

NELL  
FREUDENBERGER



THE NEWLYWEDS

*A novel*

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# *The Newlyweds*

A NOVEL



Nell Freudenberger

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THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK

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In a courtyard

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She is waiting,

Wearing a Dacca sari, vermilion in her parting.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE, "*Flute Music*"



# An Arranged Marriage

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1 She hadn't heard the mailman, but Amina decided to go out and check. Just in case. If anyone saw her, they would know that there was someone in the house now during the day while George was at work. They would watch Amina hurrying coatless to the mailbox, still wearing her bedroom slippers, and would conclude that this was her home. She had come to stay.

The mailbox was new. She had ordered it herself with George's credit card, from [mailboxes.com](http://www.mailboxes.com), and she had not chosen the cheapest one. George had said that they needed something sturdy, and so Amina had turned off the Deshi part of her brain and ordered the heavy-duty rural model, in glossy black, for \$90. She had not done the conversion into taking and when it arrived, wrapped in plastic, surrounded by Styrofoam chips, and carefully tucked into its corrugated cardboard box—a box that most Americans would simply throw away because that Amina could not help storing in the basement, in a growing pile behind George's Bowflex—she had taken pleasure in its size and solidity. She showed George the detachable red flag that you could move up or down to indicate whether you had letters for collection.

"That wasn't even in the picture," she told him. "It just came with it, free."

The old mailbox had been bashed in by thugs. The first time had been right after Aminah arrived from Bangladesh, one Thursday night in March. George had left for work on Friday morning, but he hadn't gotten even as far as his car when he came back through the kitchen door, uncharacteristically furious.

"Goddamn thugs. Potheads. Smoking weed and destroying private property. And the police don't do a fucking thing."

"Thugs are here? In Pittsford?" She couldn't understand it, and that made him angrier.

"Thugs! Vandals. Hooligans—whatever you want to call them. Uneducated pieces of human garbage." Then he went down to the basement to get his tools, because you had to take the mailbox off its post and repair the damage right away. If the thugs saw that you hadn't fixed it, that was an invitation.

The flag was still raised, and when she double-checked, sticking her hand all the way into its black depths, there was only the stack of bills George had left on his way to work. The thugs did not actually steal the mail, and so her green card, which was supposed to arrive this month, would have been safe even if she could have forgotten to check. "Thugs" had a different meaning in America, and that was why she'd been confused. George had been talking about kids, troublemakers from East Rochester High, while Amina had been thinking of dacoits: bandits who haunted the highways and made it unsafe to take the bus. She had lived in Rochester six months now—long enough to know that there were no bandits on Pittsford roads at night.

American English was different from the language she'd learned at Maple Leaf International in Dhaka, but she was lucky because George corrected her and kept her from making embarrassing mistakes. Americans always went to the bathroom, never the loo. They did not live in flats or stow anything in the boot of the car, and under no circumstances did they ever pop outside to smoke a fag.

Maple Leaf was where she first learned to use the computer, and the computer was ho

she met George, a thirty-four-year-old SWM who was looking for a wife. George had explained to her that he had always wanted to get married. He had dated women in Rochester, but often found them silly, and had such a strong aversion to perfume that he couldn't sit across the table from a woman who was wearing it. George's cousin Kim had called him "picky," and had suggested that he might have better luck on the Internet, where he could clarify his requirements from the beginning.

George told Amina that he had been waiting for a special connection. He was a romantic and he didn't want to compromise on just anyone. It wasn't until his colleague Ed told him that he'd met his wife, Min, on AsianEuro.com that he had thought of trying that particular site. When he had received the first e-mail from Amina, he said that he'd "had a feeling." When Amina asked what had given him the feeling, he said that she was "straightforward" and that she did not play games, unlike some women he knew. Which women were those, she had asked, but George said he was talking about women he'd known a long time ago, when he was in college.

She hadn't been testing him: she had really wanted to know, only because her own experience had been so different. She had been contacted by several men before George, and each time she'd wondered if this was the person she would marry. Once she and George had started e-mailing each other exclusively, she had wondered the same thing about him, and she'd continued wondering even after he booked the flight to Dhaka in order to meet her. She had wondered that first night when he ate with her parents at the wobbly table covered by the plasticized map of the world—which her father discreetly steadied by placing his elbow somewhere in the neighborhood of Sudan—and during the agonizing hours they had spent at the homes of their Dhaka friends and relatives, talking to each other in English while everyone sat around them and watched. It wasn't until she was actually on the plane in Washington, D.C., wearing the University of Rochester sweatshirt he'd given her, that she had finally become convinced it was going to happen.

It was the first week of September, but the leaves were already starting to turn yellow. George said that the fall was coming early, making up for the fact that last spring had been unusually warm: a gift to Amina from the year 2005—her first in America. By the time she arrived in March most of the snow was gone, and so she had not yet experienced a real Rochester winter.

In those first weeks she had been pleased to notice that her husband had a large collection of books: biographies (Abraham Lincoln, Anne Frank, Cary Grant, Mary Queen of Scots, John Lennon, and Napoléon) as well as classic novels by Charles Dickens, Cervantes, Tolstoy, Ernest Hemingway, and Jane Austen. George told Amina that he was a reader but that he couldn't understand people who waded through all of the garbage they published these days when it was possible to spend your whole life reading books the greatness of which had already been established.

George did have some books from his childhood, when he'd been interested in fantasy novels, especially retellings of the Arthurian legend and anything to do with dragons. There was also a book his mother had given him, *1001 Facts for Kids*, which he claimed had "basically got him through the stupidity of elementary school." In high school he had put away the *1001 Facts* in favor of a game called Dungeons & Dragons, but there were no websites that served the same purpose, and George retained a storehouse of interesting

tidbits that he periodically related to Amina.

“Did you know that there is an actual society made up of people who believe the earth flat?”

“Did you know that one out of twenty people has an extra rib?”

“Did you know that most lipstick contains fish scales?”

For several weeks Amina had answered “No” to each of these questions, until she gradually understood that this was another colloquialism—perhaps more typical of her husband than of the English language—simply a way of introducing a new subject that did not demand an actual response.

“Did you know that seventy percent of men and sixty percent of women admit to having been unfaithful to their spouse, but that eighty percent of men say they would marry the same woman if they had the chance to live their lives over again?”

“What do the women say?” Amina had asked, but George’s website hadn’t cited the statistic.

George had said that they could use the money he’d been saving for a rainy day for her to begin studying at Monroe Community College next year, and as soon as her green car arrived, Amina planned to start looking for a job. She wanted to contribute to the cost of her education, even if it was just a small amount. George supported the idea of her continuing her studies, but only once she had a specific goal in mind. It wasn’t the degree that counted but what you did with it; he believed that too many Americans wasted time and money on college simply for the sake of a fancy piece of paper. And so Amina told him that she had always dreamed of becoming a real teacher. This was not untrue, in the sense that she had hoped her tutoring jobs at home might one day lead to a more sustained and distinguished kind of work. What she didn’t mention to George was how important the U.S. college diploma would be to everyone she knew at home—a tangible symbol of what she had accomplished halfway across the world.

She was standing at the sink, chopping eggplant for dinner, when she saw their neighbor Annie Snyder coming up Skytop Lane, pushing an infant in a stroller and talking to her little boy, Lawson, who was pedaling a low plastic bike. The garish colors and balloon-like shape of that toy reminded Amina of a commercial she had seen on TV soon after she’d arrived in Rochester, in which real people were eating breakfast in a cartoon house. Annie had introduced herself when Amina had moved in and invited her out for coffee. Then she’d asked if Amina had any babysitting experience, because she was always looking for someone to watch the kids for an hour or two while she did the shopping or went to the gym.

She asks that because you’re from someplace else, George had said. She sees brown skin and all she can think of is housecleaning or babysitting. He told her she was welcome to go to Starbucks with Annie, but under no circumstances was she to take care of Annie’s children, even for an hour. Amina was desperate to find a job, but secretly she was glad of George’s prohibition. American babies made her nervous, the way they traveled in their padded strollers, wrapped up in blankets like precious goods from UPS.

She had never worried about motherhood before, since she’d always known she would have her own mother to help her. When she and George had become serious, Amina and her parents had decided that she would do everything she could to bring them to America with her. Only once they’d arrived did she want to have her first child. They’d talked their plan

through again and again at home, researching the green card and citizenship requirements—determining that if all went well, it would be three years from the time she arrived before her parents could hope to join her. Just before she left, her cousin Ghaniyah had shown her an article in *Femina* called “After the Honeymoon,” which said that a couple remained newlyweds for a year and a day after marriage. In her case, Amina thought, the newlywed period would last three times that long, because she wouldn’t feel truly settled until her parents had arrived.

In spite of all the preparation, there was something surprising about actually finding herself in Rochester, waiting for a green card in the mail. The sight of Annie squatting down and retrieving something from the netting underneath the stroller reminded her that she had been here six months already and had not yet found an opportunity to discuss her thoughts about children or her parents’ emigration with George.

2 Theirs was the second-to-last house on the road. The road ended in an asphalt circle called a cul-de-sac, and beyond the cul-de-sac was a field of corn. That field had startled Amina when she first arrived—had made her wonder, just for a moment, if she had not been tricked (as everyone had predicted) and found herself in a sort of American village. She’d had to remind herself of the clean and modern Rochester airport and of the Pittsford Wegmans—grocery store that was the first thing she described to her mother during their first conversation on the phone. When she asked about the field, George had explained that there were power lines that couldn’t be moved, and so no one could build a house there.

After she understood its purpose, Amina liked the cornfield, which reminded her of Haibatpur, her grandmother’s village. She had been born there. That was when the house was still a hut, with a thatched roof and a fired-dung floor. After she was born, when her parents were struggling to feed even themselves in Dhaka, they had done as many people did and sent their child back to live with her grandparents in the village. Because of a land dispute between Amina’s father and his cousins, it was her mother’s village to which they habitually returned. And so Amina had stayed with Nanu and her Parveen Aunty and Parveen’s daughter—her favorite cousin, Micki—until she was six years old. Her first memory was of climbing up the stone steps from the pond with her hand in Nanu’s, watching a funny pattern of light and dark splotches turn into a frog, holding still in the ragged shade of a coconut palm.

Her nanu had had four daughters and two sons, but both of Amina’s uncles had died too young for Amina to remember them. The elder, Khokon, had been Mukti Bahini like her father, a Freedom Fighter against the Pakistanis, while the younger one, Emdad, had stayed in the village so that her grandmother wouldn’t worry too much. Even though he was younger, it was Emdad her grandmother loved the best: that was why she’d kept him with her. When you tried to trick God that way, bad things could happen. Khokon had been killed by General Yahya’s soldiers only two weeks after he’d enlisted, but Emdad had lived long enough to marry. Her mother said that Nanu had often congratulated herself on her foresight in convincing Emdad to stay at home, and so it had been almost impossible for her to believe the news, ten years after the war had ended, that her younger son had been killed in a motorbike accident on his way to Shyamnagar, delivering prescription medicines to the family pharmacy. For months afterward, whenever people offered condolences, her grandmother would correct them:

“You’re thinking of Khokon, my elder son. He was killed in the war.”

By the time Amina was grown up, her grandmother had recovered her wits. But by the time she had only daughters, and that was the reason she’d become the way she was now, very quiet and heavy, like a stone.

Little by little, over the eleven months they had written to each other, Amina had told George about her life. She’d said that she came from a good family and that her parents had sacrificed to send her to an English medium school, but she had not exaggerated her father’s financial situation or the extent of her formal education. She’d said that she had learned to speak English at Maple Leaf International in Dhaka but that she’d been forced to drop out when she was thirteen, when her father could no longer pay the fees. She’d tried to explain that it wasn’t arriving in a rickshaw every day, when everyone else came by car or taxi, or borrowing the books other girls owned, or even working twice as hard because everyone else had a private tutor after school. What she couldn’t stand, she wrote to George, was having to leave school a few months after her thirteenth birthday, waking up in the morning and knowing that today she was falling six hours behind, tomorrow twelve, and the next day eighteen. What she couldn’t stand was all the waste.

She’d also confessed that she was twenty-four rather than twenty-three that year: her parents had waited to file her birth certificate, as many families did, so that she might one day have extra time to qualify for university or the civil-service exam. Her mother had warned her to be careful about what she revealed in her e-mails, but Amina found that once she got started writing, it was difficult to stop.

She told George how her father’s business plans had a tendency to fail, and how each time one of those schemes had foundered, they had lost their apartment. She told him about the year they had spent living in Tejgaon, after losing the apartment in the building called Mohor Mahal, and how during that time her father had bought a single egg every day, which her mother would cook for her because Amina was still growing and needed the protein. One night, when she had tried to share the egg with her parents, dividing it up into three parts, her father had gotten so angry that he had tried to beat her (with a jump rope) and would have succeeded if her mother hadn’t come after him with the broken handle of a chicken feather broom.

Sometimes she got so involved in remembering what had happened that she forgot about the reader on the other end, and so she was surprised when George wrote back to tell her that her story had made him cry. He could not remember crying since his hamster had died in the second grade, and he thought that it meant their connection was getting stronger. Amina wrote back immediately to apologize for making George cry and to explain that it was not a sad story but a funny one, about her parents and the silly fights they sometimes had. Even though she and George didn’t always understand each other, she never felt shy about asking him questions. What level did the American second grade correspond to in the British system? What had he eaten for dinner as a child? And what, she was very curious to know, was his hamster?

It had felt wonderful to have someone to confide in, someone she could trust not to gossip. (With whom could George gossip about Amina, after all?) It was a pleasure to write about difficult times in the past, as long as things were better now. By the time she and George started writing to each other, Amina was supporting her parents with the money she made

from her tutoring jobs through Top Talents; they were living in the apartment in Mohammadpur, and of course they had plenty to eat. She still thought the proudest moment of her life had come when she was seventeen and had returned home one day to surprise her parents with a television bought entirely out of her own earnings.

The other benefit of tutoring, one she hadn't considered when she started out, was the use of the computers that many of the wealthy families who hired her kept for their children's exclusive use. All of her students were female, and most of them were between eight and fourteen years old; as they got closer to the O- or A-level exams, their parents hired university students to prepare them. Many of these parents told Amina that they'd chosen her because they'd been impressed by her dedication in passing the O levels on her own, but of course Amina knew that Top Talents charged less for her than they did for an actual university student.

Amina had seen one of her students, a fourteen-year-old named Sharmila, three times a week; since her parents both had office jobs, they liked Amina to stay as long as she wanted so that their daughter wasn't just sitting around with the servants all afternoon. Her mother confided that she thought Amina would be a good influence on her daughter's character. Sharmila was very intelligent, but easily distracted, and was not serious enough about saying her prayers. *She has been raised with everything*, her mother said, her arm taking in the marble floors of the living room and the heavy brocade curtains on the six picture windows overlooking the black surface of Gulshan Lake, which was revealed, even at this height, to be clogged with garbage, water lilies, and the shanties of migrant families. *She doesn't even know how lucky she is*. Amina nodded politely, but the way that Sharmila's mother complained was a performance. She would put on the same show when her daughter's marriage was being negotiated, exaggerating Sharmila's incompetence with a simple dal or kitchuri, so that the groom's family would understand what a little princess they were about to receive.

Amina had sworn Sharmila to secrecy on the subject of AsianEuro.com, and then they'd had a lot of fun, looking through the photos in the "male gallery" after the lessons were finished. Sharmila always chose the youngest and best-looking men; she would squeal and gasp when they came across one who was very old or very fat. More often than not, Amina had the same impulses, but she reminded herself that she was not a little girl playing a game. She was a twenty-four-year-old woman whose family's future depended on this decision.

According to her mother, the man could not have been divorced and he certainly could not have any children. He had to have a bachelor's degree and a dependable job, and he could not drink alcohol. He could not be younger than thirty or older than forty-five, and he must be willing to convert to Islam. Her mother had also insisted that Amina take off her glasses and wear a red sari she had inherited from her cousin Ghaniyah in the photograph, but once it had been taken and scanned into the computer (a great inconvenience) at the Internet cafe near Auntie #2's apartment in Savar, her mother would not allow her to post it online. "Who would you want a man who was only interested in your photograph?" she demanded, and nothing Amina could say about the way the site worked would change her mind.

"The men will think you're ugly!" Sharmila exclaimed when she heard about Amina's mother's stipulations. They were sitting on the rug in Sharmila's bedroom at the time, with Sharmila's *Basic English Grammar* open between them. Her student was wearing the kameez of her school uniform with a pair of pajama trousers decorated with kittens. She looked Amir

up and down critically.

“Your hair is coarse, and you have an apple nose, but you aren’t *ugly*,” she concluded. “Now no one is going to write to you.” And although Amina had the very same fears, she had decided to pretend to agree with her mother, for the sake of Sharmila’s character.

As it happened, George did not post his picture online either. They sent each other the photographs only after they had exchanged several messages. George told her that her picture was “very beautiful,” in a formal way that pleased her: it was almost as if he were a Bengali bridegroom surrounded by his relatives, approving of their choice without wanting to display too much enthusiasm, for fear of being teased. Months later, once they had decided to become exclusive and take their profiles down from the site, George told her it was the day he saw her photograph that he’d become convinced she was the right person for him—not because of how pretty she was but because she hadn’t used her “superficial charms” to advertise herself, the way certain American women did.

Their correspondence hadn’t been without its challenges. Normally she would go to the British Council in the mornings before her tutoring responsibilities began; since George often wrote to her at night before he went to bed, there was almost always a message waiting for her. But one afternoon a message had come when she’d happened to be at the library. It was 4:22 a.m. in Rochester (unlike most people’s, George’s e-mails always displayed the correct time), and she had been tempted to IM and say that she was online right at that moment. But when she’d read the message, she had been relieved she’d waited. She thought it was doubly disappointing to have gotten a message at a surprising time and then to have it turn out to be the message it was, startling in its curt brevity: George had been assigned a big project at work, he said, and wasn’t sure when he would be able to resume their correspondence. He hoped she understood and that she and her family continued to be well.

She had received similar messages before, and it had always meant that the man had found someone else. She remembered the way that this particular message, more than any of the others, had closed down the day—so it seemed as if there would never be anything to look forward to again. She felt as if she had failed, and when she’d arrived home and reported what had happened, her mother’s obvious disappointment had made her own even more difficult to bear. Even her father had held his tongue and kept himself from gloating about the unreliability of computerized matchmaking, and so she’d known he had been hoping the same, too.

It had been ten weeks before George had written to her again. Much later she’d wondered whether it was this hiatus that had made her fall in love with him. The message had come at the usual time, but it was even more unexpected than the last one, since she’d assumed he would never write again:

**Dear Amina,**

**First, I should apologize for not writing for so long. I wouldn’t blame you if you had found someone else, or were even engaged by now. (I wouldn’t blame you, but I would be very disappointed.) I promised myself I would write to you tonight and explain, but I’ve been sitting here a long time. I keep writing things and then deleting them.**



It wasn't only the work, as you probably guessed. I do have a big project (I'll tell you about it if you're still interested), but believe me when I say I was still thinking about you. My friends have asked how I could be serious about someone I've never even met, but I think in some ways we know each other better than we would if we just went on dates. Do you know what I mean? I think I've been worried about getting serious because I thought you might just disappear or stop writing. I know doing the same thing to you was really stupid, and I'm sorry about that. I guess what I was thinking before I stopped writing is that I'm falling in love with you. There—that's something I wouldn't have said if we'd been face-to-face.

Well, Amina, I'm not sure you can forgive me, but I feel better having written it. How is your grandmother's health? Is your father working these days? And what have you been doing for the last two months? If the answer includes writing to someone else ... that's what I get, I guess. I know I don't exactly deserve it, but please let me down easy.

Sincerely,  
George

She had wondered if she ought to wait a day or so to write back, and then she had chastised herself for thinking about strategy. George had said that he liked her because she didn't play games; she wouldn't be like the women he remembered from college. If he liked her, she wanted it to be for the way she really was, and so she wrote back and told him that she hadn't been corresponding with anyone else. She didn't say anything about the disappointment (her own, or certainly her parents') but simply filled him in on the events of the last few weeks: her father's temporary employment at a shipping office and the pain in her grandmother's knees. Then she had printed out his note and brought it home like a gift to surprise her parents.

3 She hadn't believed there was a man on earth—much less on AsianEuro.com—who would satisfy all of her mother's requirements, but George came very close. He was thirty-four years old, and he had never been married. He had not only a bachelor's but a master's degree from SUNY Buffalo and had worked as an electrical engineer at a company called TCE for the past nine years. He liked to have a Heineken beer while he was watching the football game—his team was the Dallas Cowboys—but he rarely had more than two, and he would think about converting to Islam if that was what it would take to marry Amina.

In his next e-mail, George told her about his "big project": he had been busy buying a house. He hadn't wanted to tell her about it until he was sure they were serious, because he was afraid it was "too soon" and she might think he was "moving too fast." When Amina read that she almost laughed out loud. Why would any man hesitate to tell a woman he was courting that he had just acquired a three-bedroom house with two bathrooms, a garage, and a backyard with plenty of space for a vegetable garden? He e-mailed her a photograph, which looked to her like something from a magazine: a yellow house with a gray roof and white shutters, taller on one side than the other. (This design was called split-level, and it was one

of several similar houses on the tract, a group of homes that had been built by a developer in the 1970s.) George also mentioned that the tract was a family-oriented community, and that the schools nearby were excellent.

“My mother says he’s probably divorced,” Ghaniyah said when Amina showed her the picture of the house one day on her cousin’s home computer. “She says there are a lot of bad people online, and she’s worried about you.”

“Please tell her not to worry.”

“Otherwise, why is he unmarried?”

“Because he hasn’t met the right person,” Amina snapped. “It’s not like here—where your parents have a heart attack if you’re not engaged at twenty-five.”

Ghaniyah held up her hands in a defensive gesture. “It’s my mother who was asking. Personally I think you’re really brave.”

Amina’s mother said she shouldn’t have told Ghaniyah anything about George, but by the time Amina knew that he was coming to Desh to meet her, and what if he mentioned AsianEuro or Heineken beer himself? Her aunts were crafty, none more so than Ghaniyah’s mother, her Devil Aunty. (Her mother used to reprimand her for calling Aunty #2 by the name, but when she laughed afterward Amina knew it was okay.) Her Devil Aunt was also the only one of her mother’s three sisters who spoke any English, and she had a special way of asking one question in order to get the answer to another. Even before she met him in person, Amina knew that George wouldn’t be prepared for that kind of Deshi trick.

She had expected disapproval from Ghaniyah and her aunt, but it surprised her when her cousin Nasir started visiting her. Nasir wasn’t actually related to her; her father called him nephew because Nasir’s father had been his closest friend. When his parents had died less than a year apart, Nasir was only eleven years old. Her father had treated him like a son, monitoring his progress in school, buying him presents (even when they couldn’t afford it) and taking him to Friday prayers at the Sat Gumbad Mosque. When Nasir started college in Rajshahi, her father had arranged a place for him to stay near the university, with one of her mother’s cousins and his family. (George asked her to use the word “relative” when she was describing her cousins in English; he said it made his head hurt, trying to understand who was who.)

When she was a teenager, she had been in love with Nasir, who was six years older than she was. He had been studying computer science, but he was like her father in that he loved to read poetry, especially poetry about the liberation of Bangladesh. When Nasir returned from college on visits to see his sisters, he would ride his motor scooter over to have dinner with Amina and her parents, and often he would recite his own poems after they finished eating. Her aunts and her cousins had teased her about Nasir, who was unusually tall and handsome but very dark skinned. He allowed his thick, black hair to grow long and then cut it very short in order to save money at the barbershop. He always spoke English with Amina and when she responded, even if it was only in a whisper, he would tell her mother how clever she was. A few years after he’d finished university, Nasir got his visa and left to work in his cousin’s restaurant in London. According to her mother, Amina had sulked for two months.

She knew that there had been some discussion about the possibility of her and Nasir marrying, once she reached the right age, and also that those discussions had gradual

stopped. The rumors were that Nasir had antagonized his cousin, the owner of the London restaurant, and that he was unlikely to move to any more promising employment there. His elder sister Sakina, still unmarried at thirty-six, was encouraging him to return to the small apartment building in Mohammadpur that their parents had left them. Sakina was a formidable woman, more than 1.7 meters tall, with a streak of white in her inky hair. Most of their acquaintances had expressed reservations before Amina left for America, but Sakina was the only one who had come to her mother directly, demanding to know how she could take such a risk with her only child. They thought of you for Nasir, her mother had said at the time—that's why they're so offended. Whomever Nasir married would be in thrall to Sakina, who was certain to act more like a mother-in-law than a dependent spinster. Amina didn't think her parents' feelings about Nasir had changed, but simply that they hoped for a better life for her. She hoped for it herself.

She hadn't thought of Nasir in months when he showed up at their door one afternoon with a book for her. She had been at Sharmila's, staying late in order to e-mail George, and by the time she returned home, Nasir was gone. He had stayed for two hours, her mother said, and drunk six cups of tea; even more surprising, while he was in London Nasir had grown a full beard and started wearing a prayer cap.

"I expected a Londoni, and instead I found a mullah at the door," her mother joked. Her father, who had come in at the same time, took Nasir's book eagerly from her mother and read the title aloud: *The Lawful and Prohibited in Islam*. Amina could tell he'd been hoping for poetry and was disappointed.

"He left this for Munni?"

"And this." She handed Amina a sheet of lined blue paper from a schoolchild's copybook, folded three times. When she opened it, she found an Internet address for something called the Islamic Center of Rochester.

"A mosque in Rochester, isn't it?" her mother asked Amina excitedly.

"Islamic Center," her father corrected. "Not mosque."

"A place to meet other Muslim women, then."

Her father took the piece of paper away from Amina. "Your husband will find a real mosque for you."

Amina wanted to keep the address anyway, but her father took it and stuck it in Nasir's book. He flipped through the pages, stopping here and there. Then he asked her mother whether you had to be a guest to get a cup of tea in this house. Her father drank his tea and read the book until it was time to eat, and then when they were finished, he picked it up again. When Amina went to bed, he was still reading.

In the morning Amina was studying at the table when she noticed that something was different. It took her a minute to figure out that she didn't have to put any weight on the Southern Hemisphere in order to read; even when her mother set down her omelet and Horlicks (right in the middle of the Arabian Sea) the table didn't wobble.

"See what Nasir has done for us," her father said, turning from the sink with his face hair shaved. "A perfect fit."

Amina looked down and saw that Nasir's book was neatly wedged underneath the left side of the table's round base.

"That book is about Islam," her mother said.

But her father spoke English, as if her mother weren't even there. "Something happened to Nasir's brain in London," he said. "Maybe he is leaving it over there. That is why I am glad my daughter will be going to U.S.A."

4 When Amina had arrived in March, she'd met the majority of George's very small family right away. They had dinner with George's mother, Eileen, every Sunday night, and often Eileen's sister, Aunt Cathy, would show up to join them. One of the first things Amina noticed about Cathy was the way she kept glancing at the diamond engagement ring on Amina's left hand. The ring was a family heirloom—it had belonged to Eileen and Cathy's mother—and of course she could see how Cathy resented it going to Amina.

"That looks so lovely on your hand," Eileen had said, perhaps because she'd noticed Cathy staring, too. She turned to her sister: "George had to take it down two sizes, and I always thought Mother's fingers were thin."

"Eileen and I always said it would go to George when he married," Cathy informed Amina. "He was the boy. Even if Kim were going to marry"—she gave a short, barking laugh—"and I've given up hope, *she* wouldn't wear something like that. A blood diamond, she called it."

"It's an antique," George said. "You can't put it back in the ground."

"Exactly," Cathy had said, smiling tightly. "That's what I would've told her."

Aunt Cathy and her husband, an alcoholic and a "deadbeat dad," had divorced soon after they'd adopted Kim, and so Cathy had raised her daughter almost entirely on her own. Because she couldn't rely on Kim's adoptive father for money, she'd started her own business washing other people's dogs. That had seemed to Amina like a poor, almost Deshi sort of enterprise—something you invented with your own hands because you didn't have any other capital. But George said that Cathy didn't wash the dogs herself: she had three trucks and several Cuban employees who traveled around Rochester from house to house.

Amina had been extremely eager to meet Kim, not only to thank her for prompting George to look online for a mate, but simply because George's cousin sounded so interesting. She'd been disappointed to learn that Kim was away when she arrived and wouldn't be back until just before the wedding. Aunt Cathy and George had both apologized profusely for Kim's absence, though in different ways.

"You don't know where she's going to be on any given day," Aunt Cathy had said, during one of the dinners at Eileen's beautifully appointed table. Since there were only four of them, they ate in the breakfast nook, which was wallpapered in a pattern of red and blue sprigs that also matched Eileen's china cups and dishes. George's mother was a good cook and always remembered to make something separate for Amina, if there was pork in any of the dishes.

"Are you allergic?" Aunt Cathy had asked the first time this had happened, and George had explained that Muslims, like Jews, didn't eat pork.

"Oh, I can see how it would be dirty over there. You wouldn't want to eat any meat, would you? But our pork is very clean. As clean as chicken—next time, you'll tell Eileen she doesn't have to bother."

George's mother said then that it was no trouble to take a piece of chicken out of the freezer for Amina, but Amina's dietary restrictions had already gotten Cathy started on the subject of her own daughter.

"You can hardly cook a meal for her anymore," Cathy complained. "No meat at all, no fish"

She doesn't even eat eggs. And the last time I saw her, no onions. Can you believe that?  
Onions?"

"Why doesn't Kim eat onions?" Amina asked.

"Something to do with yoga," George said.

"When I think about what she was like as a little girl—that white-blond hair, big green eyes, the longest lashes you've ever seen. And so well behaved! People used to stop us on the street, ask if I wanted her to be in commercials. I'll tell you—that's hardly what you'd get if you tried to adopt today. Little Chinese girls everywhere, and now people are even taking them from Africa."

"When did you see Kim last?" Eileen asked.

"I can hardly remember! These places she goes—you don't even know what country she's in, one day to the next." Cathy turned to Amina. "That's the definition of torture for my mother. I hope you never experience it."

"Kim's at a yoga-training course in Costa Rica," George told Amina. "She's getting some kind of advanced certification." She had noticed a particular way George had of translating for her when they were with his mother and his aunt. Even if the thing that had been said had been said clearly in English she could understand—and she had quickly gotten to the point that she thought she could understand nearly everything—George might reprise it for her and then add some extra information he thought might interest her. After a certain number of Sunday dinners at his mother's house, Amina realized that having her there precluded George from joining in the conversation the way he might have had to in the past. He was always too busy making sure she understood.

"Kim'll make more money," he told her now. "And the certification will allow her to teach all over the world—not only in Rochester."

"That's exactly what I mean," Aunt Cathy had said. "Torture."

**5** Amina had thought she would finally meet Kim at her bridal shower, which George's cousin Jessica had thrown for her at Great Northern Pizza Kitchen. But it turned out that Kim wasn't able to attend any of the wedding events, since she and her mother weren't speaking to each other.

Amina had been sorry not to have a woman her age to advise her, but Eileen and Jessica had both been very kind. Jessica was George's only cousin on his father's side, just as Kim was his only maternal cousin; she was two years older than George, with a similar build but darker coloring. She and Eileen had taken Amina to the beauty parlor on the morning of the shower, to have a "trial run" before the wedding, and they had stayed with her the whole time in case she had trouble telling the stylist what she wanted. When Amina had pointed out her bitten nails, George's mother had promised the manicure would fix it; when she'd asked about eye makeup, his cousin had said her lashes were so long that she didn't need it. Through all of this, the girl working on Amina's hair had simply smiled and nodded, as if she didn't care about getting extra work but simply wanted Amina to be happy with how she looked.

Amina tried to explain how this manner of working differed from what she would have encountered at home—where extra goods and services would have been pressed on the family of the bride from the moment they walked in the door of the shop—but Eileen and

Jessica hadn't really heard what she was saying, because they'd been so surprised to hear that there were beauty shops in Bangladesh at all.

"Oh yes," Amina said. "They are very popular."

"But not near your village," said Jessica, with so much certainty that Amina hesitated a moment before correcting her. She explained that there were three beauty shops in the bazaar in Satkhira alone and hundreds more in the capital.

"But what about the women who cover their hair?" Eileen had asked, and Amina said she guessed that even those women enjoyed looking nice underneath the chador.

She had told George that she didn't need a wedding dress, that she was happy to get married in the clothes she already owned. She had ordered three new dresses before she came to Rochester, because tailoring was so much less expensive back at home.

"That's why I love you!" George slapped his hand on the kitchen table, as if he'd won some kind of wager. "You're so much more *sensible* than other women." Amina thought it was settled, but later that night George talked to Ed from his office, who reminded him that they would eventually have to show their wedding photographs to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"Ed says a white dress is better for the green card," George said. "My cousin Jess'll talk you. Go get something you like."

The wedding dress Jessica chose for her was sleeveless white organdy, with white satin flowers appliquéd on the neck and the bust. George's cousin was protective of Amina, telling the saleswoman firmly that they were not interested in a strapless dress and that they were looking for something economical. Jessica agreed that she might eliminate the veil—Amina had never covered her hair and didn't intend to start on her wedding day in America. But even without it the dress had cost more than five hundred dollars, not including alteration. Amina stood on a wooden box with a clamp like a giant paper clip at her waist and tried not to cry.

"Smile!" the saleswoman said. "A lot of girls would kill for a figure like yours."

"No kidding," Jessica said. "I wasn't that skinny when I was fourteen years old."

"Don't you like it?"

"She's dumbstruck. Wait until George sees you in *that*."

Jessica chatted happily with the saleswoman as they paid for the dress with George's card, but once they were in the car she asked Amina whether everything was okay.

"Everything is fine," Amina said. "Only it was so expensive."

"George doesn't mind," Jessica said. "Trust me, I could tell. Are you sure there's nothing else?"

Ordinarily when she felt homesickness coming on, she was able to distract herself with some kind of housework. Vacuuming, in particular, was helpful. Now, sitting in the car next to George's cousin, she was unprepared for the sudden stiffness in her chest, and the screen that dropped over everything, making Rochester's clean air, tidy green lawns, and even the inside of Jessica's very large, brand-new car look dull and shabby. George's cousin was so friendly, and there was still no way she could explain to her what was really wrong. When they stopped at a red light, Jessica turned to Amina and put a hand on her arm.

"Because if something were wrong between you and George, I want you to know that you could tell me. I'm a good listener."



“Oh no,” Amina said, “George is no problem,” and Jessica had laughed, although Amin wasn’t trying to be funny. She could tell that Jessica wasn’t going to allow her to be silent and so she searched for a question.

“What is the meaning of ‘dumbstruck’?” she asked, feeling slightly dishonest. She had encountered that word for the first time in a conversational primer from the British Council in a dialogue between a Miss Mulligan and Mr. Fredericks. “*Your manners leave me dumbstruck, Mr. Fredericks,*” Miss Mulligan exclaimed, and for some reason that sentence had lodged itself in Amina’s head. Often, when someone had spit on the street in front of her when a woman had elbowed her out of the way at the market, or when she’d run into one of her old classmates at Rifles Square, and the girl had inquired sweetly as to whether her father had finally found a job, she would think of Miss Mulligan and how dumbstruck she might have been had she ever found herself in Bangladesh.

“Oh, um—surprised. It just means surprised. I bet you wondered what I was talking about!”

But it didn’t only mean surprised. It meant so surprised that you could not speak.

“I was just saying anything to keep that saleswoman quiet. She was skinny, but old-lady skinny, if you know what I mean. Saggy. I don’t want to look like that, but I would like to lose fifteen pounds.” As Jessica continued to talk about the foods she ate, didn’t eat, and intended to eat, Amina concentrated on nodding and making noises to show that she understood. It was possible to be struck dumb by all sorts of emotions, not only surprise, and as they drove back toward Pittsford, Amina thought that there ought to be a whole set of words to encompass all those different varieties of silence.

6 Her mother wanted her to get married in a sari, although Amina argued that that kind of wedding, with the gold jewelry, the red-tinted sari, and the hennaed hands, was really more Hindu than Deshi, and as long as she was going to wear foreign clothes, they might as well be American ones.

“No need for a red sari,” her mother conceded. “How about blue? Or green?”

“It has to be white,” Amina said. “It has to be a real American wedding.”

“Even a white sari,” her mother said. “Some of the girls are doing it. I saw it in the ‘Trends’ column.” Since she left, her mother had been spending hours every day at the Easynet Cyber Café in Mohammadpur. It was amazing to Amina that her mother could navigate even English sites like the *Daily Star*, where she knew how to get to the Life Style page, with its features on “hot new restaurants” and “splashy summer sandals,” its recipes for French toast and beef bourguignonne, and its decorating tips (“How about painting one wall of your living room a vibrant spring color?”).

“A dress,” Amina said firmly. “That’s what ICE wants.”

Of course her mother didn’t really care about the dress, just as she would never consider visiting a restaurant (where who knew how dirty the kitchen might be) or painting one wall of her “living room” (the room where she brushed her teeth, chopped vegetables, and ironed her clothing) a vibrant spring color. The white dress was a way for her mother to talk about the worry she had had ever since the beginning—a worry that had been amplified by her cousin Nasir’s visit—that Amina and George were not going to be properly married.

It was strange that her mother should be the one to have reservations now. Both of her

parents had hoped that she might someday go abroad, but it was her mother who had worked tirelessly with Amina at every step of the long journey that had finally led her to Rochester. Her mother had always hoped to make her a famous singer, and when they had discovered that Amina hadn't inherited her mother's beautiful voice, they had tried ballet, the Bengali wooden flute, and even "Ventriloquism: History and Techniques," illustrated in a manual they had checked out from the British Council.

Their first really serious idea was that Amina might study for the O levels on her own. They had gone to the British Council once a week, following her cousin's syllabi from Maple Leaf. In the mornings, when she would have been in school, Amina and her mother would sit at the table with *Functional English* or *New English First* and always the *Cambridge English Dictionary*. When there was a word in a book Amina didn't know, her mother would underline it very faintly in pencil so that it would be easier to review later, and if there were unfamiliar words in the definition, her mother would mark those as well. After she'd passed her O levels (much to the surprise of her Devil Aunt, who'd said there was no way Amina could succeed without formal preparation), she'd checked out one of those books again, and she and her mother had laughed at the number of words they'd underlined.

When she'd passed, they had been determined to apply to American universities. Amina had written letters of inquiry to ten colleges, six of which had responded. The University of Pittsburgh had encouraged her to apply for financial assistance, but even if the tuition had been entirely free, there would have been the cost of living in America to consider. Her parents had read the letter from Pittsburgh over and over again, as if some new information were likely to appear (Amina could bear to read it only once), and shown it to all of the Dhaka relatives, speculating about a potential "American scholarship." The whole family had then of course begun to gossip about the grandiose dreams Amina's parents entertained for her—their only child, and a girl.

A few weeks after the letter had come, Amina had been listening to the Voice of America. She and her mother had been following the broadcasts in Special English for years, and even after those became too simple for Amina, they had continued to turn on "This Is America" every day at 10:00 a.m. One morning after the broadcast, there was a program about different types of student and work visas, and the SAT, GMAT, and TOEFL tests foreign students might use to qualify for them. Amina had been half listening (these were strategies she had already considered, and all of them cost money) when the announcer said something that made her look up from her book. Her mother was ironing her father's best shirt and trousers, arranged on the ceramic tile as if there were already a man inside them.

"Of course, the easiest way to come to America is to find an American and get married!"

It wasn't as if she hadn't thought of it; ever since she was a little girl, she had loved everything foreign. When other girls had traded their dresses for shalwar kameez, Amina was still wearing hers: she had to put on the uniform white-and-gray shalwar kameez in order to go to Maple Leaf, but when she got home from school she would change back into a dress and a skirt. She didn't mind covering up: when she and her mother went out to the market, she would wear trousers under the dress and a sweater instead of a shawl and even tie a scarf over her hair. Her mother said she looked crazy, especially in hot weather, but her father had laughed and called her his little memsahib. Whenever he had money, he would buy her Fanta and a Cadbury chocolate bar.



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