

It's You!



VISHAKHA

short stories by
Subhashish Bhadra

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By Subhashish Bhadra

**To my parents. I'd be nothing
without you!**

I have seen, first-hand, the consequences of not resisting. It hadn't struck me, till my sister sat me down the night before her engagement. She tried to make me understand that she was moving into a new house, with a family she was expected to get accustomed to in a few days; to share her joys, sorrows, living space and everything else with a man she had met just a few months back. She said that it would be a monumental shift in her life, and that she needed my support to make that transformation less painful. I think that conversation shook me up. I was as concerned about her, as I was worried about my own future. I realized that one day, I would also have to make a similar transition.

Everyone in the family was quite happy for my sister, though. It took a long time to find the proverbial 'suitable boy'. There were those who asked for dowry. I was shocked, honestly. I didn't know that it existed even today, and what was scary was the sheer scale of it. Forget cars and electronics, here they were talking about bungalows and the like. It made no sense to me. My sister is a working woman, and would have contributed even financially to her household and taken care of several expenses anyway. Others were even more obnoxious – many asked my sister to quit her job. 'For the family', they said. Bullshit! What irked me even more was that many of these families were from metropolitan cities, and for them to display such mentality can only be termed regressive. At best. I was busy with my studies, and hence my family kept me at a distance from the discussions. But I could see my parents, especially my mother, breaking under the

pressure. Every night, I would see her go to bed seemingly much older than when she had woken up.

Finally, a suitable boy was found. There was no dowry demand, and no 'request' to quit the job. My sister was happy since her independence would be preserved. Ma was happy because the family seemed to be well-mannered and humble. I was happy because Ma and di were happy. Every time di went out with jiju before their engagement, I could see that di was having a good time. Jiju showered her more love than I'd ever seen in real life. According to Ma, it was a match made in heaven – and after a long period of tough searching. I grudgingly concurred.

My life, however, was so different. Being the younger sister, and one born at the cusp of liberalization of the economy, I seemed to have grown up in a different world. My sister had attended a girls' school and a girls' college; I had an equal number of male and female friends. The electronics' good industry in India, and the internet, grew up with me. When I was passing out of school, I was considering more options than my sister knew even existed. My parents also grew up with me. I remember the resistance they put up to my sister's first mobile; mine was an overnight decision – firstly, because there was more money and secondly, well ... because they no more thought of it as a forbidden luxury.

My sister told me often how jealous she felt of my life. She said there was so much vibrancy, so much colour; and she'd taunt me often.

One day, while peeling the vegetables in the kitchen, she suddenly asked 'So, which one of the guys are you dating?'

I stopped, and looked at her with eyes wide open.

'Don't look at me like that' she said nonchalantly "I saw how you were cozying up in that photo".

"Oh, c'mon di! Don't talk like Ma!"

"Fine. I won't" she said. Then, after a brief pause, she asked "But which of the three is it?" Then she started laughing.

At that point, I didn't know which one of the three it was. Yes, don't get exasperated, there's always a love story. But I'll come to that later. Life was cruising along – I was having good fun with my bunch of friends and at home preparations for the marriage were on in full swing. I explored more of Delhi in those three months – with friends, and for shopping – than I had for the first nineteen years of my life.

It all climaxed on the most awesome day of my life till then – the marriage day! To say that I was busy would be an understatement. Ma was too busy with the arrangements, and I was the one entrusted to give di company, while at the

same time having to meet and greet all guests, especially the annoying kids who came with their parents.

'How're you feeling?' I asked her.

She was putting on her earrings. "Happy, I suppose. Maybe a bit nervous".

"I guess it all turns out good in the end, hai na? Jiju is so much better than those a... those guys we saw before".

"I suppose" she nodded "By that logic, you should already start looking Oh wait, you've already found three. You just have to choose".

At that very moment, my group of friends, 'those three' included, entered the room. They greeted di and me, and then sat down in the room.

Di called me aside "Vishu, why don't you take your three boys out?"

"Di! Not today!"

"Arre, baccha. I'm serious. Ma will get angry if she sees them here".

I then understood. It was one of those things you need to be careful about because you never know how people will

respond. I made an excuse and took my six friends out of the room. Then we went downstairs and chatted, while the guys hogged on the food, of course.

Let me introduce 'the three' at the point. Sid, Nick and Chirag. Sid was a Delhiite, while Nick and Chirag came from Maharashtra. Over the couple of years, I'd just grown so fond of the three of them. To di's question of 'which one', I'd never thought about it and didn't want to think about it either.

Then I went back to get di downstairs. The marriage was solemnized and the rest of the ceremonies happened. The *bidai*, as always, was tearful. Though, for the first time, I understood the sheer magnitude of the change, given firstly that it was my own sister this time and secondly the conversation my sister had had with me before the engagement. However, di leaving didn't make much of a difference to my daily life. Di had never been my best friend, plus Ma was always around anyway.

It was the middle of my college life, and things at college had begun to change. Doesn't it always happen that as you grow older with a person, you suddenly notice his or her faults? Our group of seven first became six, and then came down to five. Nick and Sneha left the gang. The rest were around, but it really didn't feel the same anymore.

Except Chirag. We grew closer. As our group disintegrated, we remained firmly together as the nucleus. He became my partner-in-crime, my emotional bedrock; even as the rest of college was transforming. He would often joke how amazing it'd be if we, the best of friends, were to get married; and for once, I began to dream. He explained the benefits to me like a salesman would – the familiarity, the history, the love, and the basic fact that we were so accustomed to each others' presence and had been through so much. At times I began to wish that he was more serious about it. I took it as a joke, and probably so did he.

One sultry afternoon when I reached back home, Ma didn't open the door. I rang the bell and waited. No response. I took out my phone and called Ma; her phone was busy. I waited outside for half an hour, and only then was I able to connect to Ma.

"Ma, open the door!" I screamed into the phone.

I heard my Ma rush to open the door. "Sorry, beta" she said.

"What happened, ma? Who were you talking to?"

"Hmmm ... Rashi"

"What happened? Everything okay with di?"

"Well She's expecting" Ma said with a broad smile.

“ARE YOU SERIOUS?” I was almost jumping with joy.

“Yes, beta. She wants to speak to you. Go call her.”

I immediately rang up di that day. She was as nervous, and more excited, as the day she got married. Nervous about how she would manage her job with maternity; and happy because she knew that Ma, I, jiju and everyone else were so happy about it.

Chirag and the rest of the gang were equally enthused. None of them had elder sisters, so nobody had had an expectant sibling.

While dropping me back after a party one evening, Chirag asked me “How does it feel?”

“What’s there to feel?”

“Must feel so different, right? Just a few days back, your sister was like a little child to your Ma; and now all grown up.”

“I never thought of it that ways. Sometimes, I feel she’s still too young. She’s barely twenty three”

“Ha ha ... you’re going to hit twenty one” he laughed “before your parents marry you off, I’m telling you we should start dating.”

“Yeah, right!”

That joke kept getting more frequent, and I more serious about it. There were days that I wanted him to say ‘no kidding’ and then say the same things. I could never be sure otherwise.

Things got tough, however, once di got heavily pregnant. It became painful to see how restricted her movement was; and for her to have to go to work with that. I told her to take leave from her job, but apparently you need leave after childbirth anyway, and di didn’t want to be gone for too long. I volunteered to stay with her as often as I could, and I’d go visit her and take care of her. But I couldn’t always be there, and neither could Ma.

“Why don’t you ask someone from jiju’s family to visit?” I asked her while I was with her.

“I tried asking. They said they’re busy.”

“What? Aren’t they excited about the baby?” I said.

“They are” she said “hence they want me to leave the job and go stay with them.”

“And you don’t want to do that?”

“Vishu, you know how much I love this job! There’s no question of leaving.”

“Then, what does jiju say?”

“He says he’ll talk to his boss to take leave himself. But he can’t ask his mom and sis to come here”

“Why not?”

“Well ... he didn’t really give me a reason.”

That day I discovered another side of jiju. Yes, he loved my sister a lot. But he didn’t quite love her as much to stand up against his own family.

“I can understand. It’s not easy to go against the people who you owe your life to” Chirag said, when I told him about what happened.

“How can you say that, *yaar*? It’s your wife you’re talking about”

“But it’s your mom on the other side!”

“You make promises to your wife while getting married, not to your mom while taking birth!”

‘I know, baba. I’m not saying he’s doing the right thing. I’m just saying it’s not unusual.”

“Fine! Justify him!” I said, as I got up in a huff and stormed out of the park.

He texted me a while later: *Please don’t misunderstand me. I wouldn’t do it if I were him, but I can’t blame him for doing it.* What was Chirag thinking! It made me all the more angry. I didn’t reply, and neither did I talk to him for a couple of weeks.

What I like most about Chirag, however, is his perseverance and his ability to make me smile. A few weeks later, while I was walking back to the bus stand after class, he caught up with me.

“Ma Kali, is your anger finally gone?”

I couldn’t resist laughing. “Shut up!”

“Your jijaji does all these things and poor me; I’ve to suffer!” he said.

“Let’s not discuss him.”

“Let’s go have ice cream?”

“Not today, yaar. I’ve to go buy some stuff. Tomorrow?”

“Oh. We’re re-starting dating tomorrow? I’m all game!”

“Idiot!”

True to the plan, we did go out for ice-cream the next day, and it seemed as if my world had started moving again. I realized how much I missed him while we weren’t talking.

Di’s troubles, meanwhile, continued. The pressure from her in-laws to quit her job continued. One day, she finally broke down and called me. She just cried for a couple of minutes. I was stupefied, not knowing what to say.

“Di, why are you crying?”

“Vishu, I don’t Don’t want to tell ma. But I’m feeling so ... so caged right now.”

“Di, talk to jiju?”

“I don’t want to bother him” she cried, barely able to speak
“He says ... says that he’s being troubled on both sides ... by me and by his Ma ... and that ... that he wants to just leave everything and go.”

“Di, please don’t cry. I’ll come meet you right away.”

This was the first time di broke down while talking to me. She wasn’t really my childhood hero, but I admired her will to live a happy life. I respected the fact that with half the resources that I had access to, she had done so well for herself; and that she had taken care of the entire family. To see an independent woman of strength, of substance, break down like that wasn’t the most pleasant experience.

It was late evening, so I had to tell Ma that I was going for a party with Chirag; otherwise moving out of home so late was out of bounds. On the way, I thought to myself how much life had recently taught me. I used to think that the world had progressed, that our nation had progressed. I’d stop short of calling it gender discrimination, but our country isn’t as liberated as I used to think it is. My sister’s career was of secondary concern to her family; even jiju turned out to be a spineless husband. Plus, why should my sister have to depend on jiju to be able to fight her battles? I was waiting to explode. Somewhere, somehow.

At that moment, I knew only one person I’d want to talk to.

“Chirag, di is crying”

“About the baby and job thing?”

“Yeah”

“I think you should ask her to push for an extended leave” he said “why don’t you get uncle, or her husband, to talk to her office?”

“But why should she take leave, yaar?” I shouted, already frustrated “Why can’t her bloody in-laws just come?”

“Vishakha, I understand, but ...”

“Listen, Chirag. I think it was a mistake to start talking to you. You’re just like them. Just like them.”

With that, I kept the phone. I buried my face in my hands and began to cry. Suddenly, I felt angry towards everything. I felt ashamed at myself – the guy I had thought of dating also subscribed to that regressive mindset.

I reached di’s place and stayed over at night; I told ma that I was staying over at my friends’ home. I bunked my first class the next day to accompany di to her workplace. Then, I went to college.

As soon as I entered, I saw Chirag standing there. I glanced at him for a moment, and then walked away angrily. He began to follow me.

“Listen, Vishakha” he said.

“I don’t want to hear anything!”

I walked into one of the corridors, almost empty because classes had started. He held my hand, and I stopped.

“Vishakha, listen to me, will you!”

I didn’t speak.

“You can’t keep taking me wrongly!” he said angrily “I said what I said because that’s the best you can do for your sister right now. God damn it, why do you not get it! You can either keep hoping that everyone’s going to behave the way you want them to, or you can do the best *given* the situation.”

I think I finally understood what he meant. My anger waned.

“And just so that you know. I’d not let someone do that to you, whether we’re together or not. You’re my best friend, and I’m not going to let anything make you unhappy ...”

Was it that my heartbeat was getting faster? With the comfort of hindsight, I would say yes.

“... because I love you. No kidding, I do ...” he said “... and I can’t imagine spending my life with anybody else.”

He came forward and kissed me.

How do I describe how I felt! Firstly, it just didn't seem real. I had been waiting and anticipating the moment for a long time, but I didn't know it was going to happen that day and in such fashion. I'd probably have been prepared on any other day, just not that day. My world, and my hope in the world, came back to me in that split second of a kiss. I found my bulwark again, and I was raring to ride against the waves once more.

Both of us bunked class that day. We went to our favourite spot in the world – the park right next to college. There was no more intimacy, no holding of hands and all that. I was just happy to have my friend back, and to now know that I'm going to be with my best friend, hopefully for the rest of my life.

It's been three months since we've been married, and everything from that day till today has been beautiful. It amazes me how that one feeling – of someone being there, of hope – can be so powerful to keep me happy even at the dullest of times.

Things weren't always rosy, though. Two years after college ended, when Chirag told his parents about us, and our intention to get married, they balked.

“They said I'm too young for marriage” Chirag told me on phone that night.

“What did you say?”

“I said that I’m just increasing the probability of them seeing their grandchildren.”

“Ha ha Did they buy that?”

“What do you think”

“No” I said.

“You know them as well as you know me, it seems”

“Don’t joke now” I said “what will you do now?”

“Let me talk to them some more.”

“Do it fast? Ma has been asking me about it since I told her” I said “and given how much time and effort it took with di, she wants us to get engaged quickly.”

“I’ll do that”

His parents resisted for long. Chirag told me that apart from us being young, they weren’t comfortable with the caste difference either; plus the fact that he is from Maharashtra and I from Punjab.

Ma was getting restless that time. The memory of what happened with di was still fresh in her mind. Di had to fight with jiju day and night during her pregnancy, and it was only after the baby was born did things cool down. Ma didn't want me to go through that, so she kept pushing me to talk to Chirag. One day, she finally put an ultimatum before me.

While I was getting ready for office, she came into my room
"Vishakha beta, give me Chirag's number?"

"What! Why?"

"I need to talk to him" she said "he can't keep us waiting forever."

I fought with mom for over half an hour, but she insisted that she wanted to talk. Finally, not being able to keep up the argument, I relented. I gave her the number, and immediately left for work. I kept trying Chirag's number while in the auto, but it was engaged.

After an hour or so, I could finally get through to him.

"Hey! Ma talked to you?"

"Yes"

"I hope she didn't push you too much. Did she?"

“Not more than she should have.”

“Did she shout?”

“No”

“Did she ask to speak to your parents?”

“Yes”

“Oh God!” I exclaimed “What did you do?”

“I assured her that we’re getting married one way or the other”

“Ha ha Did she buy that?”

“I suppose”

I was surprised. It wasn’t ma as I knew her. “Really? She did? What did you tell her?”

“I told what I told you back in college. That I love you; and I can’t imagine my life without you; and that I’ll convince mom and dad. I’d love to have them agree, but even if they don’t, we’ll be together.”

I now understood what convinced ma - the earnestness in Chirag’s voice. True to his word, he tried relentlessly to

convince his parents. They finally agreed. There's probably a limit to which parents argue with professionally successful kids.

On the eve of my marriage, I remembered the conversation I had with di the night before her engagement. I didn't feel any of the nervousness that she did. I was moving in with a guy I'd known all these years, with whom I had spent my most formative years. In college and after that, we shared our secrets, our fears, our judgements and everything else. I was experiencing the purest form of happiness.

Today, as I look back at my life, I am amazed at how lucky I have been. I might be speaking too early, but I haven't had to go through nearly as much as di had to. Yes, sometimes I get the feeling that my in-laws haven't been totally accepting of me, but I live with that fact knowing that Chirag will always stand up for me. I feel free – free to choose what I do, who I meet, how I live my life. I can still go meet Sid alone, and not have to either hide or justify that. I don't need to either inform or take permissions for anything. I feel free.

I also realized what true love is. I used to think that care and concern, such as jiju's towards di, is love. But now I realize that isn't enough. True love is one that liberates, true love is one that gives you strength to do what you want to. Chirag and I have tiffs, like any other couple does. But at any time, I know that he'll be there to fight against the entire world for me.

In love, you don't need a superman. You just need a partner-in-crime, a best friend. That's necessary, and sufficient.