

Why Deny the Obvious

by Reshmi Hebbar

Shruti Raman had known the Reddys her entire life. Their family had adopted hers as if she and her parents were tragic orphans instead of just another clan of middleclass Indians in Western Pennsylvania trying to get ahead. And yes, what had happened to the Ramans was sad enough for another family to take a charitable and then long-term interest in, the loss of the baby that would have been Shruti's much younger sister. But decades had passed since then. The "children" were educated, out of the house and working. Though Shruti hadn't been close to Pallavi Reddy since they were teenagers, Pallavi's latent lesbianism introducing enough complexity into the equation without the other main thing that Shruti was never able to address, it seemed wrong to her that not a single Reddy was with her on this mission in Bangalore. Every topic that had ever mattered--from the best elementary schools to affordable graduate programs--had always been discussed between their families. Usha Reddy and her husband, Manu, had been the authorities because they were the ones with more children, with the eldest child, the couple with the husband breadwinner who managed to avoid the layoffs of the 1980s. What was the hidden framework of rules, then, that had kept the subject of love and marriage off limits?

“Shruti’s put on weight,” Vanita Auntie observed from the middle seat of the car as it jounced away from the airport towards Shruti’s fate. Shruti sat with her head against the glass, jetlag dulling the panic she’d nursed across terminals and continents. “Looking good,” her aunt finished.

“Tell me, Radha. How’s everyone there?” Vanita Auntie went on speaking to Shruti’s mother. “How are the Reddys?”

“Usha is very busy now with the grandchildren,” her mother answered. The envy in her voice pricked through Shruti’s rising anguish. Her words had touched too close to the main thing.

“Careful, Bipin!” Vanita Auntie scolded the driver as he narrowly missed two schoolgirls who were walking together, their looped braids swinging forward.

“The Reddys’ eldest son, Ravi, just started his own medical practice,” Shruti’s father added from the front seat. Surprise jolted her so forcefully, the whiplash stirring some sense of betrayal--her father hated the gossipy kind of talk that illuminated his own failures--that she leaned into the conversation like Vanita Auntie.

“Oh ho,” Shruti imagined her aunt exclaiming next, but instead Vanita Auntie shouted too loudly for the car.

“Bipin!!”

The car’s side mirror thwacked the shoulder of a pedestrian in a bush shirt, who tripped lightly and gave them a pointed frown. “Bipin, this is not the way!” her aunt reproached, and Shruti understood too well the reflex of his “Yes, madam” as they drove on through the maze of

traffic circles, the models smiling down on them from the latest billboards, more cosmopolitan looking than on her last trip. Despite the certainty that she would have been more comfortable traveling in a sweatshirt and jeans, she knew that her aunt's compliment about her looks was because Shruti's otherwise bony figure, even at thirty, looked curvier in the stiff cotton salwar kummies she'd worn for the past twenty-two hours, just as her mother said it would.

What was Shruti except a dutiful child, no matter what her parents and their friends thought about Indian versus American kids?

"Vanita, later on we will need to find the paperwork for Shruti to get dual citizenship," her father said.

"Shruti should talk to Prakash and see what he wants to do," her mother added gently. Nobody mentioned what they'd told Shruti back home, the fact that she could always say "no" if she didn't like him. Shruti's head lolled back now in the car, and she released herself to the vortex unleashed by her parents' and aunt's chatter.

How would Shruti know if she "liked" Prakash and whether that would be enough? This was not something that could be taught and learned in a class. The youngest Reddys, Pallavi and her twin brother, Arjun, both above average students, hadn't mastered this skill, because both were still single like herself. Yet Shruti and Ravi Reddy had always excelled, had always achieved. Could it really be seen as an achievement, though, what Shruti was ready to do, and what Ravi had done, even if it had gotten his parents grandchildren?

Would anybody have cared, in the future, if Shruti lacked a romantic story of how she had met the man who would become her husband? Who would even know about the old fantasy she'd been nurturing, well after the chances of it becoming reality expired? That portrait of

herself and him as young kids, weekend after weekend, running up the stairs to hang out in different parts of the house after dinner, she to Pallavi's room to play Sorry and he to the boys' room to put the Graceland album on for the millionth time. It would have made a lovely anecdote, and Shruti would have been earnest in its recollection, sincere in relating how with every word of "You Can Call Me Al" being sung down the hall, she was convinced that she knew not only what it meant to "like" someone, but what it meant to love.

And these "citizenship" discussions sparked in Shruti's mind yet another way she fell short. She could never help but think of the prize for "good citizenship" whenever her parents brought it up, because this was one award at school that she had never won. The nonacademic distinction had been typically given to provocateurs, or students who didn't seem to apply themselves.

Shruti knew who would have won such an award if the Hindu temple's school had ever given one out.

The car careened now off M.G. Road, and Shruti sank back and let a decades-old memory continue.

"Kalyanabhuta . . . gatraya . . . karma . . ."

"Keep going, Arjun," the Hindu temple Sunday School Auntie had urged. "Lord Srinivasa needs the whole prayer."

"Kalayanabhuta gatraya . . . karma chameleon?"

The students in her Sunday School class had laughed, and then Ravi walked in with worksheets for everyone. He corrected his younger brother before walking out.

“Karmitata pradiyine.”

“Very good, Ravi!” the Auntie had called after him.

“What a douche bag,” Arjun muttered.

“Shut up, Arjun,” Pallavi had warned.

Shruti had been eager to hide the flushing of her cheeks as she registered how much Ravi’s outfit reminded her of Michael Jackson, and the less important shame of her not knowing what a douche bag was. She had gotten used to the odd fact that the twins, one year younger than herself, knew things before she did, like when Pallavi had told her the truth about Shruti’s baby sister who died when Shruti was almost nine years old.

“It didn’t really die,” Pallavi had explained one evening when they were spreading Shruti’s sleeping bag out in Pallavi’s bedroom. “It was stillborn,” she finished.

But like other things, Shruti never discussed it with her parents, not even during those first several weeks, when Usha Reddy dropped off food for the Ramans, and her mother would transfer the meals to clean plastic yogurt containers and then stand for minutes on end at the sink, forgetting herself in the faucet’s spray gushing over Usha Auntie’s white Corelle ware. Not even when Shruti was fully an adult and at her worthiest, just having completed an MBA, and Usha Reddy phoned to share the news that Ravi had gotten engaged to a “girl” they’d found for him through relatives in India, and Shruti’s mother had become so incongruously happy, smiling in a way that Shruti hadn’t seen for years. Not even then had Shruti sat her mother down and demanded that she explain herself. How could she have begun then? Where could she have found the words to ask whether she herself had ever been considered? How many people, including herself, might the question have wounded?

“Home again, home again,” sang Vanita Auntie as the driver brought the car to a stop. And it felt like it was in a way--the children playing badminton in the dusty road, Bipin hauling the luggage up the stairs, the teasing of the crows from the balcony where Shruti removed her shoes and listened to the sounds of her aunt calling to her servant to boil water for tea. Maybe it required no more of a shift than the cyclical turning of night into day, this matter of dispelling her old hopes and beliefs and securing her allegiance to a more rational system of coupling, a husband selected in India from choices curated by those who claimed to know her well enough. Maybe it was as easy as leaning her elbows onto the balcony rail and opening herself to the wonder of what others thought of as ordinary, the open windows, the noisy street life, the uncollared pets. Then, as Shruti was about to step inside her aunt’s apartment and trying to adopt an expression of placid adaptability, she heard an unmistakable rat-a-tat of drums coming through a neighbor’s widow, the equanimity of Paul Simon’s voice whisking her back home, to what would always be her home.

She could hear her aunt calling her, could sense her cousins rising from their studying at the kitchen table to come and greet her, could anticipate what would happen over the next few hours, the tea and delicious stuffed parathas, the catchup about her cousins’ “exams,” and then the confab in Vanita Auntie’s bedroom over which of the two saris Shruti should wear to meet her suitor. She knew her mother would lean down while they pleated the fabric around her, as she had done one or two times in the past, and whisper in their mother tongue that she looked pretty.

But it wouldn’t have been true. Shruti knew this as she stood at the threshold, listening to the plaintive chorus of a once popular song too old now to be playing by accident. It was a message for her to move on and get on with it. She’d had her chance. As the chorus swelled, she

stayed to listen one last time, remembering herself at fifteen, on a school bus headed to the bonfire site during temple summer camp, Ravi Reddy, then a veteran counselor, crooning with abandon to the tape playing on someone's boombox, drumming his hands on the bus seats, free of his little brother's teasing because Arjun had been kicked out of camp by then for delinquency. Ravi had thrown himself into the open place in Shruti's seat, the space unoccupied there because Pallavi, in solidarity with her twin brother, had decided to dump camp for the summer. His arm in its Henley had been so close to her that she had stopped breathing--what's going to happen now, she'd asked herself--but then Ravi had turned his knees away into the aisle and continued singing, like the seat had only been a matter of convenience. It was perhaps then that she began to realize the extent of her failures, to be beautiful, to be interesting, all things that Usha Reddy likely figured out over the next decade in her quiet quest for her eldest son's future wife--how the woman must have known that it would be impossible for Shruti to be enough to get him to turn around and warble those last bars at her ("Why deny the obvious child?") instead of to the general crowd on the bus, who were pleased to join in, charmed by his appearance as always. It seemed everyone, be they smart or average, even those who scored no gold stars on their tests but impressed their teachers with the strength of their promising hearts, good citizens and indifferent ones, everybody but Shruti was able somehow to open up their mouths to show their delight, to show how much they loved something.

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