

The Reunion

by
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Sharmila Bannerjee had banished her husband from the kitchen today. He had groaned and rolled his eyes and then ambled off happily to a friend's house for a nice cup of tea. Sharmila's mother had treated cooking like an art form. She had passed this reverence onto her daughter who took the subtlety of flavour and the importance of presentation very seriously indeed. Normally she cooked amid the chaos that was life with very little complaint. Her son would rush in and out with instant demands for unhealthy snacks and her husband would shuffle and hover, chat and depart. Most days she tolerated these interruptions but today she needed total concentration. Anjana was coming home from the States. It was a terrifying but great day.

Three years previously amidst arguments, tears and recriminations Anjana had left her loving family, pregnant, unmarried and adamant to continue her life as she saw fit. Her 'boyfriend' and father of the child had been offered a job in California and Anjana had decided to throw away all her opportunities at home and go with him. Sharmila had been beside herself but Anjana had gone after a slew of hurtful things had been said from both sides and since then they had all found it impossible to cross the void let alone the Atlantic.

Then suddenly, out of the blue, Anjana had written, saying she was coming to England for 'work' and would like to 'pop in if that wasn't inconvenient' and today was the day, the return of their prodigal daughter. In stressful situations some women clean, some women exercise, Sharmila, cooked. She had bought a feast. She hadn't fed her daughter for three long years, and now she was going to make up for it. She switched on the radio for company as she started to peel onions. A sweet voice rang out from the radio singing,

'My bonny is over the ocean
My bonnie is over the sea,
My bonnie is over the ocean,
O bring back my bonnie to me.'

How apt thought Sharmila and got on with the job at hand.

As she soaked a block of tamarind in water she remembered when Anjana had been seven years old and had her first taste of puchka. How her eyes had lit up as she bit into the hollow rice ball which exploded in her mouth releasing the sweet and spicy taste of the sauce. As it dripped down her chin, Anjana had looked as if she'd found a new life long friend. From then on once a month, Sharmila and Anjana would labour together in the kitchen to make the magical puchka and at tea time, Arun and Omit, who was only four, would join them for the feast. Happy times thought Sharmila and she fried the rice balls in preparation for her daughter's return.

Sharmila stirred a potato and chickpea mix in the frying pan and started rolling out pastry and delicately cutting it into triangles. She then placed a small blob of potato mixture into the pastry and wrapped them round, sealing them with water until they were perfectly proportioned bite sized samosas. The radio played another tune.

Sharmila hummed along quietly.

‘You made me love you,
I didn’t want to do it,
I didn’t want to do it,
You made me want you,
And all the time you knew it,
I guess you always knew it...’

The sound of water bubbling vigorously made Sharmila rush to the cooker and turn down the heat just before lentils and water bubbled over onto her spotless cooker. Focus, she thought to herself, feeling her nerves getting the better of her. Focus on the dhal and she took a deep breath and stirred some chilli powder and tumeric into the lentils. She remembered the last time she had sat down to eat with Anjana. The argument had become so heated, she had called her own daughter a slut, had cited the reputation of the family before even thinking of how her daughter was feeling. She had refused to listen and in response Anjana had tipped the plate of curry over and left in a flood of tears. How she had cursed her as she soaked her white linen table cloth in everything possible and still the tumeric remained. Tumeric stains everything, once spilt you can never deny it was there. Sharmila brushed a tear away with the back of her hand and began to fry some butter.

The radio played on as if it was accompanying her thoughts with a sound track. Vera Lynn’s resonant tones sang out,

‘We’ll meet again,
Don’t know where, don’t know when,
But I know we’ll meet again some sunny day.
Keep smilin’ through just like you always do
Till the blue skies drive the dark clouds far away.’

Sharmila glanced at the clock. Anjana would be here within the hour. Where would they start? They had said such terrible things that you could never hope to erase. Her heart felt cold and she felt angry but she knew really she longed to hold her daughter and erase the misery of the last three years. She had worried about her, about having a baby without the family’s support, about being in a strange country with some ‘boyfriend’ who would probably desert her. English boys came and went with the wind, they didn’t know how to stick at something, to make it work. She felt guilty for not being there.

Sharmila started to lay the table with her best plates. She was humming to herself and singing with the radio, but this time it seemed to lift her spirits a little.

Smile tho’ your heart is aching,
Smile even tho’ it’s breaking,
When there are clouds in the sky you’ll get by,
If you smile through your fear and sorrow,
Smile and maybe tomorrow
You see the sun come shining through, for you.’

The doorbell rang. Sharmila’s heart leapt. Carefully she removed the tea towel from her waist where she had tucked it in. She rearranged her sari and walked gingerly to

the door. She opened it. There stood Anjana, looking nervous.

'Come in,' said Sharmila in a voice she didn't recognise as her own. 'Can I take your coat?' Anjana did as asked. 'How are you?' she asked sticking to polite exchange.

'Fine Ma,' said Anjana, stiffly, 'fine.'

Sharmila asked in a whisper, 'the baby?'

'A boy,' replied Anjana, 'Kishore. And Don and I got married last year.'

Sharmila couldn't help herself, the tears were falling uncontrollably down her cheeks, 'I am so sorry. I have missed you baby,' she said, 'I'm a stupid old...'

Anjana hugged Sharmila so tightly she had to catch her breath, 'No you're not.

I...I...I was your worst nightmare, I did everything the wrong way round and I know how that was for you. But I wanted you to know that I'm okay and it worked out for me. Really it did.'

The two women stood hugging for an age, talking and overlapping with bits of information, unable to catch up their three lost years. Suddenly the sound of a key in the door and Arun entered. They all stared at each other for a moment.

'I guess this over emotional display of affection means we're okay?' he asked with a glint in his eye.

Sharmila burst out laughing. That was what she loved about Arun, when life seemed unmanageable he always made her laugh.

'You know she's cooked,' said Arun to his daughter, 'a feast for forty people.'

'Not forty,' said Sharmila, 'thirty perhaps.'

'I can smell it,' said Anjana.

'Come' and Sharmila led her daughter into the dining room.

Anjana's mouth fell open. It was like a marriage feast, pilau rice, lamb curry, kofta curry, coconut prawns, chutney, brinjal, okra, chickpeas, samosas, chops, cutlets, golab jamun, mishti dhoi and her favourite puchka.

'Are you hungry?' asked Sharmila clutching her daughter's hand tight.

'Well...I have company with me and I know they would love to join us,' said Anjana.

Arun and Sharmila looked a bit dazed as Anjana went to get her 'friends' from the car. The front door opened and in walked Don and a small boy of three.

'Hello Didima, I'm Kishore. How do you do.'

Sharmila felt her eyes and her heart fill up. 'How do you do Kishore,' she said, 'you are very welcome here. Come, come I have cooked for you.'

Kishore looked at his mum who nodded in approval. He placed his small hand in his Grandma's hand and they all walked into the dining room for a feast. In the background, the gentle hum of the radio sent its seal of approval on this reunion.

'There's a bright golden haze on the meadow,
 There's a bright golden haze on the meadow,
 The corn is as high as an elephant's eye,
 An' it looks like it's climbin' clear up to the sky.
 Oh, what a beautiful mornin',
 O, what a beautiful day,
 I got a beautiful feelin',
 Everything's going my way.'