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She was twenty-three and it was her first time on an aeroplane. The man sitting beside her, who must have been her father's age, swapped seats with her so that she could look out of the window. As they descended over England, he laughed and told her that she would have to wait for summer to see any real sunshine and that the winters were particularly gloomy. Not like in India.

On entering the airport, Mira went straight to the bathroom, where she reapplied her make-up: a lipstick that went by the name 'Raspberry', which she knew to be a fruit but one she hadn't yet tasted; kohl, which her husband had said made her eyes look sexy; a smudge of vermilion to the parting in her hair. Her fingers were trembling, and she held her breath so as not to make a mess of things. Assessing her reflection, she saw how different she looked from the woman who had boarded the plane some nine hours ago. Different in a bewildering, disorienting way.

Everything was going to be fine, she told herself. Yet the trembling had spread from her fingers to the rest of her body, and as she made her way through passport control – rehearsing whatever little English she knew, the lines she had memorised – she hoped the immigration officer would be kind, and that she would be able to find the right words and put them in the correct order.

As it happened, the officer – a Punjabi woman named Manpreet Brar – had the shiniest black hair Mira had ever seen, and a face that revealed absolutely nothing. 'How long have you been married?' she asked. 'Is somebody coming to collect you?'

'Six months. My husband is coming.'

'It was a love marriage, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'And what does your husband do?'

'Consultant.'

'Can you show me your papers?'

Mira handed over her passport and the bundle of documents she had kept ready in a plastic wallet. The officer looked through them with vague interest, as though she had seen them before, hundreds of times, and Mira wondered how many women – women like her – had passed before the officer's eyes over the years.

Mira had hoped to feel better by the time she lifted her suitcases off the conveyor belt and made her way through the arrivals gate, but her nervousness refused to dissipate, and she felt beads of sweat erupt along her upper lip and across her forehead, threatening to ruin her make-up. This feeling, which she knew to be a culmination of many things, had finally laid claim to her and she gripped the luggage trolley to steady herself, all the while searching the arrivals hall for the people who had come to collect her.

'Mira!'

She heard them before she saw them, but once she had, they were all she could see. Her mother-in-law, her saasu, a thin, nervous woman who wore a flower in her hair and a sari too bright for the airport. Her father-in-law, her sasra, a serious, sturdy man who had lost some of the fullness of his face since

the wedding. And between them, her husband, Rajiv. The man with whom she was to spend the rest of her life.

Mira thought she might be sick, but before she could do anything at all, they had raced towards her, taken control of her trolley and pulled her into their embrace.

'My beautiful daughter-in-law!' said her saasu, her eyes wet, her face barely able to contain its smile.

Mira knelt down to touch their feet, but once she reached Rajiv, he pulled her into a tight, awkward embrace that left her flustered and pink. As they came apart, she looked at him – his angular face, the crisp T-shirt that showed off the sculpted mass of his torso – and felt relief. That she still found him attractive. That he was there to protect her, though from what she couldn't say.

'Here, put this on,' said her saasu, pulling a coat from a Lidl carrier bag. 'You must be cold.' Mira was. The cardigan she wore over her sari wasn't enough to keep her teeth from chattering, and as soon as they were inside the car Rajiv turned on the heating. It was early afternoon. The neat, grey blocks of the airport felt like stepping inside the future and Mira wondered how much longer it would be before she saw some grass, some snow.

She had met these people three times before in her life: the first, when they arrived at her house in search of a bride; the second, on the day of the wedding itself; and the third, a week later, when she and Rajiv had returned from their honeymoon in Udaipur and she and her parents had gone to see them all off at the airport. In among those times there had been a flurry of text messages and awkward Skype conversations.

Now, as the car moved along the motorway, it felt like she was meeting them for the first time. This was their soil. Their country. And this fact alone granted them further dimensions, as though before her eyes they were reimagined.

It had been six months since the wedding, but it felt longer, with the doors to her old life swinging shut and the doors to her new life flinging open. Although, as people kept reminding her, she was lucky to have secured a passport and visa without much trouble and in such a short time. Blessed.

'Welcome to Leicester!' said her saasu, pointing to a sign on the motorway.

Later, as Mira looked out onto Narborough Road, she saw rows of shops selling food, jewellery, chaotic jumbles of things. It made her feel hopeful, that the country might still reveal itself to be familiar in ways she hadn't anticipated. As they reached Belgrave Road, however, some fifteen minutes later, the question she wanted to ask was: 'Where are all the English people?' But it was too soon and she went on looking out the window in silence, watching as women scurried along the pavement, their saris and Punjabi suits flapping around their legs, their cardigans wild plumes of colour against the January gloom.

When they pulled into Flax Road, Mira saw that two large dustbins had been dragged into place outside the house to reserve a parking space and a huddle of people – strangers – had gathered by the front door.

'Who invited so many people?' asked her sasra from the front seat. 'Look at them.'

'We agreed on the list together,' said her saasu.

'I didn't invite all these people.'

A nervous silence ballooned to fill the car.

'Don't worry,' said Rajiv. 'In a few hours everybody will be gone.'

'Yes,' said her saasu, her voice quiet. 'It's only a matter of a few hours.'

One after another they got out of the car. Mira felt the prickling gaze of people she didn't recognise. Her suitcases were lifted out of the boot and carried inside, and she and Rajiv were told to wait by the door. Shortly afterwards, her saasu emerged from the house with a large plate filled with water and vermilion and Mira took off her shoes and socks and, with her feet red, walked into the house over white sheets, leaving behind a trail of red footprints.

Inside, everybody was fussing, although about what it wasn't immediately clear. Rajiv, who seconds before had been beside her, had gone into the front room where the other men were sitting, leaving Mira surrounded by women and their whinging, boisterous children.

'Here,' said somebody, smiling, clearing a space for her on the sofa. 'Sit here.'

Forbidden from helping, Mira wondered how much longer it would be before they all left. She felt tired. Her face was tired too, from all the smiling.

The house was much smaller than she had imagined, with a front room, a living room, a tiny rectangle of a kitchen and a bathroom all arranged compactly, one after another in a single row. There was a garden too, if one could call it that, the same size as the kitchen and completely paved over, with a washing line running diagonally across the length of it, on which a pair of Nike socks had been hung out to dry. She thought of her house in Ahmedabad, with its big veranda, its open agaasi where she and her sister, Shreya, slept each summer. Its almond trees staining the ground with their red, rotting fruit.

It would be another three hours before the last of the guests left. In that time, a celebratory feast was ferried from the

kitchen and once people had eaten and the plastic plates were cleared away, her saasu boiled chai for everybody in a large saucepan.

Mira tried to recall the names of the people she had been introduced to but couldn't. Aside from Rupal, Rajiv's cousin, who she remembered because of her long, straight hair, which cascaded all the way down past her bum, and the teal lehenga she wore, which looked expensive.

'This is Rupal,' Rajiv had said, introducing them, 'the artist in our family.'

'Hiya,' said Rupal, taking Mira into her embrace. 'Looks like Rajiv is punching above his weight, as per.'

Mira didn't know what that meant, and in the space of a moment the gulf of the English language opened up between them.

'Shut it,' said Rajiv. Then, having sensed Mira's confusion: 'It's an English saying. It means she thinks you're too good for me.' This he attempted to explain in Gujarati, but his words were broken and clunky and all anybody could do was laugh.

'It must be so weird,' said Rupal, 'landing up in Leicester by yourself.'

'From what I've seen,' said Mira, 'Leicester looks just like India.'

Rupal laughed. 'Yeah. I suppose it does.'

Of all the people in the house, Rupal was the only one remotely near Mira's age. Even Rajiv, at thirty-three, was a decade older.

A round woman with perfectly shaped eyebrows carried cups of chai to and from the kitchen. Sitting in the middle of the beige leather sofa, Mira felt like a visitor. As though at any moment she would get up and make her way back to the airport

and back to Ahmedabad and to her parents and her sister. That was all it took, for them to be pulled from the peripheries of her imagination to its centre.

How many hours had it been since she last saw them? How many hours since they had all sobbed at the airport, the fact of her marriage to a man who lived on the opposite side of the world finally hitting them? Her eyes grew wet at the thought of it, and she went to wipe her tears, but somebody saw and the woman with the perfect eyebrows came and sat beside her. 'It's always hard in the beginning,' she said, looking around the room for affirmation. The other women smiled and nodded, murmuring their assent. Then, as if having sensed Mira's upset, her saasu emerged from the kitchen.

'Mira beta, why don't you send your sister a WhatsApp to let her know you've arrived safely? Then we can give your parents a proper call in the morning.'

Once the last of the guests had left and she and Rajiv had gone upstairs to bed, Mira felt exhausted.

It was agreed that she would wait until the following day to unpack her suitcases and when she finally entered her bedroom, she saw that it had been decorated in a way that wasn't dissimilar from the room she and Rajiv had spent their first night in as a married couple. Wilted rose petals lay scattered across the duvet, and two towels – both folded into the shape of swans – were positioned at the centre of the bed.

The bed itself was too big for the room it occupied, sharing the space with two wooden wardrobes that were positioned against one wall, stuffed full of clothes. The addition of her three suitcases made it almost impossible to move about, but she was too tired to think about it.

She and Rajiv sat beside each other, and he pulled out a hamper from somewhere and placed it on her lap. It was wrapped in shiny plastic. Inside was a designer handbag, a watch, some earrings, a box of chocolates, and an expensive-looking make-up set. She took each item in turn and admired it, offering to open the box of chocolates, but Rajiv said he was too full. She left the hamper by the side of the bed, on top of one of her suitcases.

'You missed the best bit,' he said, and she must have looked puzzled, because he emptied the contents of the hamper to reveal a neat pile of lingerie, wrapped in tissue paper, at the very bottom. She blushed, conscious of how her body would look in something so revealing. It hadn't occurred to her that a man – any man – would buy her underwear, and she wasn't sure what to think of it. She had brought with her a pair of silk pyjamas, which now felt plain and inadequate.

Her mother had given her a single piece of marital advice: that during her first year of marriage she should not disagree with Rajiv on any matter, and that she should do exactly as he said. If she did that, her mother assured her, he would be in the palms of her hands. So, when the time came for them to have sex, Mira didn't protest, even though she would rather have slept. And as Rajiv's mouth slid over her lips and her neck, she forced herself to recognise how lucky she was to have married somebody like him, who desired her in this way. But aside from this, she didn't say or do much, submitting to him in the way she thought she should.

As the bed began to creak, however, and the headboard bumped repeatedly against the wall, Mira found herself distracted, embarrassed that his parents would hear them. Whatever little desire she had felt evaporated, and she wanted him to stop but didn't know quite how to say it.

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The next morning, Mira woke while it was still dark. She hadn't been able to sleep properly – the bed too strange, too soft. She turned to face Rajiv, whose trembling eyelids she could just about make out in the dark, and wondered what he was dreaming of. The room was silent save the hum of the central heating, and she lay awake, thinking of everything and nothing, until she heard somebody walk past their bedroom and down the stairs. Something about the quickness of the steps assured her that it was her saasu and she slipped out of bed, pulled on yesterday's clothes and followed her.

The radio was on; she heard bhajans floating out from the kitchen. As she went inside, she saw her saasu pottering about at the sink, finding a home for the dishes. She looked like a different woman – her hair loose, her face without make-up. She was dressed in a light-blue dressing gown. 'Mira,' she said, the moment she saw her. 'You needn't get up so early.'

'I couldn't sleep.'

Her saasu nodded, as though she understood. 'Some tea?' The kitchen felt peaceful at that hour, despite the cluttered dining table along one wall covered entirely in jars and saucepans, the darkness slowly dissolving beyond the windows, the heating having made things warm. 'We should remember to call your parents.'

Mira nodded. 'What does everybody usually eat for breakfast?' she asked.

'Me and your sasra like to have chai and puri. Rajiv likes thepla sometimes, but mostly he eats eggs. It depends on his mood. You know how men are.'

Mira wasn't sure she did, but she nodded anyway. She felt relieved; these were things she knew how to cook.

'You're going to be lucky for this house,' said her saasu, standing at the stove about to knead some dough. 'I can already feel it.'

Mira watched as her saasu went about preparing breakfast with an ease and efficiency that could only have been the result of years of practice. Standing beside her, Mira helped fry the puri once they were rolled, and as they puffed up in the oil, she thought of her own mother, who had taught her to cook, and who would have eaten something similar earlier in the day, when it was her morning.

Once the food was ready, the women showered and dressed and by the time Rajiv and his father came downstairs, everything was laid out on the coffee table in the living room. Rajiv switched on the television, and they watched the news as they ate, the men sitting beside each other on the sofa and the women on the floor opposite, because there wasn't enough room.

'Where's my mango pickle?' asked her sasra, his voice mildly accusatory, and immediately her saasu shot up from the floor and hurried into the kitchen.

'I must have forgotten,' she said, lowering the jar onto the coffee table beside the other pickles, which it had been Mira's responsibility to bring in.

Mira watched her sasra eat, scooping up bits of yogurt and pickle with his puri, slurping his chai, his gaze glued to the television. He had his own business – a garage he had set up almost thirty-five years ago, when he arrived in England after marrying Rajiv's mother. He looked exactly the way she imagined a mechanic would, his face etched with tales of manual labour. Mira was reminded of her own father, who had worked as a builder for many years before setting up a scaffolding company. Both men had faces and bodies that managed to look both strong and worn at once.

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While Rajiv was in the shower, Mira took the opportunity to unpack. She had come to England with two large suitcases and one small. The smaller suitcase contained the entirety of her possessions: clothes mostly, some jewellery, cosmetics. The larger suitcases were filled almost entirely with gifts for her new family. Rajiv's parents hadn't asked for a dowry, but her father would not have sent her to England without something that resembled one. There were new shirts for Rajiv and her sasra, tailored to fit their measurements. An abundance of saris for her saasu with matching blouses. Mira had brought mangoes too, toasted wheat, roasted black chickpeas, a variety of kitchen utensils and nearly twenty boxes of mithai to be distributed among her newly acquired friends and family. Her father said it was important that her in-laws have no cause for complaint, and she saw how hard he had worked to afford the things he put into those suitcases. So it upset Mira to see the bewildered look on her sasra's face when she presented her gifts. 'We can get these things in Leicester,' he said, eyeing the items with suspicion.

'Everything is so lovely,' said her saasu, 'but your parents really shouldn't have! All we wanted was you!'

'I suppose we'll have to drive around the city delivering these boxes of mithai,' said her sasra, ripping one open to look inside. So that Mira wished her father hadn't bothered.

Upstairs, she tried to find room for her empty suitcases, kneeling on the floor to check whether there was space under the bed. There, she discovered tubs of protein powder, a pair of dumbbells, some tattered books that looked to be novels. There was a book called *Animal Farm*, which she knew to be Rajiv's

favourite – a fact he had asked her to memorise in case she was asked about it at her spousal visa interview. She had learned several things this way – that his favourite colour was dark blue, that his favourite food was biryani, that his favourite band was Coldplay. That he was a chartered accountant working for a consultancy, although what a consultancy was she still couldn't say. He had told her she should say their first meeting had been through friends and not through family, as had been the case.

She discovered a box of women's perfume still in its wrapping, which she knew wasn't meant for her, and an open packet of condoms, the contents of which she resisted every urge to count.

Mira pushed her suitcases under the bed as far as they would go, hoping they might eradicate her new discoveries, all the while listening out for Rajiv's footsteps on the stairs. Once she came up off the floor, she looked at the bed where she and Rajiv had spent the night and wondered whether any other women had ever slept in it.

Her curiosity took her further. In one of the drawers at the base of the wardrobe, she found a photo of Rajiv and his friends. They were sitting around a dinner table, laughing, their glasses raised in a toast. They were dressed in tuxedos and ball gowns and Mira wondered who they all were – these people her husband knew – and whether she would meet any of them. It had surprised her how few of Rajiv's friends and family members had attended their wedding in India.

In the end, that was all it took – a quick glance under his bed and in his wardrobe – for Mira to realise what strangers she and Rajiv still were.