

Material Girl

by

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The affection arrived in tidal waves, an anomaly in her spiteful life. It was an effortless love which delivered serene days and beautiful nights. As the morning dawned bright and early, she awoke to birdsong and sunrays, sliding gracefully off the bed to begin her structured day. She found respect in routine, elegance in structure, and care in compromise. Her face glowed as bright as her diamond rings as he stretched and opened his eyes. Another day of ease and comfort had begun.

Her Gmail inbox had turned into a barren wasteland over the past year after she had gleefully resigned from her stressful job at an esteemed consultancy, much to the displeasure of her parents and the shock of her friends and colleagues. Her Instagram page now featured romantic poetry instead of picnic photos with friends at overcrowded parks on humid July evenings. Her drawers now encased glittery jewellery and silky clothes instead of thick ratty files and receipts which she used as bookmarks. She had accepted his offer at a better life last year, and she couldn't be happier. An organised life; with love, structure, and fulfilled desires.

As she waved him off to his drive to work in his crisp suit and pointy shoes, she recalled her own commute to work when she drove at a snail's pace in the ridiculous morning traffic, honking at idiots-turned-drivers at the Liberty chowk roundabout, arriving at work with frizzy hair and a soaring temper. Now, he ensured that she was driven around, as she was too good to drive in the insane Lahori traffic. She closed the door with a content smile and began her chores in the airy house in her comfiest clothes.

The sharp phone ring pierced through her musings, causing her to spill tea over her shirt. The house help answered the phone. Her mother called every

morning at 10 am without fail. She walked over to the phone while wiping at her shirt with a tissue as the help handed her the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Hello. How are you?”

“Fine. I told you to call me later in the day.”

“It’s not like you have anything else to do at this time. Your help handles everything fine even without your supervision. Besides, you can call me any time you want,” her mother added hopefully.

“How is everything there?” she asked out of pure formality.

“We are ten minutes away. Why don’t you come and see for yourself?” her mother predictably retorted.

“I’ll see.”

“Are you looking at any job openings?”

This was her mother’s standard question, one that she asked every day. Before her marriage, she had always relished in her parents’ support and investment in her education, growth, and career. Now, she envied her co workers

who had to fight their families to hold a job. Valuing careers over families like those loose women her grandmother always warned her against during family dinners.

“No. I don’t need a job,” she gave her usual reply.

“You didn’t need a job until last year either, but you wanted one. You were adamant to break the glass ceiling. Now you are content in a glass cage?”

She rolled her eyes. This was a never-ending conversation with her parents. Every family get together resulted in an argument, even in her husband’s presence. Only he was able to calm her parents down, reminding them gently how she had the freedom to make choices for herself.

“Okay then, what’s wrong with wanting a man? I am finally experiencing true happiness and comfort,” she replied in a monotone.

“You used to make your own decisions. Now all your decisions are made for you. What has he done to you?” Her mother sounded on the verge of tears.

“It was my decision to marry him, and I followed through with it despite your disapproval. I have carved my own path. He has only made me much happier than you and Abba could ever could,” she replied unnecessarily harshly.

“Marrying him was the last real decision you ever made. We arranged your wedding functions exactly as you wanted. You never could have followed through with your stupid decision without our support. We want to see you happy, and we thought we did everything to ensure that. You went to the best universities and were never burdened with anything just so you could focus on yourself. Your happiness should never depend entirely on just one person. If an uneducated woman like me can make herself happy, then why can’t you?”

She could imagine the veins popping in her mother’s forehead as she pushed the receiver tightly against her left ear, while she spat viciously at her through the phone. Previously, the prospect of disappointing her mother terrified her. Now, her fury fuelled her own anger.

“Just because Nani denied you an education doesn’t allow you to live vicariously through me. My success and happiness shouldn’t be connected to yours either.”

“I spent more than half my life on you! Your happiness will deeply concern mine. You’ll understand when you have children, though I hope you never have them with him!”

“God, I wouldn’t put black magic past you at this point. I value my family!” she yelled at her mother.

“We are also your family!” her mother shrieked, positively rattling the windows of her own house. She thanked God this was not an in-person meeting.

“You people were trying to dictate my life! You cannot respect my decision just because it goes against what you had planned for me.”

“We respect your decision, that is why you got married in the first place. But that does not mean that we agree with your decision. Marrying a man more than a decade older than you just because he has more wealth than us? We raised you to be an independent woman! Now he controls your actions *and* thoughts! I am still at loss as to how did this happen.”

Her mother’s tone was tired and defeated. She decided to hang up the phone. She hadn’t been able to convince her parents in an entire year, this phone call was not going to change anything.

“Nani was right when she said there’s no such thing as an independent woman. You are dependent on Abba financially. *He* offers me a better life. I no longer get openly harassed because I don’t leave the house without him. I haven’t suffered from road rage in a year because I have a driver. I don’t even look at the bills any longer because he handles them. And I get everything I ask for. I would be a fool to leave all this and go back to spending half the day out of the house in the sweltering sun and the dangerous smog. My place is wherever he puts me, because I trust him to always put me in the best place possible. Everything is so much easier now. We’ve talked long enough.”

“Wait!” her mother cried desperately. “Please meet us in person. You have so much to offer. You were the first girl to go to school on my side of the family,

and the first woman to hold a job on your father's side. Please, just meet us once without him."

"I am not fighting generational battles," she replied through gritted teeth. "That is your problem. I have chosen a nice and cozy life for myself, and I would thank you to stop trying to ruin it!"

She slammed the receiver shut and pulled out the landline wire. He was right to request her to not share her cell number with her parents for the sake of her mental health. At this moment, she was truly glad she obeyed. She walked away, uselessly dabbing at her stained shirt and heavy heart.

Evenings promised still leaves, burning roads, and *him*. And each evening honoured its punctual promise at 5.30 pm on the dot. He marched majestically into his house, towards the wife he had disciplined, carrying an enormous bouquet of roses whose scent tickled his nose. He had decided not to complain as long as she tickled his ego. Her reward for her unwavering consent. She greeted him with a smile and a cup of tea while donned in a light pink suit, her kameez loosely enveloping her slim frame while her chust pyjama hugged her firm legs. Her dupatta swept the tiled floor as she walked shyly towards him, carrying a silver tray and expensive requests. A whispered greeting, a kiss on the cheek, and an empty teacup later, she set her sights on next week, when her parcels would be delivered at her doorstep. She had never been denied anything. Her grandmother would be proud of the life she had built for herself.

Unburdened, she responded to his each beck and call with love, supervising dinner, and then bed time. He was exceptionally tired at night and often fell asleep

mid-sentence. She knew the unforgiving workings of the corporate sector and respected why he couldn't muster the energy for much family time after 10 pm. After all, her father was not a businessman, hence the reason they laughed and talked deep into the night and woke up with weary bones and dark circles the next morning for work. After her 20-step skincare routine, she snuggled under the soft sheets she shared with him and closed her bright eyes at the world around her.

Last year, her skin tone was uneven due to the bipolar Lahori weather and her hair was grubby due to the dust storms which frequented the city. Her posture was weak due to hours of sitting at a computer and her stomach jiggled with each jumping jack as she engaged in stress fuelled binge eating. Her mood was sour because of the crude remarks and hurdles she faced daily, and she was constantly exhausted being the pioneer woman navigating the multicoloured world outside the four protective walls. Then, he strode in her life without warning, catching her off guard, and saved everyone from her, teaching her to conquer the extent of the power she truly had on those around her. She consented to not putting madness into the minds of men and causing regular earthquakes and pandemics. His affection arrived in tidal waves, washing her wounds as she followed him to her true place, a place of comforts and calmness. The storm no longer raged in her head as he validated her exhaustion and frustration, suggesting the solution her parents had taught her to snobbishly refuse. She finally cherished domestic bliss. Everyone was right throughout history. It was far easier being under shade of the vigilant wing of a traditional husband, instead of remaining steady under the storm with modern parents. Her skin was smooth and her hair soft. She stood poised and alert as she found joy in her visible collarbones. She carried a pleasant demeanour around him, and her mind was calmer than ever before. He had manufactured the perfect woman out of her who made her choices and was allowed to savour them. She was liberated and content, satisfying everyone. Amazingly, the man with the cold hard cash was really Mr. Right.

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