

A Bird for the Journey

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The sweet scent of sandalwood filled the air around her crowded house. With only one day to go, she meticulously inspected the final preparations for the big day as the chatter of women echoed throughout the dining hall as they packed the delicate fruit cakes. Her daughter, Jothi, was getting married and like all other young girls, she too must leave the comfort of home to join her husband's family. Her fiancé, Peter, was pleasant, decent and respectful. With her consent, they had been going out for almost two years now, in full knowledge of the church and all her relatives. The date had been set, the church and the hall had been booked, and the menu had been decided with the caterers. Had she called the music band director? She ticked. "What's happening on Peter's side?" she pondered, gazing at the triangular-waved palm fronds that were swirling in-out, in-out, in the evening breeze on the fringes of the wedding tent. Her thoughts disrupted, she turned back to the loud chatter emanating from her womenfolk who were now teasing the henna artist. Turning around, she carved a smile seeing the intrinsic bronze patterns of vines and flowers that have begun to show on her daughter's soft palms and fingers.

"Ah, coming back," she began to marshal her thoughts. With the dowry paid, she did not foresee any harm in asking for a little more gold, did she? She kept playing the question in her mind, a possibility that she offered herself with no justification. After all, it was just one-and-a-half grams more than what Matilda, the matriarch of Peter's family, had proposed to give the bride. How much gold would even match the twenty grams of solid 916 that she was giving away? Bangles, stone studded *jimikis*,² "Bombay" necklace, and an eight-gram chain pulled by two lovely swans. It was gold that had been bought by hard labour, that took away twenty gruelling years to gather, gold bought with a mother's love and affection, same gold that now seemed portent in her case. She did not know how her *sammanthi*³ was going to react, the norm being the girl's side give in with more weight, of gold and dollars.

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² Traditional earrings.

³ Would be in-laws.

“*Aiyo!* What weight?” cried a voice, as though it read her mind?

She couldn’t help overhearing her cousins.

“A hundred and twenty,” exclaimed the other, bringing up her three fingers and pushing her lips with it.

She too, touched her lips and felt that it was dry. She was parting with the apple of her eye, her child, Jothi. She was a good girl, who never had boyfriends. Jothi completed the housework assiduously and her culinary skill was the talk of the neighbours. Jothi was her hope, her sunshine and laughter, in short her anchor. Yes, she was her pillar of strength in her times of trials and tribulations and a window to the outside world. Furthermore, Jothi’s economical value soared above Peter’s. Her daughter was a graduate, an English teacher, an established professional, and an independent woman in the prime of her life. Perhaps, it was true that love had blinded her to the realities of life and she behaved like an unmitigated fool. Peter was a struggling musician, sleeping by day and stringing his guitar at nightclubs. Jothi had given him a chance, a chance at love, to be loved and to find a place in society.

“Jothi, the light of my soul, doesn’t deserve a five-gram *thali*?⁴” she played the question again and again in her mind as she proceeded into the kitchen.

The smell of coffee assailed her nostrils. An old lady grinned, exposing her teeth which were stained and rusty from years of chewing betel nuts and tobacco. Her wrinkled hands measured out the powder, milk and sugar, stirring and whirling as she went about her chore. The old lady, whom she had known from the municipality, stopped stirring and looked up, raising her eyebrows in question. Approving of the aroma and the colour of the hot liquid in the big cauldron, she left the old woman with instructions to serve the men who were busy putting up the wedding tent.

Still, she could not understand why she had succumbed to this. Perhaps, the constant pestering of her daughter the day before had further encouraged her tipsy fingers to dial the dreaded numbers.

“Three-two-one, no, zero first, and then three-two-one,” she dialled. Numbness kept her fingers at bay but with great effort she accomplished it.

Gripped with fear, she began to perspire. Cold sweat rolled down her fluffy cheeks as she mentally prepared an opening note. One second, two seconds passed. She laboriously mopped her moist forehead with her hand. She waited. It seemed an eternity. She could hear the ringing tones, loudly now, snapping at her, “Why did you? Why did you?”

“*Vaaa-nakk-am,*” stammered her soft voice under the heavy receiver.

“Hello, who is that?” demanded the authoritative and familiar voice, which did not return the greeting.

⁴ A yellow string tied in three knots around the Hindu bride’s neck, signifying matrimony.

“Ah, sammanthi, it’s me, Jothi’s *amma*, how are you?”

There was a pause. Her mind began to fill up with dark and foreboding thoughts. Her tension mounted. She remembered that there had been no form of communication for the past two days except the last “conversation” over what the groom’s family offered.

“Fine,” she answered, in a matter-of-fact voice which wavered on impertinence. “What can I do for you, S-a-a-mmanthi?” The last word was elongated, in a sing-song manner. Goosebumps began to appear on her arm that held the receiver.

She gathered her courage, partly slurring over some vowels and consonants. Exerting herself, she presented what she had been rehearsing. “You see sammanthi,” she began, keeping an eye on the folks in the kitchen within ear shot. “I’ve been thinking of your proposal of giving two bangles and a three-gram chain for my daughter’s thali, err... you know, just that, we think you can forgo the two bangles and make a five-gram chain instead,” she stated gleefully, glad that she managed to say it finally.

Then, without warning, Matilda’s voice thundered down the cable. She froze. “We will only give what we think is appropriate. What can you do? What if we don’t give anything to your daughter? Not even gold for her thali? What will you do?” demanded Matilda, “and, by the way, if you want a ring, you can bring your own!” Her voice was cold and rasp. It sent shivers down her spine. It gave an insight into her future in-laws, and a warning to prepare for future encounters.

Her face flushed hot. From a corner, she noticed her daughter, beaming with anticipation; blowing onto her hands for the henna to dry while she waited, bright like the marigolds that adorned her walkway – orange, yellow and crimson. What she failed to notice was her own tears, viscous and clear, dropping, “plop, plop,” onto her thick, crisp, black blouse.

“Where have I failed? What had I asked for?” She tried to reason, recalling the uncalled for tirade from Matilda.

“Even the ring?” She dropped the receiver to its silence. “Nothing much,” she quivered in a startled voice.

An air of despondency hung over the room.

“Why do you look so remorseful Jothi?” she asked the next morning and after much persuasion, Jothi reluctantly answered, “They won’t be coming to fetch me for the wedding, ma. They have asked that I go and meet them in their hometown. Big brother can accompany me,” she said, confused and disappointed.

“But why, what more now?” she asked, looking at the new coat of paint – guava pink – that her husband and sons were busy diluting for the western wall.

The groom's family had forgone the engagement, saying that it was orthodox, and being the modern Christians they were, it did not detract from the laws of the church. True perhaps, but can't they even fetch her?

"Mom, I'm not sure what I want to say," Jothi said in resignation.

It was her Jothi's wedding. Jothi deserved to be treated with respect. It was respect supposed to be shown to the bride's family, Christian or orthodox, cultured or not cultured, the girl, being taken away, must be taken in all sacredness for holy matrimony. Traditions were the cornerstones that instilled respect.

"Could this be happening?" she pinched herself.

"What do they think of her? What did they think of Jothi? A plain Jane?" she bit her lips hard.

In a stupor, she walked straight to where the telephone was. She could have strangled Matilda if she were there.

"Bitch," she heard herself say, "Wicked old bitch. What more does she want? Misers alright, could they be that greedy? What do they want? Jothi's pay-packet? Her gold? Peter's security?" her mind went blank.

She picked up the phone instinctively. This time, the numbers did not fail her. She knew what she wanted to say. This Indian habit of the groom's family picking on the bride's had to stop. Not in this century. The line was engaged.

"Call Matilda, and tell her to come fast, ippo!" she shouted.

"Halo, yaar athu, enna vendum, speak up?" she heard Matilda's voice enquiring.

What ensued from then on was beyond her conscious power to recall until the other voice went dead.

"Mom, don't do this," snapped Jothi, pulling and dropping the receiver clumsily onto its holder, which began gagging like an angry child.

"I want this wedding amma, for Peter and me."

It left her bewildered. She was speechless. She gave a long, searching look, waiting for an answer. She shook her head, smiling in disbelief. No amount of education, no amount of good upbringing could ever stand up to the creeping powers of love, she reckoned. She realised that the twinkle in her eyes, now, belonged to someone else. Her little spark has drifted.

The church bells rang, announcing the arrival of the bride. Time stood still. She could not help tears streaming down her cheeks. At the sound of the organ, the brides-maid marched ahead, followed by the flower girl in a fairy dress and the pageboy, carrying an opened bible that held the sacred thali, the chain that marked "taken" on an Indian bride. Jothi was solemn, yet half smiling, looking down, walking assuredly in her father's arms; glittering with every move, with the rich

*kanchipuram*⁵ sari, showing the artistically woven mango designs in bright marigold, orange, yellow and crimson, swimming in a sea of chilly red.

Her relatives were whispering amid the sermon. “What was the commotion?” she wondered. She had told her women about Matilda and the conversation she last had. Why were there whispers now? The garlands of roses and jasmines had been blessed. The vows were being exchanged now. The burly priest was asking questions, his mouth bubbling in big “O”s but she couldn’t make out the words. The more she bent forward to listen, the more the words seemed indecipherable. His voice was also drowned by the ceiling fans that were whirling too loudly. It was a big relief that everything went as scheduled but her heart was heavy. She strained to hear the “I do-s,” but before she could, the thali was already being fitted around Jothi’s neck. She gazed in wonder. A six gram-er it was! Her women shook their heads up and down, left and right. The ordeal was over. She smiled to herself.

The alarm clock showed four. Nonetheless, she woke up and walked past her sleeping relatives, her invisible list in her hand. Focus and Tick.

Gold. Tick! Tick!

Breakfast. Tick!

Sunshine. Tick! (she prayed, for the sun was not up yet)

The make-up artist. Tick! (not too much of foundation)

Wedding cake. Tick!

Cameraman, three rolls at a hundred each (bloody cut-throat!). Tick!

Caterer (burn the food or you won’t get your balance). Tick!

Florist (at the church, the altar). Tick later!

Hall decorators. Tick!

The groom’s entourage (To hell with Matilda!) but ticked again!

Everything was ticked!

Slowly, the guests trickled out one by one, giving their blessings to the newly-weds. Her two sons were busy handing out the door gifts, wrapped nicely in cute boxes of silver and magic dust. Some of the ladies were crooning while kissing the bride. The bride’s friends were laughing and chatting gaily. It was indeed a memorable day. She tried to remember hers, but it was strangely vague now. Soon, the hall was empty. A scattering of relatives grouped in small pockets. Some applauded her for a job well done. Others wanted to know if she needed any help. Her husband was busy paying off the band performers and the caterer while some

⁵ Silk material (sari) that is exported from one of the textile cities of South India.

of her nephews and nieces were busy bursting the balloons that formed the arch to the hall's entrance.

The honour seemed to be reserved for her, the best saved for the last. She walked towards the couple, her eyes fixed on Jothi. Approaching, their eyes met, soft and tender, as if they were seeking the most precious thing that had been temporarily lost.

“My child,” she heard herself say, “the glow and the song of my heart, before I let go of you, make sure that Peter, his family, are worthy of your education and the hardships you have endured to reach your achieved success now.”

She hugged her daughter, sensing for the first time, the strange, contiguous thin air that came between them. She felt that they were two different individuals.

“I have made my choice, amma,” whispered her little bird, softly into her ears, “everything will be fine. You’ll see.”