

Twilight Bride

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I

Jamalpur, 1964

Everyone was excited, except Tunu. 4th of April was a wonderful day. Life might change; a new member might add to the family; feasts and parties might start, and Tunu's life might turn into a fairy tale, but only if everything went according to plan. The seven brothers were not dwarfs but giants, even the 14-year-old one, who were taking care of their mother and four sisters and all of the family property quite skilfully. They had colleges to go to, degrees to earn, land to buy and sell, jobs to take care of, women to love, and what not; in short these seven brothers were busy. Sisters were nothing but trouble in their busy schedule. Abdur Rahman, the eldest brother had no problem disposing two of his sisters in what the family called "marriage of convenience." After all, the two sisters were fair-skinned, just like *Memsahibs*, and one even had green eyes. They got handsome and rich husbands. But with Tunu it was different. She was growing like an ugly mole, a wart, or an incurable scar right in front of your nose. Everyday you stand before the mirror and get annoyed by the sight of it, but can't do anything. You see that scar growing bigger and darker day by day and wish it to go away, but it stays. And so did Tunu.

Tunu lived to remind her brothers of future expenses. What man in his right mind would marry such a dark-skinned girl? *Boromama*, their eldest maternal uncle, tried to arrange a marriage between Tunu and a somewhat crazy son of one of his friends. The family was insanely rich and the son was completely insane. "It is nothing," *Boromama* tried to assure his sister, Tunu's mother, "The boy has a perfect health, and a strong body. It's only that sometimes he is possessed by a genie. Some say this genie is sexually attracted to the boy and plays with his wit. Once the genie leaves his body, our Fazlur can stay as quiet as a mule."

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Still Tunu's mother sounded unsure. *Boromama* then gave the ultimate dose. "It's either this marriage or the life of a spinster. What do you want to offer your daughter?"

The seven brothers made all preparations and invited the prospective groom to have dinner with them. As was the tradition, the groom's male family members accompanied him, and all had a hearty meal. After that the bride-to-be arrived in the pretence of serving the dessert. So, Tunu stepped into the room, clumsily pulling the corner of her sari over her head. She hesitantly approached the groom, Fazlur, who was sitting in a corner. Tunu approached him with a plate full of home made sweets and rice-cakes. Fazlur took the plate, looked at the girl, then looked back at his plate, finished his dessert, wiped his mouth with a white handkerchief offered by Tunu, and stood up. "Let's go," he said to his companions, "I am full. This woman is black... like... a black cow. I don't want to marry her." By next morning the news was everywhere. Tunu was so ugly that even the insane Fazlur would not marry her.

"We should have arranged for a lunch party," Abdur Rahman said. "She would have looked fair in broad day light."

"I told you, we should have taken her to Aunt Laily's house in the city," the second of the seven brothers retorted. "No one could have detected her complexion under the bright electric light."

"You could have arranged for an evening session," commented their grandmother. "A dark woman looks fair when the twilight falls over her face."

"These lanterns make such dim light even I can't see my own hands at night," Tunu's mother muttered. Needless to say, Tunu's mother was the fairest of all the women in that household. However, her words were ignored, and the fact remained that Tunu was rejected by a mad man.

4th of April might change everything. The *mullah* from the mosque said it was an auspicious day; the Hindu priest agreed, and the brothers arranged for an evening session to present Tunu before another prospective candidate. A good day doesn't come alone; it brings evil shadows with it. The groom's father said they would not be able to attend an evening meeting since they lived quite far. They had to take a two hour boat journey followed by five hours of train ride and an hour long bicycle ride. So, it was decided that the guests would stay overnight and meet the future bride the following evening.

Everything was settled. Arrangements were made. Abdur Rahman didn't want to waste money this time. "Prepare simple refreshments and some tea," he asked his wife, "We can feed them lavishly if the wedding takes place." The fenced backyard was selected as the venue. Wicker chairs were arranged, tables were covered with muslin tablecloths, freshly cut flowers were placed, and refreshments were brought. The groom's uncles munched on the sweetened rice balls and deep fried cauliflowers. The groom chewed on his nails, while the father kept on scratching his bald head trying to figure out the financial situation of this seemingly tight-fisted family.

Twilight fell and the future bride was summoned to serve tea. Grandmother made Tunu wear a yellow sari. Earlier in the morning she was given a raw turmeric treatment; her whole body was covered with turmeric paste and she had to sit still for two hours so that her dark skin could absorb some of the orange glow from the paste. Turmeric paste was supposed to brighten skin tone and yellow sari would definitely add some more radiance to the turmeric glow. Most of all, there was twilight – the time that was neither day nor dusk, but embraced both day and night. Twilight is the time when the sun appears in its best form; or is it the earth that appears in her best form that makes twilight so mystifying? Who knows, and who cares? All that mattered was it was twilight time and Tunu had the added glow of turmeric and yellow sari to compensate her complexion.

The groom looked at her for a moment and then went back to his usual nail biting habit; the uncles scrutinised this sixteen-year-old girl from all possible angles and concurred that she was unusually dark. Her eyes were dark and deep; her lips curved the prettiest of smiles; unruly ringlets hung over her smooth forehead. Long, black hair floated like clouds. When she looked at you, you would feel a strange emotion taking over your heart; you might have this urge to look back as she softly walked away. But none of these emotions were apparent as the uncles scrutinised her and the groom continued biting his nails. Only the groom's father was a little distracted. Everyone sat in suspense as he finally spoke, "She is very dark. Very, very dark. My son is a *gora sahib* compared to her." He looked at Abdur Rahman, "My son is going to college to get his Bachelor's degree. He is planning to earn his Master's and go for a government job. But, you see, I am just a poor school teacher." The father coughed intermittently as he continued to brood over the unusual darkness of Tunu's complexion.

"We will bear all the expenses of his education," Abdur Rahman said.

"You see, I have six other children and my house is made of corrugated tin. Winters are too cold and summers are too stormy in our area. Your sister might not feel comfortable."

"We will build you a brick house," Abdur Rahman replied.

"My second son is studying for a medical degree, and it's very expensive."

"Don't worry about the expenses," Abdur Rahman nervously added.

"I don't even have money to prepare for the wedding ceremony."

"It's all settled then. The wedding will take place tonight. I am sending for the *Quazi*, the marriage registrar," Abdur Rahman ecstatically concluded.

After twilight took its departure, Tunu found herself married to a nail-biting youth who was only three years older than her. She was married to a man whose name she had no courage to ask until night covered everything with a pitch-dark veil.

II

Dhaka, 1994

Catering is such a hassle, especially when you have a troop of twenty people coming to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage. You want to offer them rich, savoury traditional dishes, just to give the message that you belong to a well-off class and can afford to pay respects to a prospective groom's family. Tunu was therefore very busy throughout the week, making sure that the caterer did everything perfectly.

"Make sure you garnish that *pilaf* with plenty of raisins and walnuts. The chicken curry that's going to go over the *pilaf* must be cooked with fresh yogurt, nutmeg and cinnamon. The kabobs should be well-done, but don't make them crunchy. And for the dessert...." Her wrinkled brow evened a little when the caterer promised to strictly follow her instructions. "These people," she complained to her daughter, Samira, "These people are playing with my temper. Can you believe they almost forgot to deep fry the walnuts and onion rings in fortified butter? You pay them thousands of *taka* to cook such simple dishes and yet they mess up." Samira wanted to say, "Why don't you cook yourself if you are so worried?" But before she started the sentence, her younger sister dragged her away. She was already in trouble for refusing to be presented in front of a room full of people as a "piece of meat." Tunu lectured for one long hour to make her understand how college education was ruining her. "Don't make me open my mouth, Samira," she said as she began to talk, "You go to college not to learn those women's rights chants. A college educated girl gets a better husband, and that's why we sent you there. The purpose is now served, unless, of course, you plan to ruin it."

Tunu was angry because her neighbour's daughter, who was younger than Samira, already got married last year to an engineer and was now living in California. And here she was! Trying to prepare her second daughter for this "viewing," and how unruly the daughter behaved! Tunu was lucky with her first daughter, who now lived in New York with her husband. Granted, the marriage was not a good one. But so what? At least they were in America. And who wouldn't be happy to live, or to talk about a daughter living there? Tunu's husband Nizam was against it; in fact, he was against the idea of having a girl choose her own suitor. It was so disgraceful for the family.

"Try to think of it," Nizam used to tell his wife, "You are planning all your life to hand over your daughter to a good husband, and your daughter denounces your plan by falling in love and declaring that she would not marry anyone else. She watched too many of those Hollywood movies, where even an angel from heaven fell for a blond and gave up his angelhood!" Nizam became furious whenever he thought about his eldest daughter and the movies she loved. Back in his days, there were Gregory Peck, John Wayne, and some directors with common sense. What did a twenty-year old Bengali girl know about love, anyway? Why should she even think

about marriage? Wasn't it her parent's duty? At least Nizam and Tunu thought it was. They obeyed their own parents, and see, how happy they still were. Their intimacy was still great, wasn't it?

"Tunu, do you remember our first night? Don't you still feel the same way about me? Don't I still arouse your passion?" Nizam asked his wife.

"Come on, don't make me blush," Tunu said as she really blushed. Nizam looked at his wife's middle-aged body and thought about his previous night with Molly, his office secretary. Sometimes having a huge office desk was not a bad idea after all.

Samira was not listening to her mother's hour-long lecture about loyalty, virtue, and obedience; she was thinking of Roni. Roni was her dream, her life, and her spineless lover. When Samira ran to him the other day and explained what a terrible time she was going through, Roni looked frozen in time. He was always scared of people around him; he was even scared to hold her hands in public. "When we marry, we will make love all night long," he used to say, "Until then, we will keep a Platonic relationship." Roni was a political science major, and Plato was his mentor. That day, however, Samira's endless tears eventually removed Roni of his political sense. The platonic lover held her hand, kissed her in public, and said, "My love for you is like a red, red rose; it will never fade or lose its colour." Having said that, he slowly walked away and never looked back. Samira only wished that Roni had the courage that Shiplu had. Shiplu and her older sister Rima fell in love and secretly got married as their families opposed to their relationship. Now they were living a happy life in New York. Love stories like that could only happen in other people's lives, or in dreams, Samira thought. In her world, she was stuck with a timid lover, a persistently nagging mother and a cruelly over-imposing father. She suddenly realised she had no way out. She felt like a caged bird.

Samira refused to put turmeric paste over her body; she ended up sitting still for two hours in a locked room for the turmeric to work its magic on her skin. She refused to wear a yellow sari and ended up wearing one. She refused to put on any make up and ended up visiting a beauty salon with her cousins. It was not fair; or rather she was not fair. Rima, her oldest sister, had fair skin and Shiplu didn't care; he fell in love with her dark eyes and wavy hair. But Samira was as dark as a starless night. She had Rima's wavy hair and beautiful dark eyes, but was in dire need of a lighter skin. She even had the most perfect smile in the family. The good thing about her smile was that if the power failed in the house and she smiled, one could see her white teeth dazzling in the dark. "I don't need a candle in a dark night if my Samira smiled," Her father used to tease her. In short, she was more visible in the dark than under full light.

The house had a big shady garden and a covered patio. Tunu had ordered the decorators to make that patio look homely and gorgeous. The nicely decorated patio, with oval tables and cone-shaped vases filled with gardenias, jasmines and Shasta Daisies, waited eagerly for twenty important guests. The "viewing" would start after

twilight fell over the patio. The guests arrived on time. Alam, the groom-to-be, was a dark-skinned man of medium height. People said he was not taller than Samira, and surely did not have a lighter skin colour. But he was well established; he had his own poultry business, an apartment and a car. He lived in a joint family though. Alam's father believed in the large and united family theory. "You should have all your sons and grandchildren with you in the dining room. It gives you a sense of invincible power," Alam's father used to tell his sons. Alam and his four brothers lived in the same building, but in different apartments, and ate lunch and dinner together. Alam's mother was in charge of the kitchen and distributed the work among her four daughters-in-law. Each daughter-in-law had an assigned day to cook the family meal. If Samira is lucky enough, she will also have assigned days to show off her culinary skills. But for now, her fate seemed to depend on the radiant rays of the setting sun that twilight promises to bring.

The food was really delicious. Everyone thanked Mrs. Nizam Ahmed for her hospitality. Mrs. Ahmed, known to the family as Tunu, or Mother, was very pleased, as far as dinner went. The success of the dessert depended, of course, on Samira. The twilight sent its signal, and out came Samira, clad in a gorgeous gold-trimmed sari, adorned with jewellery made of 24 carat gold. Her friends thought Samira looked drop-dead gorgeous; her two younger sisters thought she looked like a certain Indian movie star. Her mother held her breath, while her father let out a sigh. His daughter looked so pretty that his heart ached. As Samira served coffee, everyone waited, in a pin-drop silence. No one said a word. Alam mumbled something, and Samira thought he wanted more sugar in his coffee. As Samira poured one full spoon of sugar in his cup, his hand touched hers; she recoiled, but he felt a flow of warmth running through his veins. If only she was not this dark, he thought, the chemistry was sure to work between them. Alam's father sat quietly and sipped his coffee when his eldest son, Zinnah, broke the silence.

"I have heard a lot of good things about you, Mr. Ahmed."

Nizam Ahmed worked in the banking sector. Everyone knew he had the power to sanction bank-loans. Zinnah praised Mr. Ahmed for being such an honest officer. He knew some other bank officials who took loans from banks and gave it to some industrialists, who eventually declared bankruptcy. The officers remained rich as they got their share, while banks became empty. Now those ex-officers lived in America. They took their money and family and lived there happily. The country was full of such corrupt people, he continued. If it was not for people like Mr. Ahmed, Bangladesh would surely have gone down the drain by now. Zinnah casually mentioned his success in the garments industry. He made clothes for some American company named Wal-Mart. It was a very big company. Zinnah had visited some Wal-Mart stores last year when he was in America.

"This year I plan to expand my industrial hand."

Zinnah wanted to export frozen fish. It was a booming business. He had seen Bangladeshi people floating all over the world craving for Bangladeshi fish.

“I need at least half a million U.S. dollars to start the business.” Zinnah paused.

“Good idea,” Nizam remarked gravely.

Zinnah coughed. His throat was dry from too much talking. His father yawned and reminded everyone that it was time for his evening prayer. Alam wanted to have another cup of coffee. Nizam Ahmed needed a cigarette.

“I know my parents would object to your daughter. All the daughters-in-law in our family are white like paper. It’s a must if you want to propagate good-looking offsprings, ha ha ha.” Zinnah swallowed the rest of his laughter as he looked straight at Nizam Ahmed and added in a low voice, “But her complexion can be ignored. After all, she is the daughter of a powerful man in the banking sector.”

Zinnah’s father yawned again and asked for a glass of cold water. Alam started shaking his legs indignantly. Nizam was in desperate need of his cigarette and excused himself.

“Are you out of your mind?” Tunu exploded inside the house as Nizam tried to explain. “What will happen to us if you lost your job? I have two more daughters to marry off and two sons to educate.”

“What else is there to do?” Nizam snapped. “This has been, what, the tenth proposal that is about to go away? What do you think people will say about her tomorrow? What do you think will happen to her? I am already getting proposals for our younger daughters.”

“Ma, I don’t want to marry now,” Samira told her mother. She then looked at her father and added, “Baba, I want to get my Master’s degree. I don’t want to get married.” No one listened. No one even noticed she was there. Nizam went outside with his cigarette and threw smoke rings towards the dark night. He then threw his cigarette; it flew up like a fire-fly and came down as a comet, or as a shooting star. Nizam looked at the fallen star and went in.

“Next Friday seems to be a good day,” Nizam said, “I will throw a grand wedding party for my daughter and your brother. What do you say?”

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