

Little Things

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Rohan heard Shoili's voice from the bathroom. "Parveen bhabi called," she was yelling. "The party tonight's cancelled." Rohan held the razor a few inches away from his chin, "Are you sure?" He felt a wave of relief washing over him. But he wanted to be certain. The door opened and Shoili popped her head in.

"Yeah! You must've been praying hard," she winked and smiled.

Rohan heaved a sigh of relief. "Nothing personal, but Parveen bhabi's parties freak me out." He paused and grimaced, "I often wonder how Imtiaz bhai lives with that woman."

Shoili shushed him, "Don't say things like that. She's not so bad."

Rohan laughed. "Sure. Thank God I'm already married. I feel sorry for those bachelors invited at her party."

Shoili smiled and then observed, "Wonder what happened – she isn't one to call off parties."

"Didn't she say anything?" asked Rohan, towel in hand. "Parveen bhabi loves to chatter."

"That's what baffles me. She mumbled something about Imtiaz bhai, and said that the party was off."

"Maybe, finally, her husband got sick of her parties?" offered Rohan.

"Maybe," shrugged Shoili. And then she turned around, "Hurry, now. We've to do grocery. No party also means I've to cook dinner."

"I'll do the cooking," offered Rohan. "I am willing to cook tomorrow too." He was just so relieved. Shoili laughed as she went, shaking her head. "You're such a..."

Of all people from the Bengali community they bumped into Keya and Arif at the Bangla Spices Store. Rohan tried to avoid this place because they are bound to meet somebody or the other from the Bangladeshi community. He preferred Trader Joe's where it is less likely to meet one of the "nosy Bongoj," as Shoili called them. Meeting a Bangladeshi would inevitably lead to some unsavoury tale about someone in the community. Rohan often wondered what was wrong with

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the expatriates. It was not so bad in Bangladesh, was it? At least people could choose their friends and circles. Today Shoili dragged him here because she wanted some deshi spices and a special pickle that was available only at this place. And now Keya was looking up at him and batted her extra-long eyelashes coquettishly. Rohan could not help thinking, "My God, the woman is wearing false eye lashes to a grocery store!"

"Salam alaikum, Rohan bhai." She did not even bother to glance at Shoili. She had eyes for Rohan only. "Did ya hear about Parveen bhabi's party? It's cancelled!" Rohan shrank inwardly from the surge of heavy perfume that Keya was wearing.

"Yes," replied Shoili politely. "Bhabi called us."

"She did?" Arif and Keya exchanged meaningful looks. And then Arif said smugly, "She didn't call us, of course."

"We're their neighbours," added Keya. "And we already know more than most." She giggled and her eye lashes fluttered provocatively. Her husband seemed oblivious to his wife's flirtation. He was busy devouring Shoili.

Rohan shifted uncomfortably. "We better get going," he said. "It's getting dark."

Keya leaned toward him and whispered, "Do you know, Imtiaz bhai has left home?"

Rohan and Shoili stared at her blankly. What was the woman blabbering about?

Arif nodded, gleeful to see their reaction. "You didn't know that, did you?"

"Of course not," Keya looked shocked. "Parveen bhabi wouldn't say that, would she?" Then she added, "He left last night or may be even earlier. And hasn't come back."

Rohan was concerned. "He may have had some accident. Imtiaz bhai is a very respectable and responsible man."

"Where's the police then? And why are they so 'hush-hush' about it?" asked Arif.

Rohan turned at Shoili, "Let's go. I have work to do."

Inside the car Shoili asked, "What do you think happened? Do you believe them?"

Rohan looked straight ahead, "I could throttle them," he said with gritted teeth. "Nosy parkers! Thank God they're not our neighbours."

Shoili glanced at her dark and the handsome husband whom most other women ogled too often. But everybody knew them as a happy couple and did not bother them much. "Do you suppose they could ferret our secrets too?" she asked archly.

Rohan kept his eyes focused on the road and said nothing. He was lost in thought.

It was a long weekend, and people seemed to have not much to do. Rohan was making his special shrimp malai curry and Shoili was folding the freshly laundered clothes when the door-bell rang. Shoili gave a gasp of joy when she opened the door, "Why, it's Zia and Raina! What a pleasant surprise!" Then she opened the door wider and asked, "Why are you so sombre? Everything okay at home?"

Both Raina and Zia had elderly parents in Bangladesh, and they worried about their health. The curse of living abroad was to have loving parents dying at home, sometimes alone.

Zia sniffed and said, "Rohan is cooking, I can tell. Yes, everything's okay at home. But things have gone terribly wrong here."

Rohan looked out of the kitchen, "Hello, *yaar!* Why didn't you call? But perfect timing! Now we'll have a real feast!"

Raina asked, "Did you hear about Imtiaz bhai?"

"We met Arif and Keya yesterday," Shoili said with a grimace. "They said something about Imtiaz bhai leaving home! They made it sound like a huge scandal."

Zia made a face too. "Those two! They should be kicked out of the community."

"How many are you going to kick out?" asked Raina. "They're growing in number. But you heard right. Imtiaz bhai has disappeared."

Rohan came out of the kitchen. "What does that mean? Has police been informed? And why does it sound so mysterious?"

"Shihab came to our house yesterday morning," said Zia reflectively. Shihab was Imtiaz Chowdhury's only son. He had just completed his bachelor's from San Diego University. Apparently, his father left home three days ago for a conference. Nobody thought of anything until his mother went to the bank on Thursday morning and found that the joint account she had with her husband was cleared out. She had her own account, of course. But they had close to 300,000 dollars in the joint account even two weeks back, and there was only \$20,000 left.

Naturally, she smelled something fishy and called her husband. To her chagrin she discovered that Imtiaz bhai's phone was disconnected. Then they called Imtiaz Chowdhury's office and learned that he had left his 20 years old job. He had notified them way ahead of time, and apparently has gone off to Canada. Imtiaz Chowdhury's Chinese boss could not make head or tail of what he was hearing. He apparently kept on repeating in his heavy Chinese accent, "But it oas all plannd," he replied. "E told me last ear that e ould settle in Montre-al. E as got a ouse there too. And u're telling me that u didn't know! Ow'sit possible?"

"So, what's happening now?" asked Shoili.

"Imtiaz bhai's younger brother is arriving from New York tomorrow," said Zia. "He will probably try to figure out what's going on. Apparently, the police

verified the information and said that they cannot do anything. It's obvious that he left on his own free will. There's nothing illegal for a man to move somewhere. Bhabi and the two daughters are distraught."

"But it doesn't make sense," said Shoili. "Why would a man close to sixty suddenly disappear without telling anybody anything?"

"I tell you, there's a woman behind all this," said Raina confidently.

"Now you sound like Parveen bhabi," said an irritated Zia.

"Did Parveen bhabi say anything about any woman?" asked Rohan.

"No. But she always says that when something happens in the community," replied Raina. And then she added wincing, "I guess now I'm saying similar things about her." She added a bit sheepishly, "I'm sorry. But think about it – why would a successful and respectable elderly man suddenly disappear like this? May be there's a younger and beautiful woman..." Rohan interrupted, "Let's just stop here. I'm sure we'll learn in no time at all. But I don't like this thread of discussion."

They all went quiet for some time. Shoili at length got up and said, "Let me set the table." She turned to her husband, "Why don't you take a quick shower? I'll make a salad. Come, Raina, help me in the kitchen."

During dinner they chatted over amiable stuff, praised Rohan's lightly spiced bhuna khichuri, malai curry and roasted chicken, and Shoili's avocado salad and the dahi bora. They laughed over silly stuff. Worried about their elderly parents. Later Rohan and Zia went to the porch to smoke while Shoili took Raina upstairs to show her some tapestries she had recently got from a yard sale.

"I'm sorry, Rohan. I know these things bother you. But Raina doesn't know anything about Mimi," said Zia.

"I know," sighed Rohan. "But I'm sensitive about those kinds of stuff." He paused and added, "It was years ago, but that horrible scandal has left a permanent scar. It was bad enough that Mimi was having an affair with another woman's husband. But all hell broke loose when the man's wife committed suicide."

"She's in Australia, isn't she?" asked Zia.

"Mimi? Yes, Brisbane. You know, she left Dhaka a few months after the incident. And only went back to visit once. It half-killed our mother. Thank God Abba was already deceased. He was very upright and believed in doing the right thing. He would not have been able to take all that."

Zia recalled the stunningly beautiful younger sister of Rohan with whom half of her brother's friends were infatuated. She was a sweet girl, but somehow in her early twenties got involved with a married man. It did not matter that the guy was nice and his wife a half-witted shrew. He was married to her, and that was how society looked on. He published a book of poetry and there were a couple of poems addressed to Mimi. It was pandemonium when the wife killed herself in a

dramatic way and left a long letter for her siblings. It caused a hideous uproar. The lives of everyone involved changed drastically. Even Rohan had left home unable to bear the condemning or pitying glances from friends and family members.

“You knew my Rafiq mama, right?” Raina asked her husband on way home.

“Umm... Rafiq mama?” Zia had a terrible memory when it came to people’s name.

“Uff, the one who lived in Zigatola” replied an exasperated Raina.

“Yes, yes,” said Zia hastily. “What of him?”

“His first wife eloped with mama’s best friend,” confided Raina a little embarrassedly.

“I thought she died,” Zia glanced at his wife with surprise. “You told me once that he never quite recovered from the shock.”

“Yes, but the shock was from the betrayal of the two most trusted people,” Raina paused. Then she added, “We never allude to it for the sake of my two cousins. It’s painful enough that their mother had left them in such a scandalous manner. So, we have always referred to her as ‘deceased.’”

“So, Imtiaz bhai’s disappearance makes you remember all that?” asked Zia.

“Yes, and no,” replied Raina. “Amma was saying the other day that the long gone wife tried to contact her children after so many years. Apparently, her son from the second marriage died recently and she felt guilty about her two children with Rafiq mama. But both Nafis and Rifat flatly refused to do anything with her.”

“Life is stranger than all those movies,” observed Zia philosophically. “I don’t know what the matter is with Imtiaz bhai, but it is indeed stirring up other tales.

Rohan went upstairs to his study to work on some stuff while Shoili sat on the veranda outside their bedroom with a tall glass of iced tea. She felt unsettled and disturbed. Even though his wife was a silly gossip monger, Shoili could not recall any scandal about Imtiaz Chowdhury. He was respectable, helpful and their marriage seemed steady. Yes, he was often embarrassed about his wife, but overall they seemed okay. He was also one of the few Bangladeshis that Rohan respected. Why would he disappear all on a sudden?

Shoili remembered her own parents. During her last days her mother had become a serious case of schizophrenia. She always had had issues, and as she grew older it became worse. When Shoili and her brother Shimanto were still young, their mother would often have these bouts of temper when she fumed like a possessed creature. She would accuse people around her of slanderous things and if anybody contradicted her, she would be incensed. So, according to her mother, Shoili’s father had numerous love interests, Shoili had affairs with all

her male cousins, and every girl who called Shimanto on phone turned out to be his girlfriend. Shoili used to be terrified of marriage, or rather, of having children. She knew that schizophrenia could be genetically carried to the next generation, and she still suspected that she might turn out to be like her mother.

One sore point in her marriage was that she resisted children, even though they had been married for six years. The very thought that someday she might turn out to be like her mother was nerve-racking for her. Her father was an exceptional man and took care of his failing wife and the two children like a mother. But she could not help wondering what would have happened if he had left them to pursue a different life. His own brothers and sisters had often suggested that he married again, and Shoili had often heard her mother's sisters whisper, "Salam dulabhai is too good and too nice. It's unfortunate that Apa can't even see how much he cares!"

She recalled the curses and blows she frequently received from her mother as a child, "You, evil girl! To defy your mother! You'll burn in hell!" As she grew older, her mother did not beat or slap her as much, but the things she used to say made her numb with hurt. Knowing that she was mentally sick helped little. She had only one mother. To this day, Shoili avoided verbal confrontations, especially if it required yelling and screaming. And she was jealous of all girls who had close relations with their mothers. Rohan knew about her fears, but lately she had noticed a wistfulness and hunger in his eyes when he saw children, especially toddlers. One reason that Shoili herself avoided the Bangladeshi community was the inevitable question directed toward her: "Why don't you have children?" or "Whose fault is it – yours, or your husband's?" So, the other dreadful thought that had been lurking in Shoili's mind lately was what if Rohan found somebody else who could give him a child? What if he found a younger and more beautiful woman? She looked at the tree that stood near their house, almost bare, exposing the whitish limbs with a few brown leaves still clinging – sign of the coming winter. Shoili shuddered at the dark and unwelcome thoughts gnawing at her.

Rohan sat in his study with his head in two hands. He did not want to remember all those years after the scandal. But Imtiaz bhai's disappearance and Raina's speculations brought all those back. Mimi, Mimi – the lovely little sister he had. So many memories etched in his heart. The dreams they all had about her marriage and happy conjugal life. All evaporated like dewdrops in scorching heat. Rohan remembered his mother. She was always a little frail, and took to bed after Mimi left home. She did not survive the blow; died within two years.

What he had never told anybody was that Mimi was pregnant when she left for Australia. Moreover, she chose to keep the baby. There were not so many Bangladeshis in Australia back in the nineties, and Mimi avoided the ones that were there. Later she married an Australian man, and their relatives never knew

that Mimi's son Watan was her love child. To this day, Rohan has even kept it a secret from Shoili. Probably, it did not matter anymore, but he just could not bring himself to share his sister's shame even with his own wife. He would not be able to take it if Shoili thought badly of Mimi.

He sighed and got up. He realised that there were things he did not know about Shoili too. Why was she so afraid of having children? Just that she might go as crazy as her mother? She did not want to discuss the issue at all, and in the past Rohan had tried to talk to her many times, sometimes even yelled and screamed. She would just withdraw herself in a cocoon, and he felt that whatever he was saying deflected an invisible wall. She would just sit with vacant eyes and a tight smile. He did not know how to get past that. At other times, however, she was quite normal and Rohan also knew that she loved him. No, love was certainly not the problem in their case. Lately, he has been thinking of couple counselling; something that might get them past the crisis. They could adopt if nothing else worked!

Shoili got out of her office earlier than usual. She had not been feeling well for the past few days. As she got inside the car she took out her phone and noticed that there were three missed calls from Raina. A message too, "Call back when you can." Shoili was surprised as it was unusual for Raina to call during day time. She dialled Raina's number immediately.

"Is anything wrong, Raina?" asked a somewhat anxious Shoili.

"It's Imtiaz bhai," replied Raina. She sounded stunned. "There's *actually* a woman behind all this."

Shoili felt dazed, "What woman? Who?"

"A woman named Ilora Zoarder. She is not young though. She was Imtiaz bhai's muse in student life. They did not get to be married because of parental pressure. She married someone else, and he married Parveen bhabi. I am not sure how they reconnected after all these years, but there they are."

"Where did you hear all these?" asked Shoili.

"It's probably the scoop in the Bangladeshi community by now. All over Facebook."

"Eeks! Poor bhabi! And think of the children!" groaned Shoili.

"I went to visit them," said Raina and went on after a pause, "They are all leaving for Wisconsin. Parveen bhabi's sister lives there. They are going to stay there for the time being. Bhabi does not seem to understand anything. She was yelling, 'Bring him back. He is MY husband. What does he mean by running after another woman? What will happen to my children?'"

"Did anyone talk to Imtiaz bhai?"

"His brother did. Apparently, he said that he has given a lot of time for a family he doesn't care about. The children have taken after their mother, and he can't tolerate them anymore. Says they have the house, and Parveen bhabi has

enough money in her account. They will be fine. He will send her a divorce notice soon.”

“Good God!” was all Shoili could say.

When Rohan returned home on Friday evening, he was quite taken aback, but also pleasantly surprised. Shoili seemed prepared for a candle-light dinner. The dining room was lit by lilac scented candles, his favourite. During their early days of marriage he used to do it. And the way she stood at the kitchen door almost took his breath away. She was dressed in a beautiful white and gold *churidar* salwar-kameez. Her hair was shorter than it was when he married her, but long enough to be braided. She had combed her hair into two ropes, and looked very young. No, she looked gorgeous, Rohan thought. And then she smiled, that shy smile she used to welcome him with during those years.

At dinner Rohan realised that Shoili had prepared his favourite eggplant chutney and chicken shik kebab. There was her very own raita too with soft homemade luchi. The tandoor naan from a local Indian restaurant was the only thing not made at home.

“When did you prepare all these?” asked Rohan.

“I’ve been preparing for this for the past few days,” smiled Shoili.

“How come?” asked Rohan taking a bite of the fragrantly delicious kebab. “Is there any occasion?”

“Today is the 25th of August,” came the simple reply.

Rohan paused and looked at Shoili. He had not remembered in a long time. Yes, 25th August was the date when *he* had proposed to her. They were married on September 15. Rohan reached out and took Shoili’s hand. Neither spoke.

“I want another courtship,” whispered Shoili, her eyes glistening in candlelight.

Rohan took a deep breath, “I believe, we need one.”

They sat quietly in the veranda holding hands. The night sky was clear. A starlit night. Rohan was reminiscing what they talked about. It seemed Imtiaz bhai’s disappearance opened a window for them – a window that brought in a draught of cool breeze with a ray of hope. “We have talked about silly things, not what we needed to discuss,” said Shoili. She told him all about her mother, the acute fear about her mother and about their marriage. In return, Rohan told her about Mimi, Watan, and the lost love of her life. He explained how it changed all of them. He was totally taken aback when Shoili said simply, “I have known about Watan. Mimi told me herself.”

Rohan turned to look at his wife and realised he had made a huge mistake. “You never said anything,” he commented.

“Only because Mimi asked me not to. She thinks you’re ashamed of the episode, and you’re still angry with her.”

Rohan kept silent for some time, and then said, “It seems Mimi trusted you more than I did.” Shoili shook her head and said, “Don’t think like that. I also did not share with you my biggest fears because I thought you’d not understand.”

They sat simply holding hands. Marriage was after all something to be worked through; not something to be taken as granted as soon as two people got married. But how many people actually work through it, wondered Rohan. There were power-plays and compromises. People compromised so much that sometimes in the end there was nothing left but compromises. Most people in the Bangladeshi community were probably laughing at Imtiaz bhai, but many also resented his guts. His married life was suffocating him, and it was true that none of his children had turned out to be like him. Of course, that did not justify his act of abandoning them. He surely had lost the respect he had garnered in San Diego in the last 20 years. But his action also showed a different kind of courage – to be able to do what he wanted and not what society expected him to do.

The nameless white tree stood lonesome and slightly crooked under the rising sun. But then it was winter and Shoili knew that when spring began it would be dressed in dark green leaves and nobody would be able to see the bare limbs. It will be okay, she told herself. Life will be kinder to her and Rohan.