

Sweet dreams

Reema rubbed the sleep from her eyes and pried them open. She was already exhausted from the madness of the weekend but she had to get up and prepare for the worst part yet, the arrival of the in-laws. It had been a typical Diwali weekend in the Saksena household, fireworks blasting as soon as the first signs of darkness arrived, rooms awash in candlelight, pujas dedicated to goddess Lakshmi, endless rainbows of succulent Indian sweets, and lots and lots of family. As tiring as it got, Reema adored the mania of Diwali. It was the one time of year she didn't feel so far away from home. The one time of year, in a life that was sometimes a little lonely, that she felt truly connected to the people around her. It was a spiritual homecoming of sorts, a realignment of her values with her place in the world.

In a sleepy haze Reema stumbled to the kitchen in search of water to wash away the excesses of the night before – poori and aloo-mattar until she was blue, followed by more squares of barfi than should be legal. She found Akaash, her self-absorbed, American-raised younger cousin propped up against the kitchen bench with a face full of cream and a half eaten piece of raspberry lamington in his fist. “The house is full of beautiful handmade mitthai and you want the plastic supermarket lamington?” Reema asked shaking her head. “Chhi. No respect for our culture in your generation”. “But jizz this stuff is the shizz.” he said, “I wanna take some home. Can I?” “Arre baap” Reema sighed raising her eyes to the heavens as if to ask what to do with the useless young of today, “ok ok. I will get you some after Amma and Babu have gone.”

Amma and Babu had not in fact, given Reema and her husband Suresh, an actual date on which they intended to depart. They had a habit of arriving on their son's doorstep and

staying anywhere between two weeks and five months. Reema hoped to bhagwan that they were not planning another almost half year stay. Their last visit had driven her to take up smoking again, a habit she thought she had left behind in college. Gulping down as much water as her tummy could manage, Reema ran through her mental list of things to do before they arrived: hide the alcohol, change the satin sheets on the spare bed to flannel, rearrange the spice cupboard because it would be inspected, tidy up the puja cabinet and finally, light some incense.

She heard Suresh yawn as he entered the kitchen, clearly as food-drugged from the night before as she was. "Morning" he kissed a miniature train crawling across the collar of her pyjamas. "Oi" she said turning to him "no kissy-kissy when your parents arrive accha?" He smiled. He had gotten used to his wife's heightened levels of paranoia whenever his parents visited. "Good lamington champ?" he asked Reema's cousin, who was busy cramming the last slivers of cake and coconut into his mouth. "Mmmhmmm" Akaash replied.

Reema shuffled off to start on her list, her face falling as she remembered that she also needed to pick up fresh flowers. She heard the phone ring in the kitchen and left it to Suresh to answer, knowing it would be his parents saying they had checked in and had just skimmed the edge of the baggage allowance and Cathay Pacific flight 432 would be landing on time and they would see everyone in approximately twelve hours.

As she pulled the sheets off the bed in the spare room she heard Suresh behind her. She spun around, his face was ashen and his hands were shaking. "There was an accident. On the way to the airport. The taxi...rolled". Reema's mind was in chaos. "But are they ok? They're ok right? Suresh?" She looked up, searching his glassy eyes. "No they're not Reems. That was

Rajeev. They...they didn't make it". Reema froze. Suresh's brother Rajeev lived in Singapore with their parents. It had to be true. Suresh collapsed into her arms, grief welling inside him. She held him as he let his tears roll. How could this have happened?

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In numbness they booked the first flight out to Singapore. Reema was as distressed about her lost in-laws as her heartbroken husband. Watching houses fade into the clouds beneath her, she thought about the packages of mitthai she had packed for Amma and Babu to take back to Singapore. They were on the dining table, with other remnants of Diwali revelry – candles, deer, leftovers and memories of exuberant mealtime conversations. They won't get to eat their share of mitthai she thought sadly. They won't get to eat their sweets.

-Ends-

Glossary

Achha – colloquial Hindi term translating to “ok”

Arre Baap – colloquial Hindi term translating most closely to “oh god”

Aloo-mattar – traditional Indian curry made of potato and peas

Barfi – traditional Indian sweet made of condensed milk and cut in squares. Similar to fudge.

Bhagwan – Hindi term for God

Chhi – colloquial Hindi term used to chide someone. Translating most closely to “tsk tsk”

Deer – Indian lamp comprising of cotton wool soaked in clarified butter inside a small clay pot. Commonly lit during religious celebrations

Jizz – the adaptation of “jiji”, a colloquial hindi word used to address any female that may act in the role of a sister, into American rapper slang

Lakshmi – Hindu goddess of wealth

Mitthai – Hindi word for “sweet”

Poori – deep fried Indian bread. Similar to the commonly known “roti” but smaller

Puja – a traditional Hindu prayer

Shizz – the adaptation of “shit” into American rapper slang