

ONE

When Marathi-speaking parents are hunting for a suitable boy for their unmarried daughter, they refer to him as a *sthal*. In the literal sense, a good *sthal* is a good place. As in, 'Do you know of a good place where I can dump my daughter?' At least that's what it sounds like to me, when my mother asks people if they know of a good *sthal*. And my mother makes that enquiry daily – to newspapers, to neighbours, to casual acquaintances and classmates she has long lost touch with. One of these days, she is going to accost complete strangers in her bid to find a good place to dump her daughters.

Daughters. That's right. Plural. In this country, that too. Where having one is considered bad luck, having two is overly optimistic, three is reckless and four, like my mother has, is just plain insane. You have to be richer beyond the dreams of avarice to afford dowry for four daughters. No, wait, not *dowry*. These days offering and accepting dowry is

illegal,* after all. So it wouldn't be dowry. It would be called devaan-ghevaan – give-and-take. As in, we'll *give* you one chance to dump your daughter in our family and we'll *take* everything you've got in return.

My parents, Aai and Nana, would have to give-and-take four times to get us all off their hands. And you couldn't do that on one man's salary. To do that, you have to have ancestral wealth or a distant relative addled enough to leave you their estate or, failing all that, at least a very negotiable set of personal ethics. Sadly, for my mother, my father ticks none of these boxes. Academically inclined philosophy professors rarely do.

So the responsibility of obtaining suitable husbands for her daughters has fallen upon my mother. And I'll say this for her: she takes it very, very seriously. Which means I should have seen what was coming when I decided to broach the subject of me studying further.

* At its purest, dowry was supposed to be insurance. It was what a bride got from her parents to ensure that, should the marriage fail or the husband die, the woman had something to fall back on. But, soon enough, dowry became just a list of ridiculous demands made by the groom's family, for anything from a gold-plated watch to an entire house, which the bride's family had to provide, or else. It was only in 1961 that the Dowry Prohibition Act made giving as well as receiving dowry illegal, for all Indian citizens. It has since then been amended several times to prevent dowry-related cruelty, dowry deaths and dowry demands leading to domestic violence. Nowadays in India, only about, oh, twenty women, give or take, die in dowry-related deaths. Every. Single. Day.

‘Aai,’ I said casually, as I helped her chop ladies fingers* for lunch. ‘I was thinking . . .’

‘Take the dal off the stove,’ she ordered, as she tightened the lid of the large aluminium pressure cooker one last time.

I obeyed, grabbing the pot of dal with the steel tongs and gingerly lowering the vessel onto the kitchen counter. Aai set the pressure cooker on the stove, adjusted the heat and began kneading the lump of wheat flour dough in the flat aluminium paraat before her. Every now and then, she’d glance warily at the cooker, as if it would explode any minute.†

‘So I was thinking . . .’ I tried again. ‘I’d like to do an MA.’

Silence. She continued kneading the dough as if I hadn’t said a word. Had she not heard me?

‘Aai, I said . . .’

‘I heard,’ she replied curtly. ‘Are you done with the ladies fingers?’

‘Almost,’ I said. I had expected this behaviour, so I was prepared. ‘See, if I do an MA, I can get a job as a lecturer, maybe even in Nana’s college. I’d get a salary, we could use the extra money . . .’

More silence. But I refused to be cowed. I had finished my BA last year and, since then, had sat around the house,

* Why okra is called ladies fingers in India remains a mystery. The vegetable certainly doesn’t resemble a woman’s digit. Unless you have compromised vision. Due to an LSD overdose.

† Because until the 1970s, pressure cookers in India routinely did explode and kill people. This only stopped a decade later when manufacturers put in thingamajigs to prevent that from happening. So while you may think rice is bad for you *now*, remember, there was a time when it was downright lethal.

doing nothing but housework. I could practically hear my twenty-two-year-old brain begging for some kind of stimulation that went beyond rolling *polis** by the stove. No, Aai was going to hear me out, silence or no silence.

‘And . . . and . . . I mean,’ I continued, ‘Nana is going to retire in a few years: a monthly salary will come in handy then.’ I went on, fully aware of the icy waves of her disapproval heading towards me. ‘I’ve even found a second-hand shop for the books. I just need the money for the fees . . . and . . . and, I could return that money to you and Nana once I start getting my salary.’

She stopped kneading and looked at me, lips pursed, an exasperated look in her eyes. ‘We don’t have the money for it,’ she began, but I was ready for this line of refusal.

‘Aga, but you must’ve saved some for my wedding, na?’ I said plaintively. ‘I can use some of that. I spoke to Nana, he says it’s the rational thing to . . .’

The piercing whistle of the pressure cooker cut me short.

Aai shot it a beady look, daring it to so much as shudder. It fell silent.

She didn’t.

‘Oh, you spoke to your father, ka?’ She perched her flour-covered hands on her waist and my spirits sank. This was her battle pose. I had seen Nana flee to the park when she took

* One might say ‘*poli*’ and ‘*chapati*’ are the same thing. It all depends on which part of Maharashtra one calls home. Ila, born in Mumbai and belonging to a community from the coastal region of the state, calls it *poli*. But had she hailed from any of the landlocked districts of the state, she would have called it *chapati*. Because there, the term ‘*poli*’ is conferred only upon that queen of delicacies, the *puran poli*.

this pose in the middle of one of their arguments. 'And what does *he* know about marrying off daughters? Spends all his time thinking about what dead men thought. Like that ever got anything done!'

She returned to the dough, pounding it with extra vigour.

I had indeed spoken to my father about it. Nana had seen my point. But now, considering how vehemently Aai seemed to be against it, I wondered if he would support me in this fight. And if he did, whether it would make much of a difference. No, I needed to make Aai see the sense in what I was proposing.

'What is so wrong with what I am saying?' I asked, trying to keep my voice level. 'Prachi from my class in college got a job at BPT. Anagha is working as a clerk in State Bank. They're both giving their entire salary to their parents and . . .'

'Am I Prachi's mother? Anagha's? No, na? Then what do I care what they do?'

'But what is the problem if I get a job, Aai?' My voice was rising but I couldn't help it. She was being so unreasonable.

'The problem?' She spun around and glared at me. 'The problem is you don't seem to understand the situation we are in. Your father's salary just about covers our monthly expenses. What little we save, you want to blow it all on studying *more*?' Her voice, already shrill, now reached an alarming pitch. 'It's going to be difficult enough to find someone for you with your complexion, and now you want to go and get an MA? Who will marry you then?'

And there it was. My complexion, as she called it. The millstone around Aai's neck. The subject of all her prayers.

My sisters had all taken after her, see – fair, rosy-skinned beauties, perfect little flowers of Konkanastha Brahmin

womanhood. Me, I had inherited, from God knows which ancestor, skin several shades darker. But we didn't call it dark in this house, oh no, of course not. Aai was staunch in her denial: I was 'wheatish'. Nothing some gram flour mixed with cream and raw turmeric wouldn't fix. Never mind that it had done no such thing in the past twenty years. I hated the smell of the wretched stuff by now.

I slammed shut the villi* on which I was chopping the ladies fingers, and stormed into the living room. She followed, waving her flour-covered hands.

'Men want wives whom they can feel superior to,' she announced. 'They don't want a girl who is more educated than them, let alone one that works! If the wife brings home money, what use is the husband, tell me? If you don't believe me, ask Juee.' She turned to my elder sister, who was sitting cross-legged on a chattai on the floor, correcting the homework of the children she tutored every afternoon. 'Juee! Tell her. Tell her what that fellow at the marriage bureau said yesterday.'

Juee looked at me apologetically. With her alabaster skin, dark brown hair and light brown eyes, she was Aai's golden

* A villi is a kitchen instrument in the same way that the Colosseum is a historical monument – the label technically fits, if you ignore all the blood involved. What a villi actually is, is this: a viciously sharp, crescent blade attached to a wooden board. On one end of the blade is an evil, serrated disc. Marathi women through the ages have sat on the wooden board, casually chopping vegetables into wafer-thin slices on the edge of the blade or nonchalantly grating fresh coconut on the sharp disc. Experienced Marathi women, that is. Novices have cut themselves to varying degrees. Ergo, the blood.

child. Since the day she had turned eighteen, five years before, Aai had been absolutely sure men would line up for Juee's hand, not only because she was objectively beautiful, but also because she seemed to have all the qualities men love in a wife. Juee was obedient, graceful, patient and an excellent cook. In other words, nothing like me. I should have hated her with all my heart, but she also happened to be . . . caring and humble and, well, just deeply likeable. Besides, she actually liked me. So, now, as she turned to me with an embarrassed expression on her face, I knew that it was only Aai's direct command that was making her say what she was about to.

'He said . . . that the families who came to the bureau to find a match for their sons usually want a girl who *is* educated,' she said, not looking directly at me, 'but a graduate is enough for them. They . . . they seem to think that a woman who is too educated or has a job can't . . . wouldn't be interested in or . . . or be able to run a house.'

'It's 1976!' I snapped. 'A woman is running this whole country right now! What world are these fools living in?'