

WHAT WILL PEOPLE THINK?

Pride. Prejudice. Puran Polis.

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CHAPTER 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 illegal¹, 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.

‘Aai,’ I said casually, as I helped her chop ladies fingers² for lunch. ‘I was thinking...’

¹ 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.

² 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.

‘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 minute³.

‘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, doing nothing but housework. I could practically hear my twenty-two-year-old brain begging for some kind of stimulation that went beyond rolling polis⁴ 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

‘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 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 villi⁵ 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 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?’

⁵ 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.

‘The real world,’ Aai shot back. ‘Something you know nothing of. Aga, forget interest or ability, you should first have time, no, to run the house? Married life⁶ isn’t easy – there are a hundred little things you have to keep track of. Nobody can handle all that along with the responsibilities of a proper job!’

‘You’re wrong!’ My fingers clenched into fists. ‘I know about the real world! I know you need money in it, that’s why I want a job, so that...’

‘If she gets to have a job, I also want one, huh!’ My younger sister Latika sat up from her reclining position on the divan that stood along one wall of the living room, her mouth turned down in its habitual petulant pout.

People often think Latika is immature. But that’s not entirely true. She is also spoilt and foolish. Not for her the claustrophobic shackles of rational thought. An impulse is enough. She is eighteen and believes this makes her behaviour both adorable and excusable, which just goes to show the extent of her self-delusion.

Now, with a dreamy-eyed expression, she sighed. ‘I want to be an air hostess. Fly all over the world, meet interesting people, visit exciting places...’

Of course. Why wouldn’t Air India take someone who failed geography three years in a row, as long as they had a burning desire to ‘visit exciting places’. But I didn’t say that out aloud. Latika is Aai’s pet, and I was in enough hot water with her as it was.

Aai gave me a look as if to say, ‘Now look what you’ve done’, then shook her head in exasperation and marched back into the kitchen, just as the doorbell rang.

Latika lay back down again, against the pillows, unperturbed by any desire to answer the door. Juee looked like she was about to get up from her seat on the floor, but I gestured to her to not bother.

I opened the door and let Nana, our father, in.

He took off his chappals by the door, handed a cloth bag full of vegetables to Juee and settled into his wooden easy chair, stretching out with a small sigh against the striped nylon fabric that formed

⁶ Tellingly enough, married life in Marathi is referred to as saunsaar, literally meaning ‘the world’. That your life as a married woman will become your entire world is not so much implied as hammered in using iron nails and a sledgehammer.

its back and seat. With his fake leather hand-pouch⁷ resting on his stomach, he wiped his sweat-soaked grey hair with his handkerchief and gave me a tired smile.

When I didn't return the smile, his own dimmed.

'What happened?' he asked gently. Apart from Juee, Nana was the only person in the family who showed me any modicum of affection.

'Aai said no,' I said tonelessly. 'No MA, no job.'

'I'll talk to her.' He reached out and patted my hand.

'That can wait,' Aai said, coming out of the kitchen with a glass of water in her hands. 'I have to talk to *you* before that.' She handed him the glass, then pulled up a small stool and sat next to him.

Nana was looking enquiringly at the rest of us. 'Can I have some tea first?' he asked wearily.

Nana always seemed weary around Aai.

'Yes, of course.' She was about to get up when Juee offered to get the tea, and bustled into the kitchen, the cloth bag of vegetables in tow. She was back in a trice with a cup in her hand. Tea was made three times a day in our home. Once in the morning, for breakfast. Once in the afternoon around four. And once in the evening, with an extra cup for Nana to have when he returned from work. Thrice a day, I'd be assailed with the sweet aroma of cardamom, left longing for what I couldn't have. See, I was banned from drinking tea in our home: Aai had decreed that tea darkens the complexion and mine 'didn't need any more of that'.

Now, I watched Nana take a sip and close his eyes in bliss. Then he turned to Aai and said. 'Is there anything to munch on, with this?'

'There's a poli left over from morning, if you want,' she replied.

'Will do. Just put some toop⁸ on it and bring.'

⁷ Long before the messenger bag and the backpack fought for supremacy as the accessory of choice for Indian men, there was the hand pouch: a small flat pouch stuffed with all the things the discerning seventies man needed on the go. That's where his house keys went, along with a ballpoint pen, his train permit, a handkerchief and maybe even a small comb. The hand pouch nestled cosily in his armpit as he made his way to and from his office, holding on for dear life to a handle in a train compartment or in a public transport bus. It set him apart as a man of taste, of refinement – and one who could always be depended on for the loan of a ballpoint pen.

⁸ Toop – clarified butter – is an integral part of the Konkanastha Brahmin household. So much so that tradition dictates that any visiting son-in-law be given a tiny bowl of melted toop to drink before his meal. This is called aaposhnee and is meant to help the rest of the meal go down well. You are not allowed to protest or say things like 'I actually don't like ghee much' or 'Isn't that too fatty?' Because as far as Konkanasthas are concerned, there is no such thing as too much toop.

Aai disappeared into the kitchen. Quick as lightning, Nana held out the cup to me and gestured frantically. I snatched it from him with a grin, took a long sip and handed the cup back to him, just in time.

Aai came back from the kitchen with a toop-smearred poli, steaming on a plate. She must've warmed it quickly on the tava before bringing it out. 'So what I was saying was...' she began, taking her seat on the stool once again.

'Where's Malu?' Nana asked loudly, taking a sip of his tea.

He was referring to my youngest sister, Malati, born a full three years after Latika, thanks to my parents' last-ditch attempt at having a boy. I don't think they had thought things through when they conceived her because by the time Malu came into the world, Aai's attention was already divided between three daughters, all under the age of ten. Malu pretty much grew up being left to her own devices and, even today, neither demands nor is given much attention by my parents. So Nana asking about her right now, while Aai was trying to talk to him about something else, was clearly his way of deliberately annoying Aai.

Except Malu, who had been in the bedroom during this conversation, didn't know that. On hearing her name, she came out into the living room, a questioning look on her face. 'Yes, Nana?' she asked. 'You called?'

'Oh,' Nana replied, a little thrown. 'Uh... how was school?'

'It's a Saturday,' Malu said, puzzled.

'Never mind, then.'

Malu returned to the bedroom looking so nonplussed she was practically minus.

'Done?' Aai asked crossly. 'Now... I wanted to talk about tomorrow.'

'Why, what's tomorrow?' he asked me, the ghost of a mischievous smile on his face.

'Sunday?' I shrugged.

'Ah.' He took a bite of the poli. 'And that warrants a discussion, is it?'

'It's the Kelkar boy's wedding tomorrow, as you well know.' Aai pursed her lips. 'And now don't ask "Kelkar who?"' Kelkar, from the floor below, whom you sit with on the katta after dinner, whose cigarette you take puffs from and think I don't know, whose son I told you would be a

good match for Ila, but did you listen? No. It's *that* son's wedding tomorrow, and we are invited and we are going and that is final!

She placed her hands on her waist and threw Nana a challenging look, while I shook my head in disbelief. Me, marry Arun Kelkar? Ha, ha, ha. We'd been in the same class through ten years of school. Arun had been the class duffer. How he'd scraped through his matric exam, when he was forever playing under-arm cricket in the quadrangle below our building, was beyond me. That was his only passion, cricket. Imagine me, having to take an interest in that godforsaken game for the rest of my life. What next, develop a sudden enduring love for kadve vaal⁹?

Nana finished his tea in one long sip and handed Aai the cup. 'Okay,' he said, getting up from his easychair and going to the window where the clothes were drying. He pulled his striped cotton panchaa¹⁰ from the washing line and began walking towards the bathroom for a bath.

Aai seemed to have expected some kind of revolt from him because she stood up and looked around expectantly. 'And... and we better get there early too!' she called out, as the bathroom door shut. Only I heard her add under her breath: 'Before all the good boys are taken.'

⁹ Ila is in a minority in hating vaal, because the Maharashtrian dish called vaalachi usal, made from vaal – field beans – is considered a delicacy on the Konkan coast. Which just goes to show that hunger truly is the best sauce, because nothing else but crippling hunger could have made an entire community love such a pedestrian – to put it mildly – dish.

¹⁰ A panchaa is to a towel, what a meringue is to a buttercream frosted pastry – roughly the same ingredients, but vastly different densities.