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Six Matching Cups and Saucers

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Abstract
She looks a nice girl, he thought to himself as she sipped a glass of orange cordial and tried to make an evaluation of her plus points as she sedately walked from visitor to visitor serving drinks. Actually, he hadn’t known that he was being taken on another visit this evening, when his sister came from work and told him to get ready because they were going to visit the home of one of her colleagues. She heard that Mrs Selvarajah had a nice daughter in her twenties, who had recently graduated from university. Her name was Revathi and she was quite good looking. Malar had seen her at one of the campus functions and had thought her ideal for her brother Ravi who was working in Australia.

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Ravi was looking for someone who was a ‘happy blend of both east and west’. He wanted a few children to reduce the void which existed in his house when he returned home from work in the evening. The problem was that most of his friends had their own lives to lead ... it was very seldom that they invited him for dinner ... the only time he met them after work was when there was an office party or when they held a rare dinner party in their homes. It was time to find a bride. Most of the relationships he formed in this new country were more or less impermanent ones. Sandra, his last girl friend had moved out of his house, because she didn’t want to make a lasting commitment in her life ... she wanted more breathing space. Now letters were also arriving from Sri Lanka, from his anxious parents and sisters, urging him to make a decision to marry.

They told him time was catching up on him and that it was important that he find a nice girl to settle down with. Already, they had informed him that they had visited a few suitable families in search of a nice, educated girl for him. Of course they told him, that they remembered that on his last visit to Sri Lanka he had told them that he wanted a girl who would not demand too much from life. Someone who would be simple, good looking and also have some qualifications which could equip her to face life in a new country. He also told his family, that he wanted a girl who was a good cook since many of his friends had married girls who were making extra money by catering for dinners and lunches.

Malar was sure that Revathi would be suitable. She had also heard
that she helped her mother with the household chores and that would
certainly be a plus point in her being selected by her brother. There
were many Lankan families who liked eating thosai and iddli since it
brought back fond memories of the country they had left behind. Many
of them were working long hours ... sometimes shuttling between two
or three work places in order to supplement their incomes and educate
the children. So they really didn’t have time to make this traditional
fare. Revathi’s culinary abilities would certainly be appreciated in the
new country.

There were also other ways in which the income could be increased.
For instance, Ravi had told Malar to look for a girl who had skills in
computer science because she could obtain a part time job if she had
this skill. Malar, on the other hand wasn’t sure if Revathi was
computer literate but then she could become computer literate if she
followed a course in one of the computer schools which had
mushroomed rapidly in the city. There were all kinds of diplomas one
could obtain before one went abroad. This would not be a problem.

Ravi had told Malar, that his new bride would have to shelve any
ideas of continuing with her studies once she came to the new country.
He just couldn’t afford to pay his wife’s tuition fees. After all, he had
to think of his own studies too. He was very keen on finishing his post-
graduate degree since he would face better prospects, like a higher
salary, once he completed his education. At the moment, he was
working on a tight budget, somehow managing on the small allowance
he got each month as a research assistant. He was trying to get a
scholarship but there was too much competition at the moment. He
would have to wait for the next academic year to gain an additional
stipend. After hearing about his financial difficulties, Malar hoped that
Revathi would not say that she wanted to study in Australia, if so there
would be problems. Malar didn’t want any such obstacles to prevent
the marriage from taking place.

As Ravi, sipped his drink he tried to conjure up a picture of Revathi
working in Australia. He imagined her deftly baking the thosai on a hot
griddle and then driving his Lancer to hand over the order of thosai.
He later imagined her being an efficient housewife and mother, rushing
off to bring the children from school, washing piles of clothes and
doing all the catering. She was good looking too. She would look nice
in jeans and a warm anorak, she would look equally good in a saree.
He could imagine her sitting on the manaverai decked in flowers,
draped in a rich gold and red saree and wearing the thali which he had
specially made in case he found his ideal partner.

He sensed that there was a streak of wilfulness in her but then he
knew how to tactfully change even the most independent woman. He
had to admit that his tact wasn’t long term because most of his
relationships had petered out after some time. He sighed when he
thought of Sandra. He wouldn’t have minded sealing that relationship with marriage, but then he only realised later on that he was just one of her many relationships ... no one stayed that long in one place. Even most of his colleagues, were always on the move, they changed their work places, travelled to other countries and moved from town to town. There were others however, who remained in one town for many years, growing roses on their fences and watching time move by. His own supervisor had remained in Sydney for many years. Now he was planning to go on a cruise on a luxury liner with his wife, Amy. There was no time to think of eternity. In fact, he had urged Ravi to find a suitable girl in Sri Lanka because he felt that Ravi often looked lonely when he used to meet him in the library, classroom or corridor. Once, he had asked him to dinner, and introduced him to his wife Amy. They had had a pleasant dinner and spent many hours seated on the veranda talking about life and work. After, that, Ravi used to invite the elderly couple for meals in his house. He used to also invite some of his colleagues and their wives. After they left however, a deep silence would fill the entire house and he would feel lonely. Perhaps this was the reason for his accepting his family’s invitation to visit Sri Lanka and look for an ideal wife.

He had managed to buy an air ticket at a subsidised rate and had handed the keys of his house to one of his colleagues. Everyone was aware that he had a specific mission for this unexpected journey back to his home country. ‘Hope to see you return accompanied by the girl of your choice,’ his supervisor had told him at the airport.

Now, as he observed the girl he was hoping to marry, he was wondering what her qualities were like. It was like getting to know a stranger ... one had to make room in one’s life and even change one’s routine existence, dull and monotonous though it may be. His sister however had told him that marriage meant companionship ... there would be someone to be with him and care for him. He hoped that Revathi would turn out to be compatible since he was getting a bit weary visiting so many prospective brides. It was the same routine on each occasion they went to these homes, and there was always the subtle scrutinising which went on during these visits. One’s identity and status would be analysed through the intricate discourse which took place. Ravi had always made it a point to show the other party that he was well off in Australia. He made references to his Lancer and his house. Of course he never made any direct references to his financial problems since it would prove to be an obstacle in the marriage proceedings. So he decided that silence was better ... the girl could find out the true situation once she came to the new country. Then it would be too late to change one’s decision.

He had many friends whose marriages were not so happy. Often, the main problem was that there was a lack of understanding between the
couple. They hadn’t really been given the opportunity of even having a proper conversation where they could have found out their perceptions about life itself. Instead, the stress was often on the external trappings which consisted of traditional marriages. For instance, attention was given to jewellery, the bridal trousseau, wedding invitations and booking a hall for the wedding. There was also the discussions which went on about the dowry. Often, the girl would have to provide substantial sums of money to give her a sense of status among her in-laws. Land and jewellery could also be included in the bargain. Ravi was against obtaining a dowry since he felt that the girl he married would an investment in itself.

The evening was viewed as a great success by both parties since they both seemed to agree on everything, Revathi’s parents were keen that the marriage be held soon. Then, she could accompany Ravi on his journey back to Australia. The only problem was that the couple themselves hadn’t had an opportunity to speak to each other. Revathi, had sat on one of the couches and had looked away from Ravi. There was a fixed smile on her face, as if she had rehearsed this moment many hours before their arrival. The only time her smile seemed genuine was when they rose to leave. ‘We’ll meet again,’ Ravi’s father had smiled at Revathi’s parents, as if to say that they had liked the girl for their son.

Revathi, wasn’t very sure of her feelings about the arrangement, but then she had to think about her parents. They were already becoming anxious that their elder daughter had not found a suitable partner as yet. This was indeed, a wonderful opportunity for them to get their daughter ‘settled’.

Mahesh aunty had said, ‘Well, if you’re inviting the young man and his sister you’ll have to get a brand new set of tea cups and saucers. You can’t serve them tea in odd cups and saucers that don’t match. Remember, it’s a formal occasion and the young man must get a good impression of the family... you know, standards, quality, breeding ...’

‘Can’t we manage with what we have? We’ve got some good porcelain and china pieces left ...’ Revathi’s mother said plaintively. ‘I have, let me see, some fine Noritake china – Blue Beauty, Longwood Angel and Exclusive by Laklain.’

‘Six of each,’ Mahesh aunty persisted.

‘Well, no, but if the young man and his sister have a matching pair, the rest of us could manage.’

‘No, no, no, it will be so embarrassing ... everyone must drink out of the same kind of cup,’ said Mahesh. ‘Hardly any time left to prepare for the visit, house to be tidied, especially all these books and papers ... the floors polished ... got ready, let’s go to town at once. Have you got a suitable silver tray?’

‘Yes, I’ve got that ... there’s a sale on at Ceylon Ceramics, I’ll see
what I can get at a reasonable price. Ceylon Ceramics have some pretty designs."

'Not green and dark brown, like the cups at the University canteen,' said Revathi's sister who was visiting from Canada.

'Well,' said Mahesh aunty, 'get ready quickly, no time to lose. Let's catch a three-wheeler. Now it's not only tea, what about the rest ... fruit cake, chicken or cheese sandwiches, biscuits and plantains ... You'll have to serve something for them to eat too.'

'I'm not a good cake maker. I don't have a good oven. I'll get some love cake from Cargills and we'll make chicken sandwiches.'

'You must have some variety.' Mahesh had suggestions as usual. 'Two kinds of cake' she said firmly. 'Fruit cake too.'

'Patties?' said Revathi's mother tentatively.

'You won't have time for that. Serve biscuits and cheese. The most important thing however is matching cups and saucers. Six cups. Six matching saucers. If you want the proposal to be a success.'

In a few weeks time, Ravi found himself seated next to Revathi, in a gold upholstered couch. The smell of roses arranged in clusters seemed to engulf the couple who sat like static robots avoiding each others gaze. 'What a nice couple they make' Mahesh aunty declared to the onlookers who sat around decorated tables observing the silent couple. Once or twice, Ravi attempted to talk to Revathi, but found it almost impossible since she answered him in static, monosyllables as if she was reluctant to talk to him in public. It was as if she was seated next to a stranger in a bus. The sense of being with a stranger grew as the time passed. Suddenly everything looked unreal and superficial, the chandeliers looked like luminous toadstools floating on clouds of air, the guests who were decked in their finery, looked distant and uninvolved as if they were mere spectators at this wedding. Photographers were walking around on the polished floors, directing the couple to smile and show that they were in love, that they were not mere strangers, pleasing the others who watched them at a distance.

That night, as Revathi was led into the marriage suite which was given as an additional incentive to newly wedded couples, she experienced a sense of panic. She was now with a virtual stranger. Her mother had told her to leave those matters to the bridegroom, as if Revathi was expected to remain uninvolved. There was no talk of going to a doctor or counsellor before the marriage ... everything was kept concealed. Revathi was developing a severe headache as she found herself in the arms of a stranger who was her husband. Yet, she thought of her parents who had really wanted her to agree to this marriage because they didn’t want her to be alone one day. Grim and austere pictures were painted of what life would be like twenty years later, when time had passed. 'Better agree to this proposal daughter,' Revathi's mother had advised her. Revathi had wanted to protest
vehemently about marrying Ravi, by talking about Mahesh aunty who was single and independent and very happy too, but she decided against arguing when she saw the expression of sadness on her mother's face.

She knew that it would be a great relief to everyone if she married Ravi. Now there was no time to change her mind, she had to get used to living with Ravi. She hoped that he would allow her to be independent, free to discover other options like pursuing her education which was interrupted as a result of the marriage.

The next morning, everything seemed like a dream. Images vague and nebulous filled her mind as the light flitted in through the gap in the curtains and she saw herself staring into the face of her husband. His eyes seemed to flicker with a spark of recognition as he glanced at Revathi. 'Shall I get you some coffee,' he said as he walked to the door, still a stranger.