to make one more attempt at convincing her father that she should study rather than marry Ajith. She would ask him at supper that night. Suraj walked into the kitchen as she switched on the kettle for tea. He had just brushed his teeth and his uncombed hair stuck out in several places.

He yawned as he spoke. "You're up early," he said.

She smiled at him. "You want some tea?" she asked.

"Ya, I'll get out some biscuits and you can make the tea."

The two of them were soon sitting at the dining room having their breakfast.

Kajal started their conversation. "Guess what?" she said. "Mel is coming to visit."

Suraj sipped his tea. "That's cool," he said. "At least you'll have company because I'm going to the Plaza."

Kajal became uneasy, but tried to remain calm. "What for?" she asked carefully.

Fortunately, Suraj did not notice her uneasiness and he explained.

"I read in the paper yesterday that the CD shop there is looking for sales people. So I thought I'll go and try."

Kajal immediately felt guilty for assuming the worst about him. "Wow, Su," she said.

"That's great. Mummy and them will be happy."

"Anyway, I'm going to bath. I don't want to be late," he said as he picked up his teacup and went into the kitchen. He returned and went straight to the bathroom. Suraj came back half an hour later dressed in a pair of black jeans and a white shirt.

"You look really smart," Kajal said. "I'm sure you'll get the job."

"Thanks. see you later," he said as he opened the back door and walked out.

As she went to her bedroom she glanced at the clock on the lounge wall. It was a quarter to nine, which meant that Melanie would arrive soon.

She was almost out of the bathtub when she heard knocking on the front door and Melanie's loud and distinct voice. Kajal stuck her head out the bathroom window and shouted to her. "Mel, wait a minute," she said. "I'm in the bathroom."

Melanie stopped knocking and Kajal rushed to her room and dressed quickly. She then went to open the front door.

"Hi, Mel. Sorry to keep you waiting," she said.

"No problem. I'm kind of early because my dad realised that he had some stuff to do before his meeting. So he dropped me off first."

"Anyway," Kajal asked, "do you want something to drink?"

“Yes, please,” she replied. “By the way, where’s your mum?”

Kajal thought of an explanation and then answered, “She had to sign a few papers at work, but she’ll be back around one.”

They went into the kitchen and Kajal poured juice for them. “So Mel, what do you want to eat for lunch?” Kajal asked as they went back into the dining room and sat at the table.

“You know what,” Melanie said apologetically, “I won’t be staying till so late. My dad has to go somewhere else so he is fetching me in about two hours time.”

Kajal was disappointed because she had hoped that Melanie’s company would cheer her up. But she decided to enjoy the time they did have.

“What have you been up to this past week?” Melanie asked. “I haven’t heard a peep out of you.”

Kajal told her about Shanthi’s and the awards ceremony. But Melanie was convinced that something else was bothering her friend. “Kaj,” she said, “you look upset. What’s up?”

Kajal hesitated for a while, but eventually blurted out, “My father has arranged a marriage for me.”

Melanie was shocked. “You’re joking, right?” was all she could say.

The serious look on Kajal’s face made her ask, “Oh my God, Kaj, how did this happen?”

Melanie listened intently as Kajal explained the entire story to her. As she spoke, tears streamed down her cheeks and she wiped them away with the back of her palms.

“You know, Kaj, we’ve always heard about this happening to other people,” Melanie said. “I never expected that one day it would be one of us.”

“I know,” Kajal replied. “Can you imagine how shocked I was? But my father is really serious about me getting married.”

Melanie had a suggestion. “Let me talk to him,” she said. “Maybe I’ll be able to convince him.”

“Are you crazy, Mel? He’ll freak out.”

“Then what are you going to do?” Melanie asked.

“I don’t know,” Kajal replied, biting her lips nervously. “I’ve thought about talking to him one more time tonight and hopefully he’ll change his mind.”

“Wow,” Melanie said. “I’m still in shock. If my parents ever did something like this I’d run away from home.”

“Believe me, I’ve thought about it,” Kajal replied. “But I could never do such a thing.”

They heard footsteps in the driveway and Kajal went to see who it was.

“Guess what?” Suraj said, as she opened the door for him. When he saw that her eyes were red he asked, “What’s wrong?”

Kajal just shook her head. “It’s nothing,” she said. “I was just telling Mel about the whole Ajith thing.”

Suraj walked in and greeted Melanie. “Howzit, Mel?” he said.

Melanie smiled and greeted him. They all remained quiet for a while then Kajal asked, “So Su, did you get the job?”

“Oh ya,” Suraj replied. “I start the day after tomorrow.”

“What job?” Melanie asked curiously.

Kajal told her and Melanie said to Suraj, “So now I’m going to ask you to get all the CDs I want on your staff discount.”

He laughed. “Just wait and let me start working first,” he said.

Kajal and Melanie stayed in the dining room while Suraj went to change out of his smart clothes. Kajal was just about to speak when they heard a beeping noise coming from under the table. Melanie put her hands in her pocket and pulled out a small cell phone. She answered it and spoke for a while. When Melanie was done on the phone she said to Kajal, “That was my father. He is coming to pick me up because his meeting finished early.”

“Oh no,” Kajal said sadly. “I wanted you to stay longer.”

“Well, he’s not here yet. So, are you seriously going to tell your father that you’re not marrying this guy?”

Kajal looked determined. “Yes,” she said. “I’m going to tell him.”

They heard a hoot in the driveway.

“That must be my Dad,” Melanie said, getting off her chair.

The two of them walked in silence towards the front door. Then Melanie spoke.

“Kaj,” she said. “all I can do is pray that your dad changes his mind. I’ll call tomorrow morning to see what’s going on.”

Kajal smiled at her and winked. “Thanks, sister-friend,” she said.

She opened the front door and Melanie walked out.

Kajal watched them drive off and then she joined Suraj in the kitchen.

“What do you want to eat for lunch?” she asked.

“Don’t cook anything.” Suraj replied. “I’ll just have peanut butter sandwiches and tea.”

Kajal decided to have the same.

Suraj wanted to watch TV so he suggested that they have their lunch in the lounge.

They had just started to eat when Kajal suddenly asked him, “Su, what do you think I should do about the proposal?”

Suraj gulped down a sip of tea. “I would tell the guy and his family that I don’t want to get married and my parents are forcing me,” he said casually.

“Ya, right,” she said. “You’re only saying that.”

“But you’ve got to do something,” he replied. “You can’t just get married, like a zombie.”

Kajal looked at him and tried to explain. “You know I feel so trapped,” she said. “I don’t want to embarrass Mummy and them, but there is this other feeling inside me that won’t go away. I always knew that the world was bigger than just Phoenix, but only on the night of the awards ceremony did I really see how true that was. Getting married is not the most important thing in the world; there is more, like making a difference, going out there and being part of something bigger. What Daddy doesn’t realise is that I’ll make them even prouder when I go on that stage and collect my degree as a qualified doctor.”

Kajal felt a drop on her hand and only when she looked down did she realise that she had started to cry. She quickly wiped her eyes, but Suraj had already seen the tears.

“Kaj, do you want me to try and talk to Daddy,” he said. “Maybe then he’ll see how much you don’t want to get married.”

“No,” she said. “Daddy will be furious and you are just patching things up with him anyway.”

They both heard knocking on the front door and turned around to see their mother standing at the gate. Suraj put down his tea and went to open the door. Kajal also got up to see what she had bought. To their disappointment she only had two packets, both full with vegetables. Suraj took them from her.

“Hi, Ma,” Kajal said. “We thought that you bought us something nice to eat.”

Their mother greeted them and went into the kitchen.

Kajal and Suraj followed and were rewarded when she put her hand into one of the packets and pulled out a box. Kajal opened it to reveal three hot pies.

As their mother packed the vegetables into the fridge she hummed a tune and Kajal, who was making more tea, wondered why she was in such a good mood.

Then they all sat down to enjoy their pies.

“What are y’all going to do with these peanut butter sandwiches?” their mother asked.

“Don’t worry,” Suraj answered. “I’ll eat them later.”

“So, Ma,” Kajal asked, “Did you sort out everything at work?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Everything is sorted out.”

Kajal thought that their mother was behaving strangely so she glanced over to Suraj to see if he had noticed anything, but he seemed too interested in eating his pie. So, she ignored her suspicions and carried on eating.

When they had finished, their mother got up. “Make fast you two,” she said to them. “I still have to make supper.”

Kajal took their saucers to the kitchen while Suraj crept into his room to avoid the kitchen chores. “Ma,” Kajal asked, “what are you going to cook for supper?”

“I’ll cook some rice and make fry fish chutney with that fish they caught yesterday,” she replied. Kajal made the tomato chutney and her mother put the rice to boil while frying the fish. Since her mother was in such high spirits, Kajal decided not to tell her about her decision to talk to her father that night.

They were almost finished preparing supper when their father hooted in the driveway and Suraj rushed out to open the gate for him. Both Kajal and her mother greeted him at the front door and Kajal set the supper table while her mother ironed his pyjamas.

As she put out the place mats and the plates, Kajal contemplated how she was going to approach her father. She was startled when he walked straight into the dining room after his bath.

They all sat down to eat and Kajal tried not to show her nervousness. Everyone ate in silence and she noticed that her mother also looked preoccupied.

Half way through the meal Kajal eventually built up enough courage to speak to her father. "Daddy," she said, "I need to tell you something."

Since she had broken the silence at the table, everyone focused their attention on her.

Her father looked at her in surprise. "Okay, what's wrong?" he asked.

She bit her lip. "It's about Ajith," she said. "I don't want to marry him. I just can't."

Her father's face reddened as if he had eaten several green chillies and was about to explode. Suraj watched in amazement. Geetha opened her mouth to speak, but her husband glanced at her and she remained quiet.

He looked directly at Kajal. "How many damn times are we going to go over this subject?" he shouted. "What will make you happy, Kajal, to see your parents embarrassed? Will that make you happy?"

Kajal stayed quiet while her father went on. He looked over to his wife at the other end of the table. "It's all your fault," he said. "You encouraged her to go to that function and be friends with that girl. You put fancy ideas in her head and now we all are going to be shamed."

To everybody's surprise, his wife pointed her index finger at him. "No, it's your fault that we are in this mess," she said, "because you felt bad to refuse your aunty. Couldn't you have just waited to see if Kajal got the bursary?"

Her husband, who was taken aback by her tone and what she had said, took a moment to recover before he could respond.

"I thought that you were on my side," he said, "but it seems that you are also gone crazy with this 'varsity thing. You are not even thinking about our shame. Everyone will say our children don't listen to us. They tell us what to do."

Suraj glared at his parents. They had never had such a heated argument before.

Kajal began to cry, blaming herself for the argument.

It was Geetha's turn to speak. "It's not about being embarrassed," she said. "It's about believing in your child. Don't you want our children to have more than us? Don't you want them to be successful?"

Anand smirked. "Which is worse," he asked. "forcing your child to get married, which will be for her benefit anyway, or giving her false hopes? Since you want Kajal to study, which tree are you going to shake to get the money?"

Suraj and Kajal turned towards their mother. They felt bad for her because this was the first time she had ever spoken up for herself, and she could not have the solution to their problem.

Geetha waited for a few seconds and smiled. "I do have the money," she said.

Her husband's jaw dropped and Kajal and Suraj stared at each other wondering if they had heard correctly. She saw their amazement and continued more seriously.

"Today I went to work and sorted out my sick pay," she said. "I have decided that I'm not going back to work, so they are going to pay me off. Kajal will be going to 'varsity after all."

Kajal could not believe her ears. She suspected that her mother had been up to something, but she never expected this.

"Cool, Ma," Suraj said. "How much money?"

"They don't know the full amount yet, but there will be enough for 'varsity," she replied.

Anand, still in shock asked, "But what are we going to tell Ajith and his family and Jyothi."

"I don't know," she answered in a softer tone. "But you have to tell them. I'm not going to let Kajal throw her future away."

Kajal and Suraj watched as their father got up from the table and went outside. Kajal stood up to go after him, but her mother stopped her. "Kaj, just let him cool off," she said. "He is feeling bad because he has to tell Jyothi that the proposal is off. You know Daddy; he can never refuse his relatives. Also he must be feeling bad because I'm going to pay for your studies and not him. But that is something he will have to accept."

They began tidying the table and Suraj said to his mother, "I'm so shocked that you told Daddy how you felt. When did you get so brave?"

She smiled at him. "Daddy and I want the best for you that is why he agreed to the proposal," she said. "But I was not happy. Thank God this money came right in time."

"Su, why don't you go check where Daddy is?" Kajal asked.

When Suraj had left, Kajal turned to her mother and hugged her tightly. "Thank you Mummy," she said. Tears welled up in her mother's eyes and she just smiled.

Suraj walked in on them. "Okay. that's enough emotions for one day," he said.

Kajal let go of her mother and asked him, "Where's Daddy?"

"He's outside talking to Uncle Ravi. He seems to be okay."

He was on his way out of the kitchen when he said, "Oh by the way Ma, I forgot to tell you that I got a part time job at the CD shop in the Plaza."

Their mother smiled. "That's very good Suraj," she said, "but please take this job seriously. I don't want you getting into any more trouble."

"Don't worry. Ma." he replied. "I've learnt my lesson." He went into the lounge and switched on the TV.

Her mother looked over to Kajal. "When we are finished here," she said, "you can go and read that course book the 'varsity sent you."

"How do you know about book?" Kajal asked curiously "I've got it hidden under all my other books."

"Don't worry about that," her mother replied. "Now you don't have to feel sad to read it."

They carried on with their evening activities while they waited for Anand to come inside. And after an hour, he did. Without speaking to anyone, he went straight to bed. The rest of the family decided to do the same as it had started to rain and a thunderstorm began to break.

Kajal could not sleep as the thunder rolled fiercely. She lay in bed and thought about her good fortune. Her dream of going to university had finally come true.

The following morning Kajal got up, while the rest of the household was still asleep. The rain had subsided. She went over to the window and smiled at the sun, peeking over the horizon. Another day had begun.

THE END

Appendix

My Masters dissertation grew out of a sustained writing project that I began as one of the requirements for the creative writing module I undertook in my Honours year.

For the Masters degree, the sustained writing project had to be accompanied by a journal in which I was to record the process of writing my novel. This essay will serve as a summary of and conclusion to that journal.

The notes in my journal appear in the form of diary entries. All my journal entries begin with 'Dear Journal', setting the tone for an informal reflection on the fiction writing process. I chose this form of address because I thought it would facilitate my creative thinking. I felt that through it I would be able to relate more closely to my work since it would be as if I were thinking about it in a personal safety zone.

In the journal, I note the problems I encountered whilst writing a (short) novel-length work and record general thoughts that struck me in the writing process. I also give an account of various books I have read that have contributed to the writing process.

The technical books have primarily helped me see my work in terms of its relevance to its intended audience. They enabled me to compare my writing with suggestions on how to write for a young adult audience.

I read the fictional books with a mainly comparative outlook, focusing on the way other authors have presented material related to my own.

The aim of this essay is to highlight the main points of the journal, which I will present under four headings: the writing process, representing a particular culture, the target audience, and references and tools.

1. The writing process

As I have already mentioned, the idea to start a short novel first occurred to me in my Honours year when I did the module in Creative Writing. By the end of the course I had completed three and a half chapters of a work of fiction and when I decided to study further, I chose to complete this as part of my Master's dissertation. Thinking back to how I started writing the novel, I remember being quite sceptical. At that time I had only written poetry and one short story. Since I was not too keen on doing a collection of short stories or poetry as a sustained writing project, I decided to 'take the road less travelled' for me, at least, and try writing an extended piece of fiction.

My next step was to consider the content of my novel. I wanted to write about people or a community with which I was familiar. In the one and only short story I have ever written, I wrote about a white American woman who knows that her husband is cheating on her. He is on a business trip and she contemplates confronting him when he returns. Even though I managed to complete the story, I felt that it lacked substance. By this I mean that I did not relate to the characters in the way I had hoped. They just seemed like people I was watching on a soap opera. I knew everything about the characters, but there was a distance between myself and their story. Having had that experience, I decided to base my novel on a community I am a part of, the South African Indian community.

I wanted to write a novel that would contribute to the slowly growing number of works of fiction by South African Indian authors such as Beverley Naidoo (*Chain of Fire*, 1989), Farida Karodia (*Other Secrets*, 1993), and Pat Poovalingam (*Anand*, 2003).

Naidoo's novel is about the forced eviction of black families during the apartheid era. The author shows how this community stood together and the efforts they made in contributing to the freedom struggle. Karodia writes about an Indian community living amongst the whites in an apartheid South Africa. Poovalingam tells the story of a young South African Indian man who goes to London to study law and returns to South Africa to fight against the injustices of apartheid. None of these novels, however, reflect the South African community in the present, something that became very much my aim. I wanted to write a story set in a contemporary milieu, beyond the perhaps overdone subject of the struggle against apartheid. I hoped to tell a different story, one of the here and now in a country where, technically at least, democracy has triumphed and people are moving on with their new identities. Once this was decided, I had to start the actual writing, which was quite a daunting thought.

Through the Creative Writing module I was doing at the time, I had come to realise that the first line of a novel could determine whether a reader continued to read on, or put the book down and moved on to another. I struggled to get a first line that I was satisfied with. After many attempts I finally wrote something that I thought would work. The opening paragraph I came up with fulfilled my aim of wanting to capture a typical Durban scene. I hope that my description of the rain pelting down on the streets and the

floating garbage will grab the reader's attention. It is intended to give a clear and vivid mental picture, one that immediately engages the reader. It also introduces the main character, with her name appearing in the first line. Once I had this setting and scene, I felt I had the energy to give her an identity and develop a cast of characters around her.

Barbara Taylor Bradford says that when she starts a new novel, she puts down the names of each character on an individual piece of cardboard and puts them into a shoebox (in Gibbs, 1995: 53). Each card contains specific information about that character such as his/her likes, dislikes, habits, a description, etc. This prompted me to do something similar at the back of my journal. I found it helped me in relating to my characters. I was able to see each character as an individual.

I continued to write and as the plot developed, so too did my characters. Perhaps more accurately, I found the relation between the plot and the characters more dynamic than this sounds. In a way, I used the characters to move the plot along. Each character had a specific role to play and that is what kept the story going. As each of the characters developed, so did the story. Even the minor characters proved useful for the plot. An example is the character of Jyothi: I introduce her to the reader at the Katha and Jundha prayer and then she turns up at the wedding again. As natural as this seems (she is a relation), her appearances hint to the reader that she is a growing influence on the plot.

Initially, I kept the writing process pretty much between my journal and myself. I remained private about the development of my writing because I was afraid of the effect of criticism on my work. However, there have been two occasions on which I have read extracts of my text to an audience. I would like to comment briefly on the different responses I received.

The first was during the Creative Writing course. It was compulsory for students to read a few chapters from their sustained writing projects. I chose to read the first three chapters of my novel and was concerned as to how the class would respond. Surprisingly, I received a positive response. I think that they were receptive to my work because we all were in the same situation, i.e. we were all testing our ability to write. Also, they understood the anxiety involved in having to read your work to an audience.

With this boost to my confidence, I decided to read the same three chapters at a Postgraduate Conference held in 2002. On this occasion, all I got was a faint clapping

after reading my work. There was no further response from the audience. I was devastated so I discussed my embarrassment and disappointment with my supervisor. He concluded that most people attending those conferences expect readers to present scholarly papers. They are not yet used to creative writing in the academic context, which is a relatively new development at our university. I look forward to a time when more students are encouraged to unlock their creativity, and when creative writing is taken seriously within tertiary education. Regardless of my experience at the conference I continued to write.

A major help in this was meeting with my supervisor. We arranged regular appointments, and discussed each of the developments I made to the plot and characters. He would read what I had written and provide suggestions and comments, both on the story and its expression. I learned to edit seriously as the story developed, as this kept my ideas and their progress clear.

Editing my work has in fact been the most vital activity in the writing process. The journal is the place where I have reflected on the editing process. Editing was a long and stressful task. However, I must convey my sincere thanks to my supervisor Professor Green for his assistance. Whilst editing I realised how important it was to read thoroughly when looking for errors. This applies as much to creative rewriting as it does to proofing. activities that I learned are sometimes difficult to tell apart.

I found this to be especially so when I wished to introduce the various culturally defining practices that inform the story - the wedding, for example. At first I tended to give large chunks of information in a very explanatory way; it was as if I was merely defining the various rituals. My supervisor pointed out that I was – in one of the oldest but truest clichés of creative writing - ‘telling’ this to the reader instead of ‘showing’ him/her. I needed to integrate the information into the story so that it did not seem forced. Professor Green explained that ‘telling’ hindered the writing process in that it would distance the reader from the story and break the narrative mode. I experienced difficulty in ‘showing’ the reader this material and I must admit that I had to write and rewrite several sections many, many times. Despite my initial grappling, I think I have finally managed to make the cultural background very much a part of the unfolding story.

Essentially, what helped me with re-writing was that I realised that I had to respect my potential readers. I had to try and read my own work from their perspective, bearing in mind that whether they were from a different culture or religion or not, I could not patronise them by spelling things out. An example of this appears on page 21 of my work. This is where I explain to the reader what happens after a Hindi wedding. Initially, I just gave a description of the various practices that occurred and then continued with the story. This broke the flow of the story, however, and my supervisor said that I had to find a way of working these details into the story. I found that by involving the characters in the cultural practices I was presenting, instead of describing those practices abstractly, the text became much more readable.

The final step in the writing process was to investigate the possibility of publishing my work, which was one of the requirements of this course. I have approached three editors from different publishing houses and their responses have been positive. Obviously they did not guarantee the publication of my work, but they encouraged me to forward a copy to them.

The first person I spoke to was Andrea Natrass, a freelance editor who works regularly for the University of Natal Press. I gave her a verbal summary of my novel and asked her if there was scope for such a work. Her response was that this country needed more fiction from South African Indian authors and that the idea for my novel was a good one.

Not knowing of any other publishers, I went to a branch of Exclusive Books and had a look at their young adult section. I found a few books that dealt with contemporary South Africa life. Examples were: *Troubles, Taxis and Toilets, Breaking Out, and High heels and Hijack*. New Africa Books published all these books aimed at a young adult audience, so I decided to phone them. I spoke to a lady named Roxanne Segers and gave her a brief idea of what my novel was about. She explained that my novel sounded like it would fit into a series they publish called the *Siyagruva Series*, to which all the above-mentioned books belong. She also said that I should e-mail them a copy of the first three chapters of my novel to see if they would publish it. I will e-mail the three chapters to her once the final editing has been done.

Then I read *Dancing Pencils* (Keats: 1999), which was published by umSinsi Press. I phoned them and asked if they would consider publishing my novel. I was surprised to discover that they were located in my residential area. The person I spoke to explained that they only published reading material for the school-going market. After I told him about my novel he suggested that I contact them in February 2004 so that they could look at my manuscript.

I am happy to have received a positive response from these publishers, and whatever the final outcome, it gives me a sense of pride to know that I have produced something that has provoked at least some interest in the local publishing industry.

2. Representing a particular culture

My novel is centred on a Hindi South African Indian family, so there were various cultural aspects that I had to consider in order to give the story authenticity. I arranged a meeting with a Hindi priest who helped me understand the significance of the various traditions with which I am not familiar. The chief religious aspects were the lighting of the prayer lamp, vegetable fasting on Tuesdays, and the wedding ceremony.

In all Hindi homes, a member of the family has to light the prayer lamp every afternoon before any of the electronic lights in the house are turned on. This is done to ensure that God is the first light in the house, a beautiful concept I was happy to include in my story.

The Tuesday vegetable fast is a result of this day being dedicated to the Hindu God, Hanuman. Since the eating of meat is considered a pleasure, Hindus observe a fast of vegetables only. Apart from adding authenticity, this added a touch of the kind of renunciation Kajal fears at one point that she may be forced to make.

An important part of my story is Kajal's cousin's wedding. The traditional and religious practices performed at a Hindi wedding added a strong cultural context to my story, all the more so because none of them have English names. This did, however, present me with the challenge of integrating these Hindi terms into the text and then explaining them through the action. I felt it was all the more important to achieve this because the wedding is significant as a turning point in the plot. This is where Jyothi sees Kajal and thereafter suggests the arranged marriage. It is also the point where Kajal

realises that Shanthi has lost her youth, and must face her own crucial decisions as she too matures.

3. The target audience

I had completed three and a half chapters of my novel when my supervisor and I realised that stylistically and in terms of content it was aimed at a youth audience. Many of the topics that I address are not limited to a particular culture, but are focused on a particular period in a person's development. As such they are not only relevant in a larger South African context than just that of a particular Indian community, but also to a youth audience beyond South Africa.

Carlsen, in *Books and the Teen-age Reader*, says, "The content of a book should somehow be related to the young person's social and personal skills" (1971:21). All the key elements of my story do seem to me to have this characteristic.

Firstly, consider Shanthi. She represents new attitudes towards sexuality, which in her case lead her to becoming pregnant whilst still a teenager. This is a very real and common occurrence in society, one most teenagers are aware of in one way or another. Often the issue is focused on the girl in question, but I wanted to show that it affects both male and female adolescents, as I try to portray in my depiction of Shanthi's husband-to-be.

Then there is the character of Suraj, Kajal's brother. A youth audience would understand what he is going through. They will relate to his decision to keep the stolen cell phones, his annoyance with his old-fashioned grandmother, and his moody behaviour. In his changing behaviour, he represents the shifting morals and values of the youth in contemporary South Africa.

Lastly, there is the issue of arranged marriage. Although considered outdated and old fashioned by some, this practice still occurs within the South African Indian community as well, of course, as in India and in much of the Indian diaspora. Even though relatively few people may relate to the idea of an arranged marriage, I think the appeal of Kajal's character stems largely from her quiet determination to carry out her dream in the face of adversity. She is faced with the decision of either being happy or

making her parents happy. Ultimately, Kajal has to balance her loyalty to her family with her own aspirations, something which many young adults experience. I did not want this tension to be resolved melodramatically (Kajal quickly rejects the idea of running away, for example), but in an ordinary manner with which a comparatively broad youth audience could identify. I hope I have achieved this.

Initially I thought that the young adult market would consist of anyone between the ages of 12 years to 17 years. However, my supervisor suggested that I try and determine how the publishing industry represented this audience. So, I did a library search and was glad to find two 'technical' books that go into detail on how the teenage - reader market is divided and the factors one should consider when writing for this audience.

One I have referred to already. Carlsen (1971:23 - 30) discusses the stages of reading development from early adolescence to late adolescence. According to him, early adolescents (children aged 11 to 14) read animal stories as well as adventures and mysteries. Middle adolescents (15 and 16 year olds) enjoy non-fiction adventure, biographies, and stories of adolescent life. He suggests that this type of literature becomes a way for the teenager to test possible solutions to his/her personal problems.

Carlsen says that late adolescence may occur between the last two years of school till the time when the teenager (now young adult) enters the working world. People at this stage of their life read material that will help them in their search for meaning and direction.

I was happy to find that if I used Carlsen's categories as a guide to selecting a target audience for my story, they would be the middle to late adolescent audience i.e. anyone aged 15 to 18 years. The outer edge of this age group is precisely the one my story deals with. In my novel I take the reader into this world and I hope one reason my intended audience would relate to the material is because they would be at approximately the same point in their lives.

However, I don't think that one can categorise children and young adult readers into neat sections. There are so many factors that may influence a child's choice of reading material. These factors may be anything from broad social ones to the particular level of, say, the parents' education.

More important for me then was Doubtfire's advice. When writing for a youth audience, she says, "the greatest danger is to talk down or moralise" (Doubtfire, 1982: 63). I absolutely agree with this statement because teenagers hate being reprimanded and being told what to do. If a writer takes on a dominating or lecturing tone, the teenage reader will be irritated and not read the book. Therefore a writer will have to write in a way that will win over their confidence.

In my story I have the older characters, such as Kajal's parents, her grandmother, and her aunts and uncles, do things that would annoy or irritate a teenager. For example, Suraj hates the pet name that his granny persists on calling him. Also, both Kajal's father and her uncle comment on the boys' use of gel to style their hair. Their granny constantly picks on the unruly behaviour of the youth in general, their disregard for culture and their taste in music. I think that a youth audience would find this relevant because they probably get similar reactions from the grown ups around them.

Both Carlsen and Doubtfire say that for a successful youth novel, the writer should write from the personal viewpoint of one character rather than the objective third person. When I started my novel I was not aware that it would be aimed at a youth audience. As I have mentioned earlier, my supervisor and I came to this conclusion only some way into the writing process. So, I cannot say that I began writing with the intended audience in mind. My objective was to write an honest story about an Indian girl living in Durban. I chose to start the narrative with the main character taking a taxi home from town because it was something that I did almost every day of my undergraduate year. Since I had started writing from Kajal's perspective – a modified version of my own - I just unconsciously continued in this mode. I basically wrote through this character's eyes i.e. everything she saw, as well as her reactions to the world around her.

I should point out though, that even though I drew some of Kajal's experiences, such as the taxi ride and the family functions, from my own, this work of fiction is not autobiographical. I just felt the story would be better grounded if I wrote about experiences close to me.

4. References and tools

References

The list of references that appears at the end of this essay consists of non-fictional and fictional books, films, and Internet websites. These media have assisted me in the writing of my story and a summary of each one appears in the journal. Of the fictional works I have read, I will give a summary of four, focusing mainly on a comparison of the characters in these novels to the characters in my own. The novels are: Rukshana Smith's *Salt on the Snow* (1988), Jeannette Winterson's *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), and Marguerite Poland's *Train to Doringbult* (1987) and *Shades* (1993).

Salt on the Snow is about the friendship between two women from very different backgrounds. Rashmi has been brought to London by her brother. He lies to her that he is a successful restaurateur and that she and their sick will live a life of luxury compared to the one they have in India. On arrival she finds that he is actually a waiter, his wife has divorced him and, she has to take care of his daughter. She feels trapped especially since she cannot speak English. Rashmi begs her brother to send her for English learning classes, but he says that he can't afford it.

Julie has had to rewrite a paper in her final school exams. This has resulted in her waiting a year to apply to college. She works part time and decides to volunteer at the community centre. Her father and brother are racist and very dominating. Julie and Rashmi become friends when Julie is sent as an English tutor to Rashmi's house. Since it is a free service, Rashmi's brother has no complaints. Julie is constantly bothered by her brother and his gang of racist thugs. The situation goes out of control when Julie falls in love with Rashmi's cousin, Vijay. The novel ends when both Julie and Vijay are run over by Julie's brothers' gang.

This novel is relevant to my work because Julie and Kajal share a belief in education as a means of escape and independence. Their family units are also the same. Julie has a brother, just like Kajal; both their mothers are subservient and their fathers dominating. Julie's father sees education as a waste of time and suggests that she get married instead. Kajal's father coerces her into marriage because he wants to keep his position of authority.

Rashmi and Kajal are both Hindi. They are very loyal to their families, but they also want to be liberated from their situations within their families. I enjoyed this book, largely because of the similar traits and circumstances that the characters share with the characters in my novel.

My supervisor suggested that I read *Oranges are Not The Only Fruit* because it was the author's first novel and also because it is ostensibly aimed at a young adult audience. Jeanette is adopted by a childless couple. Her foster mother is obsessed with religion and sees everything different from her beliefs as the work of the devil. Her foster father is a very quiet man who does not share his wife's religious enthusiasm. Jeannette realises that she is attracted to other women. Her mother finds out about this and pronounces her demon possessed, thus making her life miserable. She eventually leaves home. At the end of the novel she returns home after her mother apologises to her and accepts her for who she is.

This character and her family situation differ very much from Kajal's. Jeanette moves out of the house when her mother does not accept her decision. Kajal dismisses the thought of running away from home and, at one point, even considers giving in to her father's decision. I think that the difference in the attitude of these characters has a lot to do with the structure of their families. Jeannette rarely communicates with her parents; they lead separate lives. Kajal stems from a very close-knit family, to whom she feels obligated.

My supervisor also suggested the last two novels. He thought that *Shades* would be relevant to my work since it is the set book for this year's KwaZulu-Natal matriculants i.e. a young adult audience. We discussed a few of Poland's novels and I decided to do a comparison of her young adult novel in comparison with a work of adult fiction that she also wrote. The adult novel I chose is *Train to Doringbult*.

One can determine the intended audience of these two novels by the characters and the story. In *Shades* the main characters are Victor, Crispin, Frances, and Walter. Walter, an assistant priest, is the oldest at 30 years old and the other three are under 23 years, with Frances being the youngest at 18. The story is told predominantly from Walter's point of view. It revolves around these characters and their relationships with each other. Walter is in love with Frances, but she and Victor are in love with each other.

Seeing this, Walter chooses to keep his feelings to himself. However, Frances eventually finds out that he loves her and realises that she has feelings for him too. The novel is also about friendship, loyalty, and honour. This novel is aimed at a youth or young adult audience because the issues raised here are relevant to this age group. Also, the characters in the novel are at a point in their lives where they make decisions that will affect their future.

The main characters in *Train to Doringbult* are Jan and Elsa, a married couple who live on a farm with their little daughter and their employees. The story differs greatly when compared to the story in *Shades*. As a result of a drought and poor financial circumstances Jan goes to work away from home on a dam project. Here he has an affair and falls in love with another woman. Elsa is unaware of this and remains his doting wife, managing the farm. Jan returns home once the drought ends and initially the relationship between he and Elsa is strained. He becomes even more upset when he finds out that his mistress has married her fiancée. However, he soon accepts his situation and moves on. The characters in this novel are more mature than those in *Shades*. Their circumstances also differ and are much more serious. It is for this reason I would say that this novel is aimed at an adult audience rather than the youth market.

The films that I have referenced are relevant because they all deal with the issue of arranged marriage. *East is East* is about a Muslim family living in England. The mother is white and the father Pakistani. He organises an arranged marriage for two of his sons and they refuse. This sparks a lot of trouble within the family because the father says that his children are embarrassing him in front of their relatives. The character of the father is similar to that of Kajal's father in that he appears very complex. At one point he seems as if he would do anything for his children and then he forces them to conform to his beliefs. The father eventually gives in because his children tell him that they just won't get married to strangers.

In the film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* the father of the elite and wealthy Raichand family arranges for his son to marry the daughter of his friend. The son, Rahul, has however fallen in love with a poor girl from a simple family. His father is furious when he finds out and orders him to immediately break up with this girl because she isn't from their social class. Rahul refuses to do so and marries the girl. He leaves his parents

and relocates to London. As a result of the efforts of Rahul's younger brother, Rohan, the family eventually reunite and the father apologises for his behaviour. Here again we see that the issue of arranged marriage is usually a forced one, which is not very favourably received by the child involved.

Monsoon Wedding is totally different from the two films I have just discussed. In this film the main character, Adithi, is having an affair with a married man, Vikram. Her parents, oblivious to this, arrange for her to marry a rich engineer from America. Adithi remains intent on continuing the affair, and sneaks out after her engagement to meet her lover. Then his wife phones him to find out where he is, and he leaves Adithi stranded in the middle of the night. She realises that he doesn't really love her and decides to tell her fiancée what happened. He forgives her and they get married.

The main character in this film is similar to Kajal in that they both despise the idea of an arranged marriage. Kajal does not want an arranged marriage because she wants to do more with her life than marry a total stranger. Adithi, on the other hand, only despises an arranged marriage because it is with someone else rather than Vikram. This film plays with the conventional way in which Indian cinema tends to treat the subject of arranged marriage. Adithi's parents do not coerce her into marrying; they merely suggest the idea and she agrees. Unlike most Bollywood films, which usually focus on the tension between parents and child as they disagree with each other, this film shows the main character recognising her parent's wisdom even as she makes up her own mind.

In my search for works of contemporary South African Indian fiction, I recently discovered a column in the *Sunday Times* newspaper which I found relevant to my work. The column, written by radio personality and Carte Blanche journalist Ms Devi Sankaree Govender, is made up of short stories about a contemporary South African Indian community. I thoroughly enjoyed Govender's work because the content was so authentic and fresh. I e-mailed her in an attempt to find out whether she had published the stories and if I could perhaps use her work as a reference. She replied and told me that she had not published any of her stories outside of the newspaper format. When I asked her why, she said that she just hadn't considered publication in book form. I think that she is quite fortunate, anyway, to be able to use the newspaper column as a means of getting through to an audience.

The website that I have listed are sites that I visited to get some insight into the way other people write. One particular site is www.angelfire.com. The information given here was helpful as well as entertaining. The site provides tips and suggestions on how one can generate ideas when experiencing a 'block' in their flow of creative ideas. One tip that I found useful was to just start writing about anything. The idea is that you don't consider grammar or punctuation, because if you stop and dwell on a particular section, you will break your chain of thought.

Other useful sites were www.paragraphpunch.com, which gives information on how one should write academic texts such as theses and dissertations, as well as creative writing texts such as novels and poetry, and www.empirezine.com, which contains a host of articles on various literary topics as well as reviews of novels.

Tools

The editing course I recently attended at the University of Natal Press has helped my proof reading and given me better insight to the editing process as a whole. I tried to apply the skills I learnt in the editing of my own work. This I found more difficult than I would have thought, however, the main reason being that like most writers I have become too familiar with my writing and tended to overlook quite obvious mistakes at times.

The lecturer in the editing course first discussed 'Editorial Hats.' Of the many points covered, I related these three to my novel:

Recognising language appropriate for the intended audience. The target audience for my novel is the late adolescent group. When editing, I had to ensure that the language I had used was appropriate for the target audience and characteristic of the community.

Noting inconsistencies, for example time, facts, etc. This made me check my story for temporal and spatial consistency. I was especially concerned with sections in which my transitions covered several days at a time when I wished to move from one important event to another. My task then was to ensure that the reader understood the transition.

Identifying and correcting errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and style. In this regard, I have constantly been checking to see if my spelling was correct. My supervisor also suggested that I remove unnecessary semicolons and rather split the

sentence into two individual sentences. This would make the sentences shorter and more appropriate in structure for my intended audience.

As far as general stylistic issues are concerned, I was most aware of concentrating on the following: dialogue, pace, 'chiming' words (to use my supervisor's terminology), sentence structure, imprecise vocabulary, and consistency.

Dialogue. My text contains a lot of dialogue. This is because I preferred to give the reader a sense of what was happening through the characters' speech rather than telling them indirectly. Using dialogues also helped me create a sense of the community I was writing about. I did this by using particular words that are common in the speech of this community. An example appears on page 2, where the 'regulars' use the word 'buckled.' This is a common slang word in the South African Indian community, meaning married. Another example appears on page 45. Saras uses the expression, 'Oiyó', which is a typical Indian expression, particularly if the speaker is Tamil. Finally, the use of dialogue has helped me create the interesting distinction between each character. Saras' character is loud and her dialogue usually consists of her speaking in one breath, giving other characters little chance to contribute. Her husband, however, has no real speaking part. This actually defines his character as that of a reserved and quiet man.

Pace. In my text I have used the spaces in the text to pace the story. These break up the scenes and action into cohesive units, helping to control the flow and focus the material. Again, this is intended to help readers of a particular age group.

'Chiming' words. This is the term my supervisor uses for words that are repeated too closely to each other, creating a jarring effect. This is not always easy to pick up in the writing process, but I have learned how one must train oneself to 'hear' one's work as well. Literally read out loud, this problem becomes more obvious, but one must develop an 'ear' for one's prose as one edits. Once I was aware of this, I discovered many instances where I had erred in this regard. The solution was to replace one of the repeated words with another, or find ways to leave them out altogether.

Sentence structure. When I started writing I wrote sentences that all tended to be very similar in structure, especially as far as representing dialogue is concerned. I learned to break sentences up by moving the tag to different positions, and try out alternative

sentence formulations that prevented my style from becoming too obvious and even monotonous.

Imprecise vocabulary. One of the most important parts of editing became finding exactly the right word for the meaning to be conveyed. This was crucial for figurative language and accuracy in description. It was also, of course, a major part of getting the dialogue correct, for often the words in question both conveyed information and defined character.

Consistency. Details like the use of lower case or capitals for currency, and family terminology (Dad/dad) needed much attention in my final editing.

The editing exercises and readers report activity we were given at the editing course was very beneficial to my work. I was able to edit someone else's work and was exposed to errors that I had overlooked in my own writing e.g. missing full stops and incomplete quotation marks.

Reading the text we were given as homework gave me a distance from constantly editing my own work. Up until then I had read my novel almost everyday in search of errors and had become too familiar with the text – thus overlooking errors and taking the content for granted. After the course I returned to my editing and found that I was able to locate errors and problem areas more easily.

To end: as I mentioned at the beginning, this essay is to serve as a summary and conclusion to the journal I kept while working on my fiction. The journal was extremely helpful in that it gave me the space to jot down new ideas, update plot development, and remind myself of sections that needed reworking. Most of all, the journal now allows me to look back at how far I have come in the writing process. It is a record of what I have achieved and the stressful and enjoyable processes that went into the final product, *Kajal's Story*.

FILMS

1. *East is East*. 1999. Director: Damien O' Donnell.
2. *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*. 2001. Director: Karan Johar.
3. *Monsoon Wedding*. 2001. Director: Mira Nair.

INTERNET WEBSITES

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