The Marrying Kind

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It's your wedding day, and you're barefoot in a deep blue sari, hunched over a cigarette outside a North Vancouver home. It's a cold, wet December day, and the snowy path had to be shovelled before guests arrived. You take a few urgent puffs, like a high school student in a bathroom stall, and flick the cigarette onto the pavement. You rub your henna-painted hands together and breathe into them to keep warm.

Your new brother-in-law pokes his head out the door. "You okay?"

"Yes," you say, forcing a smile. "Just getting some fresh air. I'll be right in."

You're not going back in. Not quite yet.

Inside the house, thirty-odd guests you just met are pretending to be your family. Looking at them through the steamy windows, you're almost fooled. They could be your family—a bunch of olive and brown-skinned people with dark hair and dark eyes. From where you're standing, it's hard to tell that the women wear saris and that everybody looks more Indian than Israeli.

You look Indian too. You look Indian to Indians in Vancouver who ask you for directions in Hindi or Punjabi on the street. You even looked Indian in India, where the locals thought you were a slut for dressing like a Westerner and walking around with white boys.

You've never looked more Indian than you do today. Your wrists are heavy with elaborate bangles, and you're neatly tucked in six metres of shimmering silk embroidered with

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gold and red stones. Your boyfriend's cousins helped with the sari, wrapping it around you as if you were a gift with many layers, draping one end over the shoulder and stuffing the other into your skirt. You're only wearing a thin line of eyeliner, and your fingernails are chewed down and unpainted. You're barefoot, because you don't wear heels. You catch your reflection in the window and eye it with satisfaction, tossing your hair back like a Bollywood starlet on the red carpet.

The door swings open, letting out warmth, broken conversations, and the smell of curry. Your boyfriend (now officially husband), steps out and looks around suspiciously, as if expecting to see someone else. "What are you doing?" he asks.

"Nothing, I'm coming in."

You take one more look at the empty suburban street. It is frozen still: the snow-topped houses, the parked cars, the cotton ball bushes. Your feet start to feel numb. If you had shoes on, you might have walked away, down the trail, up the slushy road. Your bangles would jingle as you strode off, and the free end of the sari would flutter behind you, a splash of blue against all this grey and white.

"Are you coming?" He's holding the door open for you.

When you met a year and a half ago, you weren't thinking marriage. You were sitting outside your bungalow in southern India when he walked by. He looked a bit like Jesus, skinny and brown, long-haired and unshaven. He carried a guitar case and a small backpack slung over his shoulder. When you started talking, you discovered he was an Indo-Canadian from Vancouver who didn't speak a word of Hindi.

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One night you shared a bottle of cheap whiskey around a beach bonfire, and talked until everybody left and the fire died out. After one week, you were throwing around *I love yous* in both Hebrew and English. After two weeks, you called your families to announce your state of bliss. You wandered through India delirious and glossy-eyed, made love in guesthouses infested with rats and monkeys and cockroaches as long as your index finger, cooked food outside straw huts, shared sleepers on overnight trains, and licked acid stamps at parties on sandy beaches.

You separated at a crowded train station in Pune, a classic scene from a Bollywood film: a woman holds on to her lover's hand, extended from between the metal bars of the train's window. They utter declarations of love and cry. They vow to meet again. The train conductor blows his whistle, and the train starts chugging away slowly. The woman runs alongside the train until she can't continue. The train fades away into a cloud of smoke.

You spent the next seven months waitressing in Tel Aviv while he planted trees in northern British Columbia. You wrote each other long sappy love letters, and sometimes, when he was out of the bush, you spoke on the phone. When you made enough money for a ticket, you flew to Canada to be with him, lugging a suitcase filled with Hebrew books and tie-dye tank tops you'd bought in India. You were hoping to travel in BC for a while and then find a job. Maybe you'd stay for a year or two if you liked it. Who knows? You'd been living like a nomad for the past four years so you wouldn't mind the change.

Vancouver was beautiful that summer, warm and golden, and the days long and lazy. You'd never seen the sun setting that late before. You found a one-bedroom apartment in the West End, facing English Bay and a daily display of sunsets, bought IKEA furniture and a foam mattress. An old American car. A set of Teflon pots.

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One night after dinner, you started talking about the future. “Maybe I could go to college here,” you said.

Your boyfriend glanced at you carefully. “Here’s the thing—” he said. He had done some research these past few days. Apparently, the only way you could stay in Canada, get a work permit, study, was to get married.

You tensed up.

You were twenty-five. You never planned on getting married; never understood why people bothered. You blamed your father, who died when you were nine, for your textbook fear of abandonment and string of bad relationships. But your tourist visa was running out and so was your money, so you knew you had to make a decision. Fast.

“I don’t want to get married,” you whined over the phone to your sister in Israel. “Why do I have to? It’s not fair. Why does it even matter? It’s just a stupid piece of paper anyway.”

“If it’s just a stupid piece of paper,” your sister said, “what difference does it make?”

“Okay,” you told your boyfriend as you lay in bed that night.

He looked up from his book.

“Okay,” you repeated. “If we absolutely *have to* get married, then I want it to be really small, just us, no big deal. Nobody has to know. We’re doing it for the papers. That’s all. And …” you paused for emphasis, “there’s going to be no husband-wife talk. You’re my boyfriend. Not my husband. Is that clear?”

Your boyfriend grinned.

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A few days before the ceremony, your boyfriend called his father to tell him about the wedding and inform him that he was not invited. In fact, nobody was. It was just a little thing you had to do to sort out the papers. You heard his father yelling on the other end (you could make out the words "customs," "tradition," and "community") and watched sweat gathering over your boyfriend's brow as he struggled to throw in a word. Finally, he slouched onto the couch and nodded into the phone, defeated.

"My dad is throwing a party," he said after he hung up, rubbing his temples. "Just close family members, nothing big."

Within days, his father arranged a catering service, a cake, and an outfit for you to wear. Fifty guests were invited, and your boyfriend's aunt volunteered her large North Vancouver home. He wanted you to have *real* wedding bands, replace the 150-rupee rings you'd bought each other in India, but you refused; you liked yours, his was shaped like an Om and yours like a flower with a moonstone in it. You called your mother in Israel and assured her that there was no need for her to borrow money to fly to Vancouver. That it was just a formality. Your mother sighed but didn't push. You figured she was so relieved to see you married off that she chose to pretend it was the real deal, or at least hope it would turn into one.

On the morning of the wedding, you woke up at 3 AM, flushed with sweat, remembering a visit you made to a fortune-teller in the mountains of Israel the year before. You and your best friend had driven her beaten VW bug two hours north of Tel Aviv and up precarious mountain roads to see her. It was a hot day and the car wasn't air-conditioned. The fortune-teller greeted you in jeans and a T-shirt, not quite the mystical character you had expected, and led you to her living room, which had no crystal bowls or velvet curtains. Children's toys were scattered on the

carpet. She opened your cards on a table marked with crescent-shaped stains left by coffee mugs, and then leaned over to examine your palm. Her face lit up. “Good news!” she announced. “You’re going to be married by twenty-five!”

You leaned back, laughed a long, healthy laugh and explained to her that that was impossible, that you did not intend to ever marry.

“She really doesn’t,” your friend affirmed. “She’s not the marrying kind.”

The fortune-teller smiled knowingly and said you must invite her to the wedding. “What a waste of time,” you muttered, rolling your eyes, as you stepped out of her house and into your friend’s car.

You woke up again at 9 AM with a jolt, heart racing as if you’ve been running all night. It was raining outside. It took forever to put on your sari, and it ended up looking stupid: the front pleats were uneven, and the part that draped over your shoulder kept loosening up. You pinned the fabric to your blouse with safety pins. It would have to do until your boyfriend’s cousins fix it later this afternoon. Your boyfriend came out of the bathroom wearing his brother’s suit. “It’s too big,” he groaned. A red dot adorned his cheek where he’d cut himself shaving. You swore he looked fine and helped him tie his hair in a neat ponytail. Your maid of honour, a male friend of your boyfriend’s, showed up with a bottle of champagne, and you downed a glass with your morning coffee.

The wedding ceremony was held in your living room. The only guests were your maid of honour and your boyfriend’s brother. A poster of a contemplative Bob Marley was your backdrop as the justice of the peace, a grey-haired lady you’d picked from the phone book, performed the ceremony. You’d picked her because you liked the sound of her name, and

because she was a woman. Jewish wedding ceremonies are traditionally performed by men, so having a choice is just one advantage to marrying out of faith. Not that either of you care much about religion. Your spiritual affinity is the kind one picks up on one's travels, along with mass-produced Buddha statues and incense sticks. It's summed up by statements such as "everything happens for a reason" and "the universe takes care."

The early morning glass of champagne made you tipsy and you giggled like a teenager at a school dance and avoided your boyfriend's eyes. You felt silly repeating these English lines you'd heard a million times in movies. Eventually you fixed your gaze on the justice of peace. She had icy blue eyes, like frozen puddles.

You exchanged the same rings you'd been wearing for the past year and a half. Then the woman said, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," and your stomach turned. Your boyfriend smiled at you. You kissed quickly and hugged.

Now your boyfriend is holding the door open, looking at you narrowly. "Are you coming or what?" he says. It's later in the afternoon and you're standing outside his aunt's house in North Vancouver.

You walk in. He follows.

Inside, the house is warm and smells of turmeric and steamed rice, coriander and perfume. The guests wander around, taking dozens of variations of the same photo, lining up by the buffet table to heap vegetable samosas and lamb curry on their plastic plates. Your boyfriend's buddies form a row of white boys as they sit against the wall on their best behaviour, clad in suits, empty plates in their laps. There is no alcohol served, which you find peculiar and cruel. Your boyfriend's young cousins chase you around the room, admire your henna, and grab

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the free end of your sari. Finally, you escape to the washroom. You lean on the sink and stare at your reflection.

"You're married," you say. "How does it feel?" Your reflection shrugs. The truth is you feel nothing, except for a dull pain over your right eyebrow, a remnant of a champagne-induced headache.

"You're married!" you persist. "You're someone's wife!" Your reflection flinches. For a few seconds it's hard to breathe, as though a foot presses on your chest, but then it passes.

After the buffet, everyone gathers around for the ceremonial portion of the day. You enjoy the traditional rituals for the same reason you like wearing a sari; you see them as an anthropological experience, like some weddings you attended in your travels; only now, you're the one on display. You let your new family feed you Indian sweets and shower you with rice. You and your boyfriend break little clay cups with your feet while the guests cheer. The custom is that whoever breaks the first cup will be the boss of the house. For the next four years, you will both remember breaking the cup first.

In the late afternoon a cake is brought out, a massive creamy thing, with your names written on it in pink. At this point you're exhausted, your cheeks ache from smiling, and your eyeliner is wearing off, along with the effects of the Advil. The party reminds you of a distant cousin's bar mitzvah you were dragged to by your parents. You feel like pulling on your mother's sleeve and nagging, "Is it over yet? Can we go now?"

The guests gather around, prepare their cameras, and wait for you to cut the cake, holding the knife together as you bend over the cake and feed it to each other as newlyweds do. This is the one ritual in the party that you recognize from your own family weddings, from movies and

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television. As you stand next to your boyfriend, your sari tightens, clinging to your skin, making it difficult to breathe. You feel nauseated just looking at the icing. You breathe in deeply and slide two fingers between your petticoat and your skin to allow for air circulation; startled by the cold touch of sweat. You lean toward your boyfriend and whisper, "I'm not cutting the cake."

He turns to you. "What? Why not?"

"Because I think it's stupid. That's why. I'm not doing it."

"It's not a big deal. We're almost done."

"I'm not doing it. And I'm not feeding it to you or being fed either. Anybody who knows me even a little bit would know I hate this shit."

He doesn't tell you you're being ridiculous. He sighs. His aunts are whispering into each other's ears. A murmur spreads around the guests, growing louder as moments pass. Nobody is sure what's going on. But you won't budge. You have given up enough. You never wanted to get married in the first place; you never wanted a party and now you want a drink and you can't have it, and you will not cut the fucking cake!

Your boyfriend (as you'll call him for the next four years, never your husband) ends up cutting the cake with his brother, not quite the photo-op the guests hoped for. You stand beside them and smile like a bride should, feeling as if you won one battle amid many defeats.

A couple of days later you pick up the wedding photos and browse through them quickly, pausing only to admire your outfit or to discard the ones of yourself you don't like. You're posing besides strangers you cannot name, smiling the same smile in all of them. Except for one. In the picture, your boyfriend leans over the cake with a knife, smiling goofily, as his brother pretends to fall over it. You're standing in the shadow looking smug; the smile you thought you

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mastered so skilfully appears frozen and forced. You feel that pressure in your chest again, but this time it stays. It's like someone has your heart in his fist.

You call your brother in Tel Aviv that night and recount what forever will be known as "the cake story." You do it in a light, amused tone, as if it were some funny tale for dinner parties. You think you're being clever and charming. You expect him to appreciate the hilarity, to share your distaste, knowing well enough that you're better than those cake-cutting brides. But your brother isn't laughing.

"I don't get it, it was just a cake," he says. "What was the big deal?"

You're quiet for a moment, while your mind races in search for an answer, then say, "Whatever," and change the subject.

You hang up the phone and look over at your boyfriend. He's stretched out on the couch, switching channels on TV. He catches your gaze and smiles. Your husband. From this angle he looks like a different man, a handsome stranger, the kind of man you'd meet on a tropical island for a holiday fling.

Your husband.

You feel that weight in your chest again, and this time you know: it's doubt. This won't last, it tells you. It's not the cake, it's you. You're going to screw it up. Can't you see? He likes the cake; he likes the husband-wife talk; he *is* the marrying kind.

"What?" Your boyfriend's smile turns to a frown. The moment is gone. You bully doubt into a dark corner and shut the door.

"Nothing," you say. You wear a big smile and join him on the couch.