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Hunger Wrapped in Silk and Gold

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Around 7:30 p.m., every neighbor around my husband's suburban home in Kolkata heard the news as the doctor's wife across the street called out for my mother-in-law at the top of her voice.

"Listen, Sita's mother just called me. Your phone is not working. She said that Sita must be at the American visa office sharply at 10:00 a.m. tomorrow. She should stop by the British Airways office beforehand. They have her ticket." I was relieved. Since I was applying for Ph.D. programs in the U.S. before I got married, all consulate communications were going to my parents' address. I married, the regular arranged marriage, about a month ago and was looking forward to going to the U.S. soon. My parents, who lived nearby, insisted on my spending most of the time with my in-laws.

It was about 9:30 p.m. when I sat down to the five course dinner with my mother-in-law. Each item contained fish in some form or other as Bengalis love fish. Unfortunately, I never got used to it.

"Just give me one small fish with curry sauce for the rice" I asked Nimai, the man-servant serving us. The house had only three permanent residents, but at least six servants. Nimai was about my age and I was sort of scared of him. Everybody suspected that he was the one who stole my heaviest gold necklace right after the wedding.

Refusing fish was a bad omen to my mother-in-law, but I had a lot on my mind. Tomorrow, I would have to leave home by 7:15 a.m. to reach the British Airways office in central Kolkata. Later, clearance papers had to be obtained from the Reserve Bank of India. Since I earned scholarship money, had a bank account, and would carry a substantial amount of jewelry out of the country, I had to have proper papers. My uncle knew somebody in that office who promised to help me to get them quickly and without bribes.

"Ma, who will go with me tomorrow?" I asked my mother-in-law.

"Don't worry. Pratik will go with you." Pratik, about four years older than me, was my brother-in-law.

My husband had already filed papers for his Green Card. I had never seen him waking up before noon, an aftermath of his late night parties.

I left the table hungry. After a fitful night of sleep, I woke up before dawn, but stayed in bed looking over my papers and running through every possible scenario. Before going to the bathroom around 6:00 a.m., I looked into my mother-in-law's room.

"Ma, Pratik is coming with me, right?" I asked. Her face was grave.

"I am not sure. Your husband promised him a Green Card a while ago. Now, you are going before him. Your father-in-law is not feeling well either. Looks like you have to postpone your journey." My father-in-law entered the room with an even graver face. It was not my fault that U.S. Government gave priorities to wives over brothers, particularly ones without advanced skills.

I grew up in this city and knew most of the streets like the back of my hand – actually my feet knew. I could go anywhere by public transportation without anybody's help. However, since my marriage I was a prisoner, not allowed to leave the house without an escort. I went to the bathroom, showered with ice-cold water and got dressed.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to break a taboo. Indian brides were not even allowed to show their full face to their brothers-in-law. Surreptitiously, I went downstairs and knocked on Pratik's door requesting him to escort me. There was no reply. As I was about to give up, Nimai opened the front door from outside and was on his way up the stairs. Suddenly, he turned around.

"I can come with you to the Consulate." I found this solution somewhat uncomfortable, but the only feasible one.

"Hey, if everything goes well, I will give you one hundred rupees." Even in the darkness, his eyes shone. I would have to get rid of him in the middle of my errands, to avoid giving him any inkling about the money and the jewelry I would be carrying late in the evening. I left most of the jewelry with my mother and would pick them up from my father's office. I knew that Nimai would be able to manage my mother-in-law. We found her sitting at the dining table sipping her morning tea.

"May I take Nimai with me to the Consulate?" I said.

"How can you? He has to cook." As I mumbled away, Nimai took over. He argued about what the neighbors

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might say if she did not let me go. Finally, she conceded. Perhaps she thought that I would not be able to get the papers any other way. The day before giving her the chance to do this, I left the house with Nimai immediately without any breakfast.

My first stop was at the British Airways office. The agent explained the process and gave me a copy of the ticket for the consulate. I called my mother from his private office and explained the plan to her.

“Sita, at this agency, no other traveler has ever managed to get the paperwork done within a day. Good luck to you.” the agent said.

The visa interview for immigration went without a hitch. With the visa in hand, we arrived at my father’s office around 1:00 p.m. As a government officer, he worked at a prominent building in central Kolkata. It was time to get rid of Nimai for a while.

“Come back here by 5:00 p.m. and wait for me in the lobby of the building. I will be fine with my father.” I said, as I tucked a twenty rupee bill in his palm. After picking up my stash of jewelry I received as a dowry, I went to the Reserve Bank with my uncle’s friend. I had to show them to the bank officer to get the Indian export certification. The rest of the afternoon was a blur. I remember walking along streets and corridors of several office buildings and waiting for hours. My uncle’s friend managed to get me necessary certificates. I called my mother from my father’s office.

“You should go straight to the British Airways office. The office is now closed, but the guard will open the door for you and the agent will wait inside. I have left a message for your mother-in-law that you will be home late” my mother said. I started sobbing, hearing her strong voice.

“You know, you should have let me stay with you. I had no proper food other than a cup of tea since last evening. I am not even sure that my mother-in-law will let me go to the airport tomorrow. She tried to throw enough roadblocks today.” I said

“Don’t worry. We will be there with a taxi bright and early” my mother said.

After picking up the ticket, we arrived home around 9:00 p.m. travelling by public transportation. I did not dare to take a taxi alone with Nimai.

“May I have something to eat?” I asked.

“How can you expect to have anything here? You must have had a feast at your mother’s place” my mother-in-law said smoothly.

“I never went there.” I said. I noticed the dinner set aside for Pratik on the sideboard. It was 24 hours without food.

I could not sleep because of hunger. Next morning, the house was full of neighbors and relatives. My parents came with a large box of sweets. Now, it would be impossible to stop or make me late from taking that flight. My mother-in-law turned on her charms for my parents. Yet, I could not manage to get hold of any food. Everything was intercepted. We left for the airport by 9:30 a.m. I managed to sit between my parents. My mother-in-law insisted on my wearing the pink silk wedding sari.

I heard that the food during the first leg, a ten hour-long, Kolkata to London flight, was really good. However, after the snack of orange juice and nuts, I fell asleep and missed the lunch. It was more than 48 hours without much food.

After going through immigration at London, two big agents carried my suitcases to the terminal of the U.S. departure and I followed them. I wished I could stop them, take out one of the discs of date palm sugar, special gifts for my husband, and devour it. But they would be solid as a brick. I was carrying eight dollars in cash, maximum allowed for travelers, and dared not spend that emergency money. After ten hours of lay-over at London, I boarded the plane to Washington D.C. for another eight hour long flight. It was about 70 hours without food. After a while, my body started getting used to the lack of food. The flight attendant brought me a plateful of raw vegetables and a piece of soggy bread. It was my husband’s idea. He had asked for a Hindu vegetarian meal when he bought the ticket. I polished off those disgusting morsels while eyeing delicious non-vegetarian Hindu meals others were eating. Within an hour, I threw up everything.

Soon after clearing immigration at the Dulles Airport, I blacked out. When I came to, I noticed that somebody in uniform was pushing me in a wheelchair. I took a sip from a giant glass of most delicious orange juice. My jewelry bag was on my lap.