

## Looking for Love – *Lolita Chakrabarti*

When Dilip Sen turned 37 he steeled himself for the disappointed groans and exclamations from his mother and his Auntie Renu.

‘But you’re such a sweet boy,’ cried Auntie Renu, ‘a catch I would have thought.’

‘I know! I know!’ wailed his mum, ‘but the years roll on by and my son is still all alone, all alone to bear the rigours and strife of life.’

The problem? Dilip Sen was single. He had spent the last decade being the centre of family anxiety. He had tried to discuss it with his friends but none of them were particularly sympathetic. They were all married, they were all busy and they were not Indian. He knew that it was of extreme importance to his family that he settle down and create his own family, his parents regarded this as their final responsibility and only then would they stop bugging him.

‘Are you gay?’ asked Auntie Renu hopefully one Christmas as if that would solve everything.

‘No!’ Dilip had said thinking it would have been so much easier if he were.

‘Have I failed you?’ wailed his mother to whom every problem no matter how small was a direct indication of her limitations as a human being.

‘No,’ soothed Dilip.

‘Are you lacking in the downstairs department?’ asked his father.

‘No,’ sighed Dilip, exhausted.

The truth of the matter was that Dilip was now a partner at the law firm where he had started ten years ago. He was an extremely busy, highly respected lawyer and all that came at a price. He hadn’t time to go courting. He hadn’t time to get out in the jungle and hunt. So now that he was steadily working at the top of his tree he was able to look at the view and see what he was missing. Almost everyone he knew was married, attached, divorcing or regrouping. In the office only him and mousy Felicity Smith were single and she always looked like she was running for cover. He felt left behind.

‘Come to the temple,’ coaxed his Mother, ‘there are a few girls, not top quality, but still unmarried. Obviously older but then what do you expect. I’m sure you’ll find something there.’

‘I don’t want to find something, Mum,’ insisted Dilip. ‘I’d like to find someone.’

His mother stroked his arm affectionately and tried to look hopeful.

So it was no surprise to Dilip that he found himself heading to the Malborough Hotel for his first brush with **‘Party 4 Two – a night where singles meet singles and perhaps become doubles!’** He had come straight from the offices and with briefcase in hand wondered if he might look a tad official for a social occasion. But it was too late now, there was no turning back. He walked hesitatingly into the James Suite and felt extremely self-conscious as he was greeted at the door.

‘You must be Dilip!’ gushed the beach blonde with the high hair. ‘We spoke on the phone. I know you’re Dilip because you’re our only Indian. Can I call you that? Indian? Good. You never know what offends these days. There’s a laminated badge on the table for you and the order for the day is mingle!’

Dilip smiled a tight, awkward smile and shuffled over to find his laminated badge. ‘If you want a specific introduction just ask!’ the blonde cooed from what seemed a mile

away. Dilip wanted the floor to swallow him whole.

Dilip got himself a stiff drink and stood uncomfortably at the bar. The room seemed to be horrifically brightly lit and everyone seemed to know each other. No one spoke to him and he felt too self-conscious to initiate conversation. At one point when he was feeling brave he managed to put down his briefcase and scan the room. He saw people of all ages, politely chatting, doing their best, laughing at nothing. He wanted to leave. But just then, at the opposite end of the room, he saw a woman sitting alone, attractive, modest and vaguely familiar. Dilip ordered another drink. He was feeling a little nauseous. He hadn't had time to eat all day and the miniature finger foods in circulation were doing nothing to soak up the alcohol which sloshed around his insides. The beach blonde who greeted him at the door suddenly sprung into vision. 'Having a good time?' she seemed to scream at him. Dilip nodded, he was a lawyer, he knew how to lie convincingly. 'I was so glad you've joined us. It's great when someone new comes along, widens the pool....of choice....if you know what I mean?' She beamed at him and then burst into raucous hysterical laughter. Dilip's head was starting to split.

'Would you excuse me?' he said politely and edged away.

He walked towards the door. This had been a bad idea, a desperate idea. Why had he come? There was nothing here for him. He was at the door when he felt a light hand touch his arm and someone said, 'Mr Sen?' Dilip turned round and saw the familiar woman whom he'd glanced earlier.

'Yes. Yes.' He said relieved to perhaps know someone and have a relatively normal conversation. She was an attractive woman with brown eyes and deep red hair. A client perhaps?

'Felicity. Felicity Smith,' she said smiling shyly, 'from the office?'

'Of course,' said Dilip in recognition, but quite taken aback by this transformation. 'I didn't recognise you, you look so different.'

Felicity smiled graciously.

'I'm sorry that was clumsy of me. I just mean you dress so conservatively at work,' he offered trying hard not to offend.

'Well needs must,' she said lightly.

They smiled at each other, embarrassed. Dilip looked casually out at the room flicking the occasional glance at Felicity when she wasn't looking. She was in her late thirties, and not mousy at all. Tall, shapely, classic clothes sense, sharp interesting face. 'I'm not good at these things. It's my first one you see. It was a mistake, I thought I might....' he tailored off.

'.....meet someone?' she offered. They stood for a moment then both laughed. The ice had been broken. 'It's my second,' said Felicity, 'and believe me it's no better than the first....up until now, that is.'

Dilip smiled, he liked the compliment and felt a little blush in his cheeks. 'I was just going,' he said, 'but perhaps if you're staying I could get you a drink?'

'Please,' she smiled and so the evening began.

Soon they were talking about work, about family, about life. Felicity told Dilip that she'd been a PA at the firm for two years now but she wasn't enjoying it really. That everyone was pretty condescending to her and made her feel small. Dilip looked at Felicity, she was totally different to her office persona. He liked this version much better.

‘You don’t do yourself any favours, you know,’ he said. ‘You dress like a mouse at work and you behave like one too.’

Dilip saw the blood rise to Felicity’s face. Either she was very angry or upset. Either way she hadn’t liked what he’d said.

‘That’s an extremely arrogant thing to say,’ she exploded, ‘You’re all the same in that office. No humility. You think you run the country, the way you all strut about, expressing your narrow opinions. In my last job I did my best – bright as a button, sharp, professional, to learn what I could. But my boss.....misunderstood...thought I was being too ‘interesting’. I brought a charge of sexual harassment against him and d’you what? It was dismissed. He was too valuable to lose. So I had to go. I couldn’t stay – not after that. So now I make sure I attract no attention whatsoever. That way I’m safe.’

Felicity’s eyes were sharp and fiery as she spoke. She was angry and rightly so. Dilip felt terrible. He hadn’t meant it like that. ‘What I meant was....what I meant to say was you’re a clever person and extremely attractive and I think you shouldn’t hide it. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so clumsy. I should go.’ He got up to leave but Felicity rose and put an insistent hand on his arm. He stopped to look at her and saw in her face an apology.

‘I’m sorry. I leapt and didn’t look,’ she offered.

Just then the beach bonde appeared as if from nowhere.

‘First rule of attraction, seemingly pointless physical contact speaks volumes.’

Dilip glanced at Felicity, who tried not to laugh.

The blonde continued, ‘bringing people together...it’s a gift.’ And with that she was gone.

Dilip and Felicity gathered up their things and left the hotel together. Only they did they burst out laughing.

‘I know I’ll see you again,’ said Dilip, ‘tomorrow at the office. And I’m sorry that the office hasn’t been much fun for you these last couple of years. We’re not all bad you know.’

Felicity grinned, ‘I can see that. Anyway, I’m quite looking forward to coming into work tomorrow.’

Dilip smiled back, ‘Not half as much as I am.’