

Paarbati and Mohammad

If you look back you would think love was inevitable, two lonely people thrown together in a beautiful place of cool bright mornings. But surprisingly, Paarbati Sarma and Mohammad Khan's love was not the gradual affair that blooms from a spark of attraction into a greater passion, and all the melodrama. They were quite indifferent to each other at first.

I am not certain of the reasons for this. After all, they were both single and worked for the same family in Hong Kong. It would have been quite natural if they had checked each other out.

Mohammad Khan was the religious type. He wore a flowing beard and a skullcap, refused to look women in the eye and prayed five times a day. He had a ponderous way of speaking Urdu, and often got stuck when Pashto rose unbidden to his tongue. Sure, he was good-natured and obviously fond of the baby; if he was sticky about anything, it was only for two-hour prayer breaks on Friday afternoons. And he liked to be off early during the Ramadan month. I suppose his obvious piety scuttled any potential he might have had as a love match for Paarbati, the Nepalese maid.

Mohammad Khan addressed Paarbati as 'Madam', eliciting approbation and giggles respectively from his employers, Raghav Iyer ('What else should he call her?') and Rinke Chandiramani Iyer ('He does not have to call her at all.'). Mohammad presumably called Paarbati 'Madam', as a mark of his pure intentions. In any case—perhaps I am being uncharitable here—he may have found the smooth landscape of her eastern features too alien to be interesting. Maybe it kept him stronger in his resolve. Just like Paarbati never bothered with this lumbering fuddy-duddy from Pakistan who was the family driver.

But in the best traditions of all great love stories, Paarbati and Mohammad noticed each other on the same day. It was the day little Rishi started school.

After a lot of research, Rinke had decided on Lowland House at The Peak as the place where Rishi would start his education. The excitement had built up over the entire week, what with the buying of new outfits including a raincoat and Wellingtons (Lowland House had an outdoor programme where the children fed rabbits, watered plants and generally mucked about in the dirt),

the shopping for a school bag, the labelling of these purchases ('Please return to Rishi Iyer, "Munchkins", Lowland House, The Peak, Hong Kong'), the steady indoctrination of the future scholar ('Rishi is going to school! He is a big boy now!'), and the tinkering with his sleep routines to have him wake in time for school (a risky venture with often disastrous consequences, but parents never stop trying). The big day dawned bright and early. Rishi slept peacefully. His father left for work, Mohammad Khan arrived, breakfast was readied, water bottles filled, bags repacked, clothes laid out, and Rishi slept on. Rinke had been crooning wake-up lullabies all morning, to no avail. ('Wakey wakey Rishi baboo, it is school day today!') She was thinking of changing tack when the phone rang. It was her closest mate, her best friend forever. Rinke abandoned the sleeping Rishi into Paarbati's willing arms and took the call. Their conversation was heard through the house but was confusing, so let me give it to you. Make of it, what you will.

'Rinx, it is the Dame Stepford sale today.'

'The sale starts next week, Mona. The Preview Sale is on Wednesday. I am a member, I know.'

'So am I a member. This is the Pre-Pre, Rixie.'

'The Dame Stepford Pre-Pre! Have you got an invite? What did you buy last year?' Hope and envy rounded out Rinke's vowels.

Indeed Mona had an invitation, and as a generous friend she would take Rinke with her, and tell her all about the giant acquisition of last year. But what about Rishi? It was, after all, his first day at school; mums usually stayed on to make the child comfortable. But the Dame Stepford Pre-Pre! Rinke looked up to see an all-dressed-up sleepy little toddler seated on his high chair, his eyes still closed as Paarbati spooned cereal into his mouth. Miracle worker, Rinke thought, as the obvious suggested itself.

So a plan was made, to leave Paarbati with Rishi at school while Rinke and her friend went to the Dame Stepford Pre-Preview Sale. Was it bad for appearances, leaving her maid to stand in for her? Rinke did not lose sleep over appearances of the abstract kind. And she trusted Paarbati. So that was how Paarbati, little Rishi, Rinke and Mona came to be piled in the SUV, as Mohammad drove to the petrol pump.

He turned back and explained rather needlessly before getting down, 'There is no petrol, madam.'

'Why does he look sideways when he talks to me? It's so creepy!' Rinke had the quick and breathless British diction of a certain kind of Hong Konger. 'Like he's got no eyes, know what I mean? But Raghav goes on about how he is being respectful and how their people have *tehzeeb* and all that... *the culture*, you know?'

'Yes, it's a pity,' her friend agreed. 'If he shed the skullcap and shaved his beard, he'd be quite dishy, don't you think?'

'Puh-leez!' squeaked Rinke. 'He's not old or anything—his ID says twenty-five—but those sidey eyes!'

Paarbati, sitting up front, was too surprised for words. Maybe it was the beard or the Pathani suits, or his gentle demeanour; she had thought of Mohammad Khan as an older man. She watched as he walked back after paying the bill. He wore a loose shirt over track pants, she realised, not a Pathani suit, and he was tall and strapping under those clothes. He got in and turned around as always. 'Chocolate for Rishi baba,' he said, to a chorus of protests.

'Mohammad, you cannot give Rishi sweets. I am serious,' Rinke warned him, but Rishi baba was not going to give up without a fight. 'My Choco!' he cried.

Rinke was worked up. 'Paarbati, this goes for you too. Don't let Mohammad give sweets to Rishi, do you hear me?' Paarbati involuntarily looked at Mohammad just as he turned to her, his eyes full of mischief. He had forgotten to look away. Paarbati's breath caught. He had the most beautiful brown eyes, fringed by the darkest, thickest lashes she had ever seen.

They made their way to the school in cacophony as Rinke kept up a conversation, over her son's wails, about a pair of ankle boots. Paarbati, when she trusted herself to speak at last, turned around to talk to the angry little boy. Would Rishi baby show her how to feed rabbits at the school?

'I killum wi' my lie baser,' was his bloodthirsty reply. The chocolate was forgotten.

Rinke smiled gratefully at Paarbati, and admonished Rishi: '*Light sabre*, honey bun, and bunnies are darling, you don't kill them. Okay, munchkin?' And she went on to Mona about the darling lambskin boots.

Rinke was still talking when they reached the school. She hadn't noticed the weather change. The sky was overcast—that is Hong Kong for you. She turned to her driver. 'Can you hand Paarbati the *chhaatuh* please, from the back?'

Mohammed looked mystified.

'*Chhaataa?* Brolly?' Rinke put one fist over the other, making a stretching motion. 'You know... umbrella?' Hindi and Urdu are mutually intelligible, but here she was getting stuck over everyday words.

Mohammad's Pashto-accented Urdu recalled French-accented English. 'Madam, you don't mean *chhatri?*'

'Yes!' Rinke kept a straight face. A *parasol* it was. 'Cute,' mouthed an incorrigible Mona. They burst into giggles as soon as he got out. Neither were they immune to his unworldly charm. In an unsteady voice, Rinke told Paarbati, who missed nothing, that the car would come back for her.

Mohammad Khan dropped the ladies off at the store and drove back the winding roads to the school, past the fog line, cutting through the rising mist. A light rain had started up, but the wind had picked up too; the drizzle swirled up before touching the ground and splattered his windshields unevenly. He parked opposite the school building and idly looked up. Paarbati was standing in an open corridor, outside the closed glass door leading to Lowland House. Surprised, he hurried up.

What had happened was this. The new teacher at Lowland House believed she was evaluated on how quickly the children settled in. She was also driven out of her wits by interfering mums but she could not order them out—the school allowed parents to handhold their children in the first few days. A domestic helper was easier to handle. The teacher explained to Paarbati that Rishi was comfortable, he was in professional hands, there was nothing for Paarbati to do in the classroom, in fact she was in the way; at this point she had smiled widely and pointed to the door. Paarbati moved to the patchwork sofa in the lobby. But that bothered the Earth Mother in snow-white plaits who manned the front desk, so Paarbati picked herself up one more time. She knew Rishi went from sunny to terror-struck in a second if he couldn't see a familiar face. So that was how she came to be standing outside the school gate, like the legendary boy on the burning deck. Except that she was hugging herself in the cold.

Mohammad was struck by how strong the breeze was when he came up. A light spray dusted his face and beard; he was glad of his jacket. Had Paarbati let Rinke madam know? Paarbati shook her head; the situation did not warrant an SOS call. Would she wait in the car? She shook her head again. She had to be where she could hear Rishi. Could he wait in her stead? Paarbati refused the offer but permitted herself a smile, and that was Mohammad Khan's undoing. He was, after all, a young man—it was all he could do to look away as the chiffon dupatta caressed her contours; now if he forgot his code and looked her full in the face, and found in place of the unruffled blandness he had expected exquisite dimples on the chin and both cheeks, what was a red-blooded male to do? Paarbati curiously observed the flush creeping up his neck just as the faint sound of Rishi's first cry reached their ears.

He watched admiringly as she walked into the den of the disapproving diva, and asked to see Rishi. Paarbati had a soft voice (that went high only in Nepali,) clear diction in all languages, and poise enough for ten women. She spoke respectfully but stood her ground as the cries grew louder and louder until at last, a hysterical little Rishi was led out of his classroom. She hushed him and rocked him to sleep. The newbie teacher was talking at Paarbati about prolonged childhood dependencies. Mohammad could not understand any of it, but he saw how the calm indifference of Paarbati's expressionless gaze quelled her.

I think Mohammad fell in love with Paarbati then. Rather, he acknowledged that she was an extraordinary young woman, even as his blood rushed to his head and everywhere, saying to him: 'Never mind all that. Isn't she lovely?'

Rishi's wet lashes stuck to his cheeks. His little chest moved up and down as he napped in Paarbati's arms, and every now and then a tiny sob shook him. He was still whimpering in his sleep when gently, she eased off Rishi's Wellingtons, one boot after another. She was almost done when Rishi woke up, howling. Mohammad was by her side in a trice. So was the teacher. 'Is he very attached to an article? Have you moved home recently,' she volleyed questions. Ignoring her, Paarbati looked into the brand-new boot and handed it to Mohammad: 'Can you pull it out?'

He did, and turned to the school staff, offending ball of paper in hand. It had not been taken out, and they had crammed poor Rishi's rosy little foot in, bending it into the boot as he screamed

and screamed. The school staff was apologetic, but what was to be done now? Rishi retched in pain as Paarbati tried to move him. Mohammad decided for them. He bundled his jacket around a shivering Rishi and, holding his leg by the calf, ran all the way to the clinic in the adjoining building, in a loping stride that spoke of experience. He was the one who soothed Rishi, feeding him chocolates over Paarbati's objections, letting him play with his mobile phone until a sobbing Rinke arrived at the X-ray lab.

That evening when he came to return the keys, Paarbati thanked Mohammad for his help. He spoke to the door hinge. 'My younger brother broke his foot once. I daresay they fix everything here, but in our village... the key is not to disturb the foot before the bonesetter looks at it. Humko ghabrahat ho gayee thee,' he smiled. *He had panicked.*

Paarbati sang in the shower these days, much to Rinke's astonishment. 'Do Diwane sheher mein... *two mad kids in the city; Aabodaana, dhoondhtein hain, ek aashiyana... look for relief; a sanctuary they look for.*' It was inevitable. Paarbati prayed and fasted and hoped the madness would spend itself. Mohammad fasted and prayed and tried to cast her as an evil temptress. He failed as spectacularly as she did.

In fact they were made for each other. They were both mountain people who straddled nationalities—Afghanistan and Pakistan, Nepal and India. They were both sweet-tempered, yet strong, the oldest children of poor families, who invested their emotions in nurturing their siblings. Above all, they truly enjoyed caring for and playing with small children.

Mohammad loved listening to the stories she told Rishi in the car. Paarbati liked his mild manner. They eschewed meat—she was vegetarian and he was afraid the meat might not be halal. He bought her coconuts for her puja (*ibaadat*, he called it), and took her to Aap Lei Chau, where she could climb the stone embankments, break the coconuts on the stone wall, and lob them over into the sea. Raghav named them 'the religious conclave'. A lapsed Tamil Brahmin, he had no patience with this overt religiosity. Perhaps he was the first one to sense the undercurrents in his house, the pheromones flowing from car to kitchen, utility to parking lot.

One windy afternoon while getting back from a drop-off at Shek O, Paarbati cried out loud: 'Oh, please stop.' When they got out, she ran to the edge of the mountain road and gazed out into

the distance. Cumulus clouds raced across the sky, dappling the hillsides. 'It is much more beautiful where I come from,' he smiled. Paarbati was sceptical. Before long, they were trading names of peaks: Nanga Parbat and Kanchenjunga, K2 and Mount Everest. *Paarbati*, he mused that day, *mountain girl*.

Yet nothing was said, nothing acknowledged. Before long, it was Christmas time. They were moving house. It was seven in the evening and Rinke was still clearing out her closet, loading Paarbati with her discarded dresses. She had to be done before the packers came in the next morning. Could Paarbati take Rishi for a drive, show him the trees in the malls, the lights? Paarbati was trying on a pair of Rinke's cast-off silver dangles. 'Don't take them off—you look nice.' Rinke hustled her out.

They stood outside Statue Square and took in the enormous Christmas tree and the lights show. 'Santa Claus is coming to town,' sang Paarbati. The earrings gave her a prettier look than usual. As she bent down to Rishi, a swath of hair, smooth and glossy from the dry wintry air, slipped out of the clip and fell on her face, hiding the dimple of her smile. Automatically, Mohammad reached out and tucked it behind her ear. She looked up, startled. He was *looking at her, deliberately looking*, and his eyes were not brown; they were dark with a scorching emotion. Could he hear her thudding heart, would he know it was not the tree lights that cast the rosy glow on her face?

She was saved by Rinke's call. Could they pick Raghav up? He was done for the day, was in fact waiting at the Alexandra House taxi line, very close to where they would be. Paarbati spun around guiltily, peering into the yellow festive air. There was Sir, looking into his phone. Had he seen anything?

They drove back mostly in silence, punctuated by Raghav's monosyllabic replies to Rishi's excited questions. Paarbati could not bear the tension. She stole a look at Mohammad but he seemed relaxed, happy almost. And before she could turn away, he looked directly at her again, and smiled ruefully. She almost ran into the house when they reached.

Paarbati could not sleep that night. She came alive when she thought of those eyes on her, but it could not be, she told herself, she had always been the sensible person. The eldest sister

who shielded her siblings from the ugly fights at home, the daughter who sided with her mother and separated from her father, the dutiful child of twelve who went to work when her mother fell sick. She was the rock of her family who steered its course, while her mother floundered through a series of jobs and breakdowns before running away with a younger man. The elopement had been the ultimate betrayal for twenty-year-old Paarbati, who was touchy about her 'honour' and village gossip; she could not afford a flighty mother who played into the hands of those who spread vile stories about Paarbati's 'bahargaon', abroad, job. ('Who knew what these girls got up to, going abroad and returning with pots of money,' the talk went.) She had held her head high through all those insinuations, and now this? Paarbati fell asleep at four in the morning, waking only when the packers arrived, which was just as well, for Raghav and Rinke had had a massive fight.

Raghav had caught the drama by the Christmas tree the previous night. He did not approve. His reaction seemed prissy and paranoid to Rinke, while he felt she was being expedient, only bothered with her domestic help situation. 'Darling, don't overreact,' she had said. 'Paarbati will never betray us. Besides, I can't find another one like her.' The use of 'filmi', melodramatic words, annoyed Raghav; 'will not do anything stupid' would have got more purchase from him than 'betray', but that is the way with cross-cultural marriages. Rinke valued loyalty while Raghav treasured truth—and it took them time to understand that it was often the same thing.

They finally agreed to make sure that Paarbati and Mohammad were not thrown together. As they were going away on holiday soon, they did not have to make any quick decisions.

The packers left the new house at five-thirty in the evening. It was six when Paarbati discovered that her big suitcase containing all her belongings, including her mobile phone and portable DVD player, was still in the old house. Mohammad was asked to get it. He returned to find the living room doors wide open. Paarbati was feeding Rishi in front of the television while Rinke conducted a marathon telephone conversation with the Internet service providers: 'It is not Inky. I said R for Roger, *followed by* I for ice cream. Yes, R.' Rolling her Rs and her eyes, she held her hand out at Mohammad, who was standing uncertainly in the doorway. He took the suitcase into the kitchen.

Whether Rinke waved Mohammad in, or whether she was making a staying gesture, would be debated for two years through an arbitration panel, a preliminary court hearing and, ultimately, a settlement meeting.

A minute later, as Raghav walked in from work, they heard a loud crash. Mohammad had been looking for the helper's room to deposit Paarbati's baggage. The lights were, however, not working. He had stumbled in the dark, on an upturned stool, and the suitcase had spilled out some of its contents before landing on his foot.

'What is he doing inside the house, Rinke?' Raghav spat his words out. Rinke was on hold music and unwilling to desert her post when so close to a glorious appointment; pointing to the phone, she shushed Raghav. Mohammad left immediately. He grimaced as he dropped the keys into a jar, but did not appear hurt.

Paarbati stayed rooted in the living room, Rishi on her lap, her eyes glued to the TV screen like Tom and Jerry were going out of fashion.

The next day, Mohammad called in sick. His foot was giving him trouble. It could be a hairline fracture or it could be a sprain. Was he was sulking? The family was going on vacation the next day, so this was not a problem. But when they returned after two weeks and Mohammad still did not come back to work, Raghav decided that all this malingering was a blessing in disguise. He called Mohammad to his office and let him go with a month's salary. Mohammad did not show much emotion.

A fortnight later, Raghav received a lawyer's notice from Mohammad Khan demanding compensation for unlawful dismissal and injuries sustained in the course of work. All hell broke loose. There were recriminations and counter-recriminations, these-people's and I-told-you-so's, and of course the crown jewel of all marital arguments, 'it's-all-your-fault'.

What of Paarbati? Her phone had stopped working after the suitcase fiasco. By the time she returned from the family holiday and got her connection back, the lawyer's notice had arrived. She refused to take calls from Mohammad, and things came to a head only when Mohammad spoke to Rinke. Paarbati Sarma agreed to meet Mohammad Khan at the Hong Kong Bank building on her day off.

On Sundays, the building at 1 Queen's Road Central sounds like an aviary. As you near it, however, you will know that it is not birdsong but the din of a hundred maids picnicking in the covered ground-level area of the Bank. Paarbati spotted him at once.

'Rishi ki bahut yaad aati hai,' Mohammad began, and got his reward. Paarbati's face dimpled.

She looked about as she spoke. 'Rinke Madam wants to know if you are all right.' He mumbled vaguely in reply but that did not satisfy her. 'You never let her know about your leg.'

Mohammad was not capable of anger, but he did feel exasperation. And Paarbati's point was? How many times had he not called her these past weeks? 'I don't care—' he began, and stopped. He started again: 'Rinke Madam is nice, but she is not interested in my leg. She is busy with parties and shopping. These women are a bad influence on a pure spirit.'

That gave her pause. If it had not been for Rinke's madcap notions, she would not have even been here, talking to him. Paarbati had always thought of Rinke as an entity that needed to be managed, not judged. But if she had to judge her... her mind wandered as Mohammad spoke.

Nights looking after colicky babies can foster inexplicable bonds. Once in an airline lounge as they waited to catch a flight, jogging Rishi in turns in their arms, Paarbati had felt the need to talk. At the end of the narrative, Rinke had burst into tears, but what she said had surprised Paarbati more:

'I would've been mad with worry if a twelve-year-old child of mine went off to find work. It's amazing that your father traced you in Mumbai, and made that phone call all the way from Darjeeling—I would be proud of a man like that. And you would not speak to him, oh dear, he must have felt so helpless...' Rinke dissolved into tears again, as she thought of a rough labourer standing inside a provincial phone booth of yore, shouting 'Hello, Hello' into silence.

Rinke's opinion eased a sad weight off Paarbati's heart. And she found it in her to forgive the man who had beaten her mother. Yes, maybe her mistress was a bad influence. She had certainly seemed so when Paarbati's mother eloped, and Rinke had stopped her from going into lamentation. 'Your mum is not forty yet, honey. She has a right to a life, don't you think? I get it you don't like it, but come on, quit going on like you're protecting her bloody honour or something!'

What was with her boss? Dad happy with the new wife, mum with the boyfriend, all's right with the world? Was that how things worked? Or was it the way of the 'seth log', the privileged people? She was lost in her own train of thought.

'Listen to your heart,' Mohammad finished. 'You have a clean heart.' He waited. In his mind's eye he saw them in his village near Peshawar. He would buy the piece of land adjoining his father's and they would not have to fight to have the canal run through it. They would plant rice, redeem their pledges and free his youngest brother from the clutches of the Taleban. She would be a good mother to his children, a lovely daughter to his parents and a great example to his sisters. She was so clever with languages—Pashto would be no problem. He knew he would be content. If only she came with him.

Was it her heart that leapt when she heard his voice, or was it a baser passion? When did he become so sure of her heart? But he was the one of the clean heart, who spoke his mind. Why could she not be like him, ask him to come to Darjeeling, meet her dying father and her runaway mother, take her brother under his wing. In her mind's eye she saw them giving her sister away in marriage, doing the kanyadaan. They could buy a house in Darjeeling, send their children to St Joseph's Convent and make them into doctors.

What a lovely daydream!

She looked around. They stood out amongst the mainly Filipino maids. She felt a sudden surge of pride at Mohammad, who was so handsome and serious as he looked down at her. All she wished was to hook her arm in the crook of his elbow and walk away. 'These women like you,' she said. He flushed endearingly.

His beautiful unprotected girl. He had to take her away from this den of vice and keep her safe in the circle of his arms. His colour rose. 'Satan's handmaidens. Don't pay any attention to them.'

'Samjheen?' he added. *Understand?* He had used the informal, sometimes pejorative, always intimate, 'tu' form of the verb. So he could stray from his formal tones of speech when he chose. What else did she not know of him? Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes as longing

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warred with confusion. He looked like a boy despite the hideous beard; she could not bear to break his heart. Let me think, she said.

She went home and asked Rinke to book her ticket to Darjeeling. Rinke tried to reason with her, but Raghav saw her point.

Paarbati called Rinke from Darjeeling. 'Rishi ki bahut yaad aati hai,' she said, before tears overcame her. *We think of Rishi a lot.*

No, Paarbati did not come to Mohammad. It was not because he was Muslim and Pashto while she was Hindu and Nepalese, because he lived in Pakistan while she was from India. Ironically, it was because he was a man and she was a woman. It was not their time.