

Turkey Masala

It was exactly a year ago that Ann had met Kishan for the first time. He had visited her house for the Thanksgiving dinner as a special guest. Ann's parents were always very keen on meeting people of different countries and cultures, and every year they invited one of the fresh international students at the University. The University ran a *Host Family Program* that allowed interested local American families to notionally 'adopt' international students for a year. The adoption was limited to providing the student with a temporary "home away from home" that he or she could visit on holidays, and, making available to the student an authentic source for information about American customs and culture. In return, the host family got the opportunity to satisfy their urge to learn about what life was like in other countries.

This year Ann's parents had adopted Kishan through the host family program and their first interaction was arranged to happen on the *Thanksgiving Day* when Americans celebrate all the good things in their life, like family and friendship. Ann's

father Darren went to the University's International Students Office and picked up Kishan for the 30-minute drive to their house.

Ann's own participation in this host family program, thus far, could be described as *reluctant* at best. She usually watched from a distance (and only did what was asked of her) as her parents went through the hoops of playing *family* to these distant strangers. She felt that these foreign students were all rather strange and underfed, and Kishan didn't appear to be an exception. He was lanky, and made awkward movements as he walked into her house and stood near the door fidgeting. He looked rather comical in his huge brown winter jacket, which he didn't seem too keen to part with. For a moment it appeared as though her father might have to snatch it away from him and cause an international incident! Somehow, Darren made him understand that his jacket was just being stowed away temporarily so he could move about unencumbered. Ann's parents were a very friendly couple, and they always went the extra mile to make their international guests understand such little details of the western customs.

After completing the reception formalities at the door, they called Ann downstairs to meet the guest. "Ann dear, won't you come down and say hello to our new friend here?"

She was watching the rituals from the balcony overlooking the foyer, and didn't feel too eager to go down. Nevertheless, she ran down the stairs and gave Kishan a very pleasant smile. He gave her one flitting timid glance and then quickly looked away. "*Here is another shy little Mama's boy!*" she thought.

Since it was late evening already, everyone moved to the dining room. The dinner was delicious – her mother had taken

the trouble to find out what kind of food would suit Kishan's culture and religion. Most of the international students were very touchy about food, Ann had observed. She remembered the episode with a previous student who had argued with her mother for hours on whether the turkey had been killed in a proper manner before it was put up for sale in the supermarket. (Luckily he had shown much less interest in how it was cooked!)

The conversation at the dinner table was steered mostly by Ann's parents. They wanted to know if Kishan had found a suitable place to stay (he said he was sharing a big house with 4 other students), and whether he was able to cope with the cold weather (he just nodded). He rarely looked up from his plate, but answered all the questions politely and in a funny accent. Ann could only catch bits and pieces of what he said. He liked his University department, he said. And he planned to work hard to finish his degree program as soon as possible. On the question of what he planned to do after getting his degree, he said he planned to return home and start his own business.

After the dinner was over, they all sat near the electric fireplace in the spacious living room, and allowed the turkey to settle down. There was more one-way talk and Ann's mom Karen described a few mundane things such as what she and Darren did for a living (she was a middle school teacher and Darren was a self-employed distributor of computer printers). She mentioned that Ann – their only child – was a senior at the nearby high school. She also gave a brief lecture on the origin of *Thanksgiving*. Kishan listened attentively and nodded his head vigorously. Ann's father Darren played some piano tunes which seemed to interest Kishan. Finally, he rose to leave. He promised to keep in touch, and glanced at Ann for a split second before saying good night. She sensed a flicker of relief in his eyes when he was at the door. Darren whisked him away in the family station wagon back to his house near the University.

After a few days Ann noticed that there was a letter from Kishan among the pile of junk mail that arrived every day. She couldn't have missed it since it was in an odd-sized purple envelope. She opened it right away standing by their street-side mailbox, and read it. He had thanked Ann and her parents for everything they had done for him the other evening and for making him feel at home. The *Thanksgiving Day* took a special meaning for him, he wrote. She noticed his beautiful handwriting with all the letters printed – distinct and separate – unlike hers and her parents' cursive style. He seemed to have chosen the words carefully and thoughtfully. The accompanying square-shaped card was cute and was probably hand-crafted in his country. It had tiny beads and even a few strands of peacock feather stuck on it. She thought she might show it later to some of her school-friends.

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It was another month or so before she saw him again. That was at Dominick's, the big grocery store. Kishan was with four other guys – they all looked like him. They were pushing two carts – filled with all sorts of canned and frozen vegetables, juices, flavored yogurts, and milk bottles. They were all wearing those heavy winter jackets, and looked pitiful with their unshaven faces and deep-set eyes or thick-rimmed spectacles. Kishan noticed her and looked so surprised that for a moment it appeared as though he might faint at his cart. But he managed a smile and a barely audible "hello". The rest of them looked confused and just gaped at her. She also smiled, but, didn't feel like saying anything and quickly moved away. She was used to these foreign students blankly staring at her, but had never quite understood it.

He continued corresponding through his letters and cards, and the flow became quite regular. He never made a telephone call. They probably didn't have phones back in his village, she thought; or more likely he was scared of talking directly with her. In any case, his letters were long and descriptive, and appeared to express his thoughts quite well. He described his weekend trips with his friends to the nearby parks and other scenic locations. She was impressed at how beautifully and vividly he observed nature. He reminded her of small things that were always around her but which she had never noticed. Like the game of chase played by squirrels. Or the magnificent colors of the vast skies of the Midwest. The never-ending twilight. How calm and quiet the lakes were. Ann enjoyed reading these descriptions of nature. She often thought of replying to him in writing but could not figure out how. Actually, she didn't have to worry about the correspondence department. Her parents, especially her mother Karen, routinely called him up at his house and asked the usual questions about his studies and health. But Ann felt that their meaningless chat on the phone was no match for his letters. He deserved something better. But, at the moment, she wasn't sure what.

One day, in her school, she took a stroll towards the Ethnology section in the library and started browsing through books on other cultures. She had no idea what to expect. Her knowledge about his culture was based only on hearsay. It was said that snakes and elephants roamed the streets; that people were primitive and ignorant. But Ann wasn't so sure any more. He appeared far from being ignorant. She skimmed through some of the books. They all appeared to reinforce the stereotype. There were photos of exotic animals, cattle, and half-naked farmers. She shut the books and left the library in disbelief.

Kishan visited their farmhouse again on a Sunday. This time, he drove from the university in a beat-up light-green

Volkswagen Rabbit that he had bought recently using his earning as a teaching assistant. She met him at the door and offered to take him on a tour of their farm. You have a farm too, Kishan inquired with a surprise. Ann explained that although it was their farm, they had tenants who did all the work. Kishan looked in much better health this time. The brown winter jacket was still there. But, his cheeks looked filled up and his eyes brighter. He was still shy of looking directly at her, but talked with her much more confidently. He appeared very happy and elated, and kept commenting on every little thing. The pigs were cute, he said. Back home they were so ugly and dirty. (Yes, she recalled the images she had seen in the library books.) He was quite shocked when her sheepdog came seemingly out of nowhere and lunged at him for a friendly hug. She laughed uncontrollably at his struggle to get away. He was embarrassed, and mustered some courage to pat the dog away. When she took him to the silo where they stored food grains in a 10-story-high temperature-controlled metallic cylinder, he was visibly impressed. Like a preschool boy full of curiosity he started firing all sorts of questions: what is that valve for, what if lightning strikes, how do you take the grain out, and so on. She was still struggling to understand his strange superfast accent, and now he was out of control!

The following Sunday he visited, Ann had decided to skip Church and let her parents go without her. Now he is completely at my mercy, she thought. This would be a good opportunity to pull away the letter-writer's mask and find out what he was really like. Would he like to go for a boat ride in the nearby lake, she asked him. Of course, he said. The trees would be all barren, and the water extremely cold, she warned. He didn't mind.

They drove to the lake with the canoe in tow. She pushed the canoe out to the water and showed him how to use the ores.

After zigzagging for a while, they slowly steered the canoe towards the middle of the placid lake. He started describing to her how much he loved nature and life. He looked thrilled like a baby when he dipped his fingers in the icy cold water. He also appeared much bolder this time and she caught him venturing directly into her deep blue eyes a number of times. She had such lovely golden hair, he commented once. In response to his little speech about nature, she started talking about her own school and friends. But about halfway she realized that she didn't want to talk about any of that. It all sounded so incongruous, so out of place. She felt many of her friends were so uninteresting, so shallow. The guys always talked about fancy cars and football. And the girls appeared obsessed with dance parties and the sports heroes of the school.

Ann was startled when she heard the sound of a musical instrument. He apologized for breaking her reverie and shyly showed her his shiny harmonica. Can you play, she asked. He played a few tunes and she provided percussion accompaniment by thumping on the wooden side-board of the canoe. Their music sent tiny ripples across the still water. She enjoyed the tunes very much. They were all songs from really old movies, he informed her.

This time, his letter had a poem. It described the lake experience they had both shared the other day. She read the poem aloud, again and again. It consisted of simple short lines and yet sounded rhythmic and beautiful, like a song. And once again, through his poem he reminded her of little things that were around her but which she had not noticed. Like the ducks following their canoe in a beeline. The trembling reflection of the barren trees. The sound of her laughter when she giggled at his funny accent.

This time she mustered the courage to reply to his letter in writing and attached a hand-drawn picture card. She put lots of smiley faces and winks all over the card. In the note she said she admired his poetic skills. She said she loved the way he opened her eyes to the little gifts of nature. She said she enjoyed talking with him and hoped that he didn't mind that she made fun of his accent.

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For a whole month, they didn't meet or exchange letters. He had his semester exams. She had hers too. She was graduating this year. So, there were all kinds of parties planned before and after the formal graduation. The *senior prom* was one of the eagerly awaited events. Like her other friends, she wore her most gorgeous dress and danced with a football player. Most of her friends had plans to continue the party late in the night. Ann also went along and played bowling and ate loads of pizza and ice-cream, but she realized she wasn't enjoying the party quite as much as she had expected to. The mindless chatter and the unbearable noise caused her a headache. After some time, she apologized to her friends and to her prom partner, and returned home.

During summer holidays, he didn't go anywhere, nor did she. The place he would have really liked to go to was thousands of miles away, he said. Instead, he drove to Ann's house almost every other day. Her father played the piano and he listened with great interest. He even took a few beginner's lessons. He also wanted to learn roller-skating. But after falling down a couple of times in the funniest ways and providing her with ample laughing matter, he gave up. Instead, they went bike-riding in the countryside. She enjoyed his constant babbling and gradually had less trouble understanding his accent. He told her jokes about graduate students. They talked about their future

plans and aspirations. They spent long minutes just wandering silently watching the deep, dark green woods. The faint rustle of the gigantic firs and the occasional sprint of a squirrel across the road only added to the peace they felt within themselves. There were moments when they lost track of place and time.

Like a bird soaring in the sky, their friendship flourished. She longed for the weekends when they could meet. She didn't believe she was in love with him. He was from an alien country and culture. He was strongly attached to his people and their customs. But he also seemed so liberated and advanced in his thoughts. He admired the romantic western poetry. He criticized the way capitalist governments were fleecing their people. He talked about a new type of society in which everyone would be happy. He talked animatedly about freeing the women of his country from male domination. He harshly criticized the system of arranged marriages: girls were offered on a platter to men as if they were lambs of sacrifice. How senseless!

Kishan was certainly different. Inexorably, Ann found her mind converging on him. Like a cyclone sweeping everything into its vortex, her thoughts spiraled into him.

At the end of summer, Ann announced that she had decided to take a year off instead of going to college. She explained to Kishan that it wasn't uncommon in America to take such a break after high school. Lots of kids took the year to pursue music or do social work. She said she might stay home and help her father in his printer business. Kishan in turn informed her that he himself was taking a short break and going home for a couple of months for some urgent family business. His mother had asked him to make that trip. He would lose a few course credits of the Fall Semester but he could catch up in Spring, he said. Ann was unhappy to see him leave. But she

wished him a good time and asked him to return as soon as possible.

She didn't hear from him for a whole month and a half. Finally his letter arrived. The envelope bore a couple of fancy stamps: one showing an elephant and the other a bald man wearing round spectacles. The letter inside declared that Kishan had got married to a certain miss on an auspicious day. There was a wedding photograph too. The bride was decked with gold ornaments and a rich-colored dress, and she peeked at the camera demurely from behind a heavy make-up. Kishan wrote in the letter that his wife had been specially selected by his mother from a large number of girls interested in marrying him. He wrote that he had then met the girl personally and found her to have all the perfect qualities. He had predicted in his letter that Ann and his new wife would become friends in no time at all!

Like every year, Ann's parents had once again invited international students to their house for the *Thanksgiving* dinner. Instead of inviting someone new, they had invited Kishan once again, along with his new wife. As usual, Ann stood in the upper floor balcony watching their guests enter through the door. He looked the same – lanky and comical in his brown winter jacket. His wife wore a T-shirt and oversize jeans, and had a tiny dot on her forehead. He nudged his wife forward and introduced her to the hosts. Ann's parents were full of smiles and admiration, and they called out to Ann, "Honey, won't you come down? Our guests are here."

She didn't feel like moving and felt as if her feet were tied to a rock. But, the next moment she found herself running down the stairs and giving a most pleasant smile to the wonderful international guests.

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Epilogue

(This is what happened during Kishan's visit to his home country.)

Kishan was devoted to his mother. When he reached his parents' house in his home-town, his mom, Shanti, was at the door to receive him with little oil lamps in her hands and a huge proud smile on her face. After all, he had done what the old man (her husband) had been unable to do: Go to America and pursue university education. Soon after her marriage, Shanti had developed a grudge against the old man for a variety of reasons – mainly for his lack of ambition. She had sought redemption from her bright, promising son.

Kishan had always shared everything with his mother – tribulations in primary school, differences with friends in middle school, insecurities of adolescence, difficulties of career planning. His mom had guided him cleverly in every instance and saved the day for him. So, it was natural that on the day he reached home, he took his mother aside after lunch, placed in her mouth a small square of the Swiss chocolate he had brought from the US, and told her all about Ann. He described to her how beautiful Ann was, her sparkling blonde hair, her deep blue eyes, her marvelous skin. He described to her how happy he felt in her company. He confessed to Shanti that he was in love with Ann.

Shanti's reaction was carefully guarded. In her heart, she was not at all pleased at this piece of news, which clearly threatened to dismantle all her plans. She could not accept a strange woman of a foreign land taking charge of Kishan's life. So much was yet to be accomplished at the hands of Kishan. Moreover, Shanti had already chosen a girl for Kishan. A perfect girl. A girl that would blend in nicely in Shanti's family, fall in

line with Shanti's way of conducting life's affairs, respect Shanti's superior wisdom. Ann was clearly a trump card, a threat. She would most certainly steal Shanti's boy from her to a faraway place and destroy all her dreams.

As cleverly as before, Shanti worked on Kishan to rid him of this awful affliction of a foreign woman. Initially, she feigned interest, even respectfulness, and asked more questions about Ann, asked to see her photos, inquired about her family. Then she congratulated Kishan for making friendship with an American woman and said a woman friend is a gift, a bonus for every man, a place of solace and comfort. Shanti then asked Kishan not to confuse friendship with love. She asked him to ensure that their friendship survived throughout his life – his marriage, his family life, his career.

Kishan was startled at this turn of logic, but could not refute it forcefully. His attempt to suggest marriage with Ann was laughed off by Shanti who exclaimed why anyone would spoil a friendship like that with marriage! Kishan was confused – he didn't know whether to laud Shanti for her advanced thinking, or to condemn her for forbidding him to marry Ann.

The discussion continued off and on throughout the afternoon, and Shanti cleverly played her next card. She secretly made arrangements such that late afternoon, seemingly out of nowhere a beautiful girl presented herself at the door which Kishan opened. Leela, as she was named, was the girl chosen by Shanti for Kishan. She was a stunning beauty – almost as tall as Kishan, with a perfect figure which she cleverly accentuated by wearing a skillfully draped sari. Kishan all but forgot about their discussion about Ann, as Leela walked in seductively and touched Shanti's feet. She hung about for a little while, tried to seduce Kishan with her physical beauty and then went home.

To Kishan's credit, this matter of Ann and Leela remained unresolved for a few days. He continued to offer resistance to Shanti's frightening logic. But, Shanti was adamant and fierce. She shed tears at cleverly chosen moments in their debate and sobbed that her son no longer respected her. She occasionally raised her voice to remind Kishan that it was her toil and sweat that had enabled him to go to America in the first place. And, of course, she ensured that Leela visited their house at regular intervals and continued her game of seduction.

By the end of the week, Kishan surrendered to his mother. He had spent all his life unquestioningly under his mother's guidance, her mentorship, her rule. This was the first time he had felt the need to disagree with her, but, he was woefully unprepared and thus failed to conclude the matter in his favor. He agreed to marry Leela and, in his mother's words, *to preserve his friendship with Ann as a precious gift from the heavens!*