

FIRST EDITION

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*For:
Jane
Shelagh
Pam
Deborah*

I

THE BED

. . .

a cream-coloured kurta, the neck and cuffs of the long silk shirt trimmed in gold thread. a red dhoti. a cream-and-red turban edged in gold, from which a long curtain of pearl-like beads hangs and covers his face. around him red draperies—a ceremonial canopy. behind the canopy, walls decorated in red fabric. my eyes are lowered, focused on his cream silk slipper shoes curled at the toes. he is standing on red flowers strewn on the red carpet. people hover about, their backs to us. they are busy-busy, organizing his life, but they don't pay him, or us, attention. there is a low table inside the canopy. no, not a table, a bed. he takes my hand. we move toward the bed and lower ourselves onto it. we lie side by side, his arm across my chest. i worry people will see us like this. i want him to lie on me. i am thrusting. thrusting my body. i plead, i want him. he is holding his penis, i take hold of it, can hardly breathe, my chest aches for the release of. no, not love, sex.

everything is red. his tongue. his penis. the palms of my hands. red red red.

someone draws back the hanging cloth of the canopy, i pull away just in time and get up off the bed. drums are beaten with fury, cymbals clash, tremble, and chatter, a rhythm red and violent draws near. his soon-to-be-wife approaches, mummy-like, shrouded in flowing red and gold, marigold heads scattered ahead of her steps. i leave through a side door, looking behind me. he remains reclined, no evidence in sight of interrupted pleasure.

That dream again. In it I always want him so badly. I am shaking from my waist down, like a dog yanked off a human's leg.

I wonder if I moved about in my sleep. If Alex has any idea of the kind of dream I had lying next to her. She's already left the bed. And she's closed the door—that was considerate. She is able to navigate the house soundlessly. How does she do it? Whenever I try to shut that door quietly, the hinges squeak, the handle squawks, the lock hits the jamb loudly.

I must get out of bed. It's 7:56 a.m., much too late to put a stop to him visiting us. I have no choice now but to face him.

But he'll be facing me, too. I'm not the only culprit here. I must remember that. Odd that I'd sleep in on this of all days. But not so odd, I suppose, that I'd have dreamt of him. But this, of all dreams.

It's so quiet with the door closed. Funny, you can't hear a thing from the rest of the house, but you can hear a dog out on the street barking and, from outside the window behind the bed, a bird—at least, I think it's a bird—scurrying along the metal eavestrough. Could be a squirrel. A chipmunk maybe. Or a mouse trying to get in from the cold. We're supposed to be fine with that, supposed to expect that sort of thing living in an old farmhouse on what is technically an island. I doubt I'll ever get used to critters wanting to share space with me.

The desire I felt in the dream lingers in my body. Ripples of pleasure torture me. I'll think of Alex. I'll curl under the covers here for just a few minutes more and imagine her.

But a feeling of regret descends on me, and I take my hands from beneath the covers and pull the top sheet taut up to my chin. I wonder what she's doing. We hadn't ended the night well. Yes, that's right. There'd been all that tension. I wonder how she is this morning.

We'd come to bed, both of us, with heavy hearts. The silence between us crouched on my chest like a small animal breathing in my face. After a while, my e-book held like a wall, I wondered if I should turn and hug her, perhaps say something kind. Instead, I closed the book, and she, closing hers, too, reached up and turned off her bedside lamp. When I heard her gentle sleep-breathing, I relaxed. But for a good while I couldn't sleep. Then, just as I was finally drifting off, her perfectly aware voice ripped apart the veil.

"Was there ever anything between you? Is there anything you should tell me?"

I jolted wide awake. If playful jealousies had been part of our little games of arousal, it was too late—in the night, and in the trajectory that has led us to today—to expect this as a motive for her question. Should I answer with a clearly irritated voice, I wondered, or should I respond kindly? Should I take on a tone of indignation and ask what might she possibly be insinuating by "anything" and by "between"?

"Are you awake?" she persisted.

The pull toward sleep had disarmed me. I was too tired to properly gear myself up for a discussion that could easily

deteriorate into argument. “I am now,” I said, biding my time. I stared tensely into the blackened room. Another tactic was necessary. “The only thing you need to know about Prakash,” I capitulated, my voice low to emphasize I’d been well on my way to sleep, “is that he’s loyal. Very loyal. He doesn’t drop his friends easily.”

She did not respond. This woke me further, and I felt pressured to continue. I added that while I wasn’t surprised he’d gotten in touch, I also wasn’t worried it meant the beginning of anything—for instance, a connection we’d be obliged to carry on. Again she didn’t respond. Fully awake, deciding on kindness, I softened and offered more: that was Prakash, I said—here today, gone tomorrow. Still nothing from her. If she’d picked up on my feeble attempt and the careless contradictions in it to reassure her, she didn’t let on. I knew she hadn’t just suddenly fallen asleep. She wanted me to speak. So even as I felt worn-out so late at night, and was struggling for the right words, I acquiesced and added gently, “You’ve been so—suspicious is not the word, nor skeptical, but so—so something regarding him, Alex. As if it’s unthinkable that I could have an old friend who’d want to visit me. Am I that unlovable?”

From her came finally a response, and it was one that relaxed me, a soft and breathy cluster of a chortle. I turned on my side and put my arm across her. She drew it tighter, as if it were a seat belt, and grasped my hand. We lay like that for some minutes, and at last, feeling relieved, I closed my eyes. Then, just as I felt again the tug of sleep, her voice, as alert as if we were in the midst of a daytime chat, startled me: “You know, five years ago, when we came here to live, we left so much behind.”

What was she getting at, I wondered. I was tempted to beg, *Do you seriously want, at this time of the night, to talk about our move here?* But gratitude for what I imagined was a switch from our previous contentious topic held me back. I gave her hand a light squeeze by way of acknowledging I'd heard her.

"I mean, we're not the same people anymore," she continued.

"Aren't you tired, Alex?" I asked.

"I'm just thinking that one can't really hold on to the past. Not if you want to move forward. We all eventually relieve ourselves of things and people no longer in our lives."

I pulled my hand from hers. Despite the heat beginning to flush my face, I made sure to keep my voice even, and asked, "So what are you saying?"

"Well, just that if we're not in touch with someone for several years, perhaps it's not a friendship worth holding on to, even if it had once been. I mean, you'll find out, won't you? But perhaps these things just take time, and letting go happens naturally. On its own."

I had to bite my lip to prevent my baser self from flaring up and announcing that Prakash was not simply any old friend, and that the history he and I shared—his part in it, my part in it—was more than reason enough for him to want to pay me a visit. But this was approaching truths and subjects I couldn't afford to unbridle.

That's why I overslept—I'd been awake most of the night stewing about Alex's assumptions and worries, and my own foolishness. Oh, man. If only I could step back in time, I'd undo this mess. Why on earth did I invite him here? Into my home. My sanctuary. Our home, Alex's and mine. But one can also ask: why did he, in the first place, contact me? It should have been clear, at least this time, that I'd meant to cut ties with him. I guess that's what happens when you simply hope people intuit what you're intending. But I couldn't have told him directly, explicitly, to bugger off and leave me alone. Of course I couldn't.

Alex has been testy ever since she learned of his visit. She knows nothing of my connection to Prakash, really, so why this fractiousness? Her discontent about his coming here has been less than playful. It amounts to insinuations, if not accusations, of a dalliance—past or present, who knows what's in her mind?—and, whether or not she's aware of it, casts aspersions on my sexuality.

It's all really unfortunate, and her manner makes me feel guilty. Doubly guilty, in fact. For asking him here, to the home I share with her, *and* for cutting him out of my life.

Alex's unease, given what she knows—and does not know—is unusual and extreme. I ask if something else is bothering her, but it's always that uninviting two-word answer she delivers: “The book.” Or: “My work.” One and the same, really. Or she just stares at me blankly, unnervingly.