

Thoroughbred

by

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i

As far as she could tell, Dr. Raza was sitting in her own damn office. She had haggled for weeks with the *furniture wallah* who had made the mahogany desk at which everyone was seated. Her initials discreetly inlaid in the far-corner. She was mad proud of it, even though she sometimes wondered if the carpenter had shortchanged her by using an inferior type of wood.

As she sat at its head, her authority being so casually challenged by this gentleman in the crisp blue shalwar kameez, annotated by the shiny golden cufflinks spelling his name in turn, she felt the need to remind the room who was in bloody charge around here. That modern chandelier overhead may have been illuminating his disconcerted wife who was accompanying the Blue Seth, but *she* had paid for every fancy bit of it. Mrs. Seth nervously played with her diamond bangles as the room grew increasingly charged, and Dr. Raza took even that as a personal affront – an almost challenge to the balance of power in *her* office. There was no question. It *had* to be restored.

ii

Two years ago, Mrs. Seth had first visited Dr. Raza with her brand new daughter-in-law. The young couple had been married in a grand ceremony. “All of city was in attendance,” crooned Mrs Seth as she admonished Dr. Raza for not gracing the family with her presence at the event of a lifetime. Everyone had talked about how lucky this lucky girl was for securing a husband as marvellous as Mr. and Mrs. Seth’s only son. “But *we* have not been so lucky, Dr. Raza.” Her expression turned. “It’s absolute tragedy. It has been whole six months and no child. So we come to you for your blessings Dr. Raza. Please give baby to my daughter in law. Money is no price.”

Dr. Raza didn’t bat an eyelid. She was accustomed to a colourful variety of patients in her now decade-long infertility practice. It was not odd to have a mother-in-law commandeer a young girl saddled to her son to the clinic. Usually the demand

was for Dr. Raza to implant nothing less than a bonny boy into the girl's uterus. Mrs. Seth had at least remained gender neutral in her desire. A husband accompanying his wife in a first meeting was rare. It happened, but it wasn't the norm. And even in those cases there was no shortage of theatre in the nature of the requests they brought with them.

She wasn't sure whether more families came in asking for male children, or more mothers walked in with their daughters asking to ensure, and in cases where it may be needed, to repair the girl's hymen. There was far less interest in the idea that a girl should be vaccinated against the HPV virus "before marriage," and far more concern about the presentation of her virginal state. Dr. Raza had considered finding a better euphemism for asking her young patients whether they were sexually active, but then relented to the commonplace "*aap* married *hain?*" It was just easier.

Dr. Raza turned to look at Mrs. Seth, and found that her eyes were intently fixed upon her, bleeding desperation. "I'd like to speak to the girl in private, please. Would you give us the room?" Mrs. Seth was visibly confused. "*Dr. Sahiba yeh private hae hai.* You ask anything, no problem. She will answer." Dr. Raza was non-plussed. She rang for her PA, and deftly asked her to accompany Mrs. Seth to the VIP lounge. The term was successful in its deployment. A wave of pleasure perceptibly crossed Mrs Seth's face and she was thus easily ushered out of the way.

iii

Laila liked to read. She liked music. She hadn't yet been allowed to attend a concert – she was far too young for that – even when all her friends were going. She was allowed however to visit the bookstore as long as her brother went with her, and she could buy and read whatever she wanted. Thankfully no one had read enough to even consider censoring her authorial choices. This was the year Laila would complete her "A" Levels, and she was nervous but excited about the prospect of starting at college after. She had scoured through the webpages of the local university and was

psyched to see the dynamic music scene there. The university also taught the Theory of Music and the idea of enrolling in the class made her heart sing. She couldn't wait.

iv

Dr. Raza sat facing the girl, more child than woman, and squarely asked, "Are you ready to be a mother, Laila?" The girl was quiet. Her silence more one of containment than the usual awkwardness that the doctor had seen on most 19 year old faces. "I don't know what I am ready for, Doctor." Her voice echoed in the small room. "Do you track your ovulation cycle?" Dr. Raza continued. "What for?" came the reply. The defiance in equal parts calm, and chilling. She sat back in her office chair and weighed her words before asking her next question. "Laila, I want you to feel comfortable here. What you share remains confidential between us, whether you choose to retain me as your doctor moving forward, or not. Do you understand?" Laila replied in the affirmative. Dr. Raza held Laila's gaze and continued, "have you consummated your marriage?"

"No, we have not."

v

Salman was such a nice guy. Everyone said so. He was also so handsome, with his hair perfectly groomed and the way he styled himself in those smart yellow cardigans paired with his denim shirts. Not everyone could pull that look off but Salman! – oh, how Salman could pull that look off! Of course all the women around him wanted to pull that look off of Salman's lithe frame – the logo on his belt serving an even greater temptation to do so – but no sir! He was saving himself for someone special. And that of course, only made all those women want him even more.

When Salman told his parents that he didn't wish to return to Pakistan after completing his undergraduate degree from England, they were absolutely aghast. He loved London, he explained. He loved his freedom there, and how he could

unapologetically be himself. It was a line his father just didn't understand. Nor his mother. Their love for their only son was as loud as their personalities and they couldn't bear the thought of him not wanting to return. They would simply ensure he had everything he needed to be himself at home.

He flew back for his break, confident that he would be able to convince his parents that his choices would be better served away from Pakistan. His parents loved him so much, surely he could make them understand that his way made him happy. Surely his happiness would sway them into acquiescing. He felt reassured by the fanfare with which they welcomed him at the airport. The car ride back home was warm and mirthful. He had returned with everyone's gifts and requests and the mood was unabashedly one of abundance.

As they turned into the lush, long driveway of the still new Seth residence, a surprise waited for Salman. It was every bit the fancy, flashy, shiny car he dreamed of, as red as his dreams. Compact. Sporty. The image of him and his lover driving down a highway with the top down, the wind in their hair, their collars succumbing to the breeze. Mr. and Mrs. Seth smiled in unison. Surely they understood their son so well.

vi

It had taken some time for Laila and Salman to find something akin to a rhythm in their relationship. The terms of their marriage had become clear to them both fairly swiftly. She was a simple middle class girl. He was a handsome and wealthy catch. His job was to be the perfect son with the perfect life. Hers, for her stroke of good fortune, was to be eternally grateful, and hence be obligated to remain forever pretty, and constant in her obedience to the family. Together, their only job in the Seth universe was to procreate – how gorgeous their children would be given their distinct levels of attractiveness. That's all that mattered. Maybe if they could deliver that ... maybe both would be left alone to live their lives on their own terms one day.

One night after yet another failed attempt in the bedroom, they lay next to each other. “Why did you marry me?” Salman asked Laila.

“You ask me that as if I had a choice in the matter,” a tenderness underlined the cutting edge of her words.

“You tell me,” Laila asked Salman. “Why did *you* marry me?”

There was silence for a while. And then evenly the reply, “because I do not know how to stand up to them.”

vii

Over the years, the Seths had seemingly come to some kind of convoluted terms with their son’s sexuality as long as no one ever talked about it, and as long as no one else ever (officially) learned of it. The price of reaching this reluctant acceptance had been two failed IVF treatments that Laila had been made to endure. But what of that? Laila and her needs were entirely irrelevant to them. Moreover, she owed them a whole lot of unconditional and undying gratitude for having such nice, kind, big-hearted, supportive in-laws who were perfectly willing to not hold Laila accountable for their son’s low motility rate and sperm count.

Dr. Raza thought back to their first meeting. Mrs. Seth had been right about one thing from the start. This was a true tragedy. Dr. Raza had ached as she saw her young patient through these two long years. She had had enough. It was painfully clear what needed to be done, but the marriage had persisted against everyone’s better judgement.

Purchasing power has a might all its own. And it had brought the Seth family all back to Dr. Raza’s office on this day, with renewed vigour. Mr. Seth sat with legs splayed as wide as they possibly could be splayed as he occupied the chair across the

good doctor's desk. He couldn't be more confident in his solution to his family's predicament. All the doctor had to do was follow his orders, and that would be that. His friend ran a dairy farm with Australian cows imported straight from – you guessed it – Australia, and had so kindly offered that whenever Mr. Seth would have his first grandchild, he would gift him one of the finest from his herd to sacrifice for the child's *Aqiqah* ceremony. Mr. Seth was all ready to offer the finest of everything in service of his own needs. This made him feel very, very good.

The solution was so simple. Mr. Seth thought it particularly ingenious, especially as he was the one who had thought of it. The years had clarified that Salman, who had trouble shooting at all in the first place, unfortunately only shot blanks. But they had no other torch-bearing child. He was the only son. A fact that was fast losing its romantic hold on Mr. Seth's imagination.

Faced with the doom of never having a biological heir, Mr. Seth relished expressing his great epiphany, “*Dr. Sabiba hum donation dete hain. Aap hamara sperm use kar lein. Aik hee baat hai.*”

She used to believe she had heard it all. Every last possible crazy request that could be. But nothing had prepared Dr. Raza for this moment. She paused. She collected herself. She enunciated her words clearly, “This is not a joke, Mr. Seth. You cannot be a sperm donor for your daughter-in-law's eggs.”

“*Na jee, na!* What joke? This is a *simple* solution for all of us. No one has to know. And even if they do, what of it? *Bacha tau phir bhi hamara hee ho ga.*”

“Your request is not just unethical; it is illegal, sir,” she drew out her words to ensure that their full effect would somehow dawn on this gentleman. He shrugged his shoulders, indicating his indifference to such matters. Dr. Raza looked at the four

seated around her. The nonchalance of the request, the smug, entitled solution seemed to have no effect at all on the men in the room.

She turned to the women, “Mrs. Seth, do you understand what your husband is asking for?”

Mrs. Seth nervously stroked her wrist. “*Theek hee tau keh rabe hain - bacha tau hamara hee ho ga. Hamari taraf se sab razee hain. Ap operation ki tayyari shuru karein.*”

“Do you not see that *you* are asking me to fertilise the illegitimate child of your husband and your daughter in law? This child would *not* be your son’s child. This would *not* be *your* grandchild. This would be your husband’s child with your son’s wife!”

“Dr. Sahiba, we are not such educated people. *Hum itna nahi sochte. Bass ab aap waisay kar lein jaise Seth sahib chahtey hain.*”

Dr. Raza sat back and took a long sip of water. Exasperation had swallowed all her words.

“It doesn’t matter what any of you want.”

The voice was soft and unexpected. Confused faces turned in its direction. Laila sat a little taller and continued, “Dr. Raza, do you remember what you said to me when I first came to you? You spoke to me alone, in private, and I want you to repeat your assurance in the presence of my husband and my parents-in-law, that whatever we decide to do next, your promise of confidentiality holds true for us all.”

“Yes, Laila,” said the doctor respectfully.

Laila let out a long breath, and then continued. “I do not want a child. And I do not want to waste your time. It is pointless to explain anything to anyone here. I think you understand that.”

And then, facing her parents-in-law directly, Laila declared, “and I do not wish to stay in this marriage any longer. When we leave this clinic today, I will return to my own home, and all of you will no longer make any demands of me. In turn, I will never speak of my husband’s complete disinterest in me or of his sexual preferences. Those are his story to tell or to keep. But my story will no longer be written by any of you.”

She could see that Mr. Seth was seething. She addressed him directly, “I know you’re angry but if you do anything to try to hurt or sabotage me, know that this doctor is my witness, and that I can destroy you with your own truth.”

She watched the man get up, while yanking his wife and son from their seats.

“Thank you,” mouthed Salman to Laila as he followed his parents out of the clinic.

It was the first time Dr. Raza ever saw Laila smile.

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