

THE
marriage
knot
-a tangled love story

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DEDICATION

To Sarvesh and Darsh!

For infusing so much joy in my life!

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To The Supreme Being:

कायेन वाचा मनसेंद्रियैर् वा।
बुद्ध्या तमना वा प्रकृ तिस्वभावात्।
करोमि यद्यत सकलं परस्मै।
नारायणायेति समर्पयामि॥

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THE WEDDING NIGHT



It was her wedding night. She was decked up in a dark blue silk saree and had on minimal jewelry. Her cousin, Amala was seeing to her makeup. With anticipation coiling like a big snake at the bottom of her belly, she knew she could not do justice to her makeup. Not that she knew much otherwise. So, she easily resigned the makeup duty to Amala. Amala was good. This was right in the middle of her realm of expertise. Neha allowed Amala to work her magic. The result was stunning. Normally, she would never have used so much color on her face. There was eye shadow, rouge, and lipstick. It had subtle hues that matched the color of her saree. She could not believe so much makeup would still look great on her.

“I am not putting too much makeup” said Amala. Neha glared at her. “What? I am not!”, Amala protested. She continued, “You have to look natural. But, enough

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to accentuate your most beautiful features. Like your wide eyes. And your full lips. Your skin is perfect. I am sooo jealous". Neha smiled.

"And your hair is nice and wavy, but will not go with this makeup. So, I am going to pin it up in a bun. That way, it would be easier for you to take it off. Or for that matter, it would be easier for Arjun to take it off too", said Amala grinning mischievously.

"Stop brooding. You have to smile more. You look so much prettier when you smile. And don't forget to call when you have time tomorrow. I want to know all the details." said Amala, her eyes glinting in mischief.

Amala had been talking non-stop to Neha. Amala was three years younger than Neha, but she was still doling out advice. The advice was not that useful, but the very act of advising reminded Neha of how much Amala loved her. And she was very grateful for that. Her tone was the only soothing thing in her current state of mind.

After Amala finished with her, Neha turned to look at herself in the mirror. Amala was a genius. Neha looked gorgeous. The dark blue saree suited her tall frame while accentuating her curves. It was her mother's saree. Her eyes moistened a bit when she thought of her. But, she quickly pulled herself together. Amala had not mentioned anything about water-proof makeup. If the

make-up runs, she knew Amala will hit the roof. She forced herself to smile. And then, she thought about Amala, and her small army of friends and family, who had taken time out to be at her side on this day. She was grateful for all of them. And the smile was no longer forced. Looking at the bright side of everything was something that she had been forced to do – to even just survive. And it was a skill that she had learned well.

Her aunt came rushing in. “Neha, are you ready? Ok, come with me.” Her aunt took her by hand and led her up the stairs to Arjun’s room. The snake at the bottom of her stomach reared its head again.

A large number of relatives had gathered before the room. From her side, only her aunt, uncle, and Amala were present. The rest were all Arjun’s relatives. She recognized only a handful of them. Then, she caught sight of Arjun in their midst. He was tall, lean and muscular. His muscles rippled through his white shirt as he moved. A glyph tattoo was visible on the side of his neck. The tattoo was a triangle with a horizontal line intersecting it in the middle. He was wearing a white *dhoti*. He had curly hair with a quiff of about 2 to 3 inches at the top. It gave him a finger combed look and he looked drop-dead handsome. He looked at her and smiled. Her heart raced. *"God! He has got a good smile.*

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Sincere and straight from the heart!” She immediately felt a bit better. Neha wondered if she looked half as good as he did, notwithstanding the layers of makeup she was sporting. She took another swift glance at Arjun. And then she looked down. She did not want to be caught staring at her husband and give his relatives more meat for ragging. After all, it was customary for the relatives to rag the newlyweds before they can enter their room for the night.

“*Anni*, you are totally covered in blue and green. You look like a peacock. You are looking sooo beautiful!” said Keerthi. She was Arjun’s cousin. Neha beamed at her. The only thing that was better than a compliment, was a compliment at the right time.

Arjun’s uncle saw her and said, “Come on! Come on! We have only a very simple task for the newlyweds. Sing a romantic song to each other and then we will let you enter the room.”

Neha’s heart skipped a beat. “*Sing? Me? Before all these people whom I desperately want to impress? I am so dead!*”

Arjun exclaimed, “What?! No way!”

Neha smiled and shook her head. “Sorry, I can’t sing.”

After ten minutes of cajoling, persuading and threatening, the relatives grew tired. But they refused to give up. Arjun and Neha were equally adamant in not singing.

Arjun's mom, Vaidehi intervened. "Arjun, the faster you get this over with, the faster you can move on. It is just a song. Sing it!"

Arjun looked at his mother with irritation. Then realization dawned. There was no way his relatives were going to let him go without a song. There were many times when he had been in their position and had given the then newlyweds a real hard time. They all still seemed to remember it. After all, for a few people, it was payback time.

Arjun resigned himself to his fate and started singing. A beautiful voice pierced the air. He was singing "*Ennavalae adi ennavalae...*" - an evergreen, popular, romantic, Tamil song. Neha listened spellbound. His voice tugged at her heart and she allowed herself to get transported into a blissful, higher state. His clear, resonating voice gave her goosebumps. Arjun had all his relatives spellbound as well.

The song was soon over and Vaidehi was the first one out of the trance. "Ok. That's enough. Arjun and Neha,

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get inside the room. Rest of you, please come down. We have some ice cream down there.”

“Ice cream” was the magic word that made all the relatives forget any idea they might have had about ragging them more.

Arjun and Neha were ushered into their room and the door was locked. Neha looked around the room. Arjun’s cousins were responsible for the decoration and they had done a good job. The bed was decorated with flowers. There was a huge heart in the middle decorated with rose petals. A few plates containing fruits and sweets were placed on the side table. Huge bouquets of flowers were kept all around the room. They had even sprinkled the floor with flower petals.

Arjun walked to the side table and drank some water. Neha stood hesitatingly at the door. Arjun turned around, leaned on the table and crossed his hands. He looked at Neha and said, “Sit, Neha!”

Neha moved to the bed and sat down. Her heart was pounding and her palms sweaty. Crack! Neha jumped up.

Arjun walked to the bed. “Don’t worry. It is just a *papad*. My stupid cousins. They think it’s a joke!” He lifted the bedspread. There were *papads* placed at the four corners of the bed. And a few more were spread out

in the middle. Arjun cleaned it all up and threw them in the nearby wastebasket.

“I think it is clean now. You can sit.” Neha sat down.

“Thank you” whispered Neha.

Arjun went and stood near the window. He crossed his hands and stood there, looking out of the window. Neha could not understand what he was looking at. It was quite dark outside and there was nothing to see. Neha waited patiently. Should she say something? Was something worrying him? He seemed tensed. He was now massaging his neck. Could she just lie down and go to sleep? It had been a really long day.

Curiosity finally got the better of her. “What is the matter? Do you need anything?”

Arjun turned toward her and sighed. “Yes. I need a divorce!”

NEHA



Neha had been the only child to her parents. Her father, Raghu, was a financial consultant at a large firm. Her mother was a charted accountant freelancing from their home. Theirs had been a very happy family. They had lived in a huge house with a large garden. There had been a lot of trees in her garden including a lemon, a pomegranate, and a mango tree. The trees had produced so much of lemons and mangoes, that her mother had made pickles for the entire neighborhood. Distribution of the pickles had usually been Neha's job. It was a job she had loved and looked forward to. She was always treated to sweets and other delicacies when she dropped off the pickles. She had enjoyed being pampered. Her father had built a small swing in the garden and that had been her favorite place in the entire world. Under a canopy of leaves, she used to sit for hours, dreaming or reading.

But it had all changed. On that fateful day. She remembered the day vividly.

It had started as a normal day. She had been in her eleventh standard, barely into her sixteenth year. She had been in school that day. She had shared her desk with Karan. She was always at loggerheads with him. So much so, that, they had measured the desk and the table with a scale and had drawn a line exactly in the middle; each clearly marking their own territory. Nothing was ever allowed inside the other's territory – sharpeners, pencils or limbs. And Neha had fought with him on that day, because he had kept rocking their desk, playing a stupid game. Neha had been furious. The English class had been in progress. She remembered her teacher very clearly. She had been talking about silent letters. And how to pronounce “plait”. And that was when fate had walked in. In the form of the school peon. And changed her life forever. He had whispered something in her teacher's ears. Her teacher had immediately given control of the class to the class monitor and had asked Neha to come with her. They had gone to the principal's office. The students had named the principal, “the dragon lady”. This had been the first time that Neha was seeing her outside her own den. Talking to her uncle. “*Why is my uncle here?*”

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Her principal had said “Neha, my child... You are going home now. Ok?” Neha was surprised at her principal’s tone. It was full of love and affection. Neha had panicked. Something was seriously wrong.

Her uncle had then taken her home. He had briefly said that her parents were ill and had refused to give any more details. Neha’s parents had gone to a nearby village for a funeral the day before, leaving Neha alone with their servant maid. They were supposed to have arrived that day. *“How can they be ill? And both at the same time! And why is uncle crying?”* She had never seen him cry.

Neha had gone home. Hoping her parents themselves would answer some of her questions. A few of her relatives had been standing outside her home along with her parents’ friends. *“Why are so many people here?”* She went inside searching for her parents. And she had found them. In a glass case! Covered with flowers.

Her first reaction had been that of denial. She had shut her eyes and had wished to wake up. She believed she was going to wake up any moment and realize this was all a horrible dream, and her parents would walk in to comfort her. She had opened her eyes and found her parents still in the glass case. *“Why am I not able to wake up?”*

Her parents had met with an accident on their way back from the funeral. A truck had rammed the car in which her parents had been traveling. The truck driver had fallen asleep at the wheel. Her parents had died instantly.

Her aunt had walked up to her and had taken her into her arms and had started wailing. Why was her aunt wailing? It had not been her aunt's life that had just gone up in smoke. Her aunt's parents were still alive. It was only her parents who were dead.

The next few days had moved in the blur. And all Neha had thought about was just one question. "Why?" Was it because of something she did? Was God angry with her? Was this the way in which she was being punished?

And a story had formed in her head. Her parents had gone to the relative's funeral. Maybe Lord Yama, the god of death, was there at the funeral. Maybe he was still hungry, not satisfied with taking just one life. And he had seen her parents and had liked them. So, he had taken them with him. She could almost picture Lord Yama. With his huge handlebar mustache, broad shoulders, heavy body, and an evil laugh. If she prayed to him, will he take her too? She had wished and prayed. But nothing had worked.

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She had been in a trance when her parents were buried. And when her relatives had fought over who would take care of her. As her mother did not have any siblings and her father had a younger brother, the onus by default fell on him. He had been willing to take her in as he had a daughter a few years younger than Neha. But his wife had adamantly refused. Husband and wife had been fighting, when her family lawyer, Mr. Das had walked in and informed them about the annual maintenance that the family taking care of Neha would receive. That had sealed her aunt's mouth and her own fate.

Neha's parents had drawn up their will perfectly. All their properties would move to Neha's name when she turned twenty-one. She would not be able to sell anything until the age of twenty-five. Money from her trust fund would also be locked. Systematic withdrawals could be made for education and marriage. Money from dividends and rent would be given to the family taking care of Neha. All the money and property would be controlled by a group of trustees and they would do the needful in line with the will. So, neither Neha nor anyone else could touch her actual properties. She was rich, but only after she turns twenty-one. And until then, she was

a dependent who could just offer the prospect and the lure of future money to her relatives.

Neha had moved into Amala's house. It was a two-bedroom flat with no garden. She had shared a room with Amala, who was thrilled to have her cousin sister around all the time. She would have preferred a much happier Neha, but as someone who had yearned for a sibling all her life, this still was her gift from God.

Amala's mom had not liked Neha and had considered her as a burden, inspite of the maintenance money she received monthly. As soon as Neha had moved in, Amala's mom fired their servant maid. Dusting, mopping and cleaning vessels - all had fallen on Neha's shoulders. For someone who had never entered the kitchen till then, Neha found herself suddenly entrusted with preparing entire meals.

Neha had found it extremely tough in the beginning. Every night, she used to check if Amala had gone to sleep and then carefully cry into her pillow. Sometimes, she had broken down in the bathroom, sitting under the running shower. Her uncle had never come to her aid, in fear of ruining the peace at his home.

It had lasted for a year. Low marks in her eleventh final exams, shook her out of her despair. She realized that a good education was the only way she could stand

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on her feet again. She had to be strong. She resolved to do her best during her final school year. And she had aced it.

After school, she had joined B. Com and passed with flying colors. Her parents' fund had enabled her to join an MBA course majoring in Finance from a very reputed college. Her good grades during M.B.A. had landed her a good job with decent pay.

And that had been when Arjun's mom had entered her life. Mrs. Vaidehi Krishnan had come to meet her uncle and aunt. She had been a childhood friend of Neha's father. And she had come with a marriage proposal. Her uncle had been very happy. Her aunt, however, had been unable to bear the fact that Neha was getting a good alliance.

“Who is this Mrs. Krishnan? How can we believe her?” her aunt had argued.

“What is there to believe? She had studied with my brother. They seemed to have been very close. I don't know her as there was an eight-year gap between me and my brother. I don't remember my brother's school friends much. She is also there in my brother's wedding photo. She is whom she says she is.”

“Ok. But why come now? She might have heard about Neha’s money and maybe she is just after that...” her aunt had been adamant.

Her uncle had again patiently explained, “They are very rich. She had lost her husband when Arjun was very young. She had taken over their textile company and had been running it very successfully for the last 15 years. Didn’t you just see the car she came in?”

“Ok, but it is strange. You have to accept that. Her coming out of the way to ask for Neha’s hand. Maybe, something is wrong with Arjun.”

“I have asked some of our relatives and friends to check on Arjun. We will soon know. But more important than that is Neha’s opinion. What do you think, Neha?” her uncle had thrown the ball at Neha.

“I think I should talk to him once before I say anything” Neha had opined.

And that had got the ball rolling for the marriage.