From An American Brat

Bapsi Sidhwa
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Abstract
A brief but fierce deluge following the dust storm the night before had brought respite from the June heat 116 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade the day before. Otherwise the consternation caused by the letter from America, with the added irritant of tempers and nerves frayed by unbridled temperatures, would have plunged not only Zareen and Cyrus but the entire family into despair and foreboding.
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As it was, holding the letter in her inert fingers, the obscene photograph having already fluttered to the bedroom floor, Zareen found it hard to breathe. That Feroza should have chosen to send this photograph, of a man with his legs bared almost to his balls, was significant. Surely she must be aware of the assault on their parental sensibility. A subliminal cloud of nebulous conjectures and a terrible fear entered Zareen’s mind. She grasped the basic premise – that Feroza was preparing Cyrus and herself for a change – but a change of this magnitude? She was confronting the ‘unknown’, and she felt helpless in the face of it.

Once she had scanned the first few lines of the letter, her vision became so acute, so superbly lucid, that she felt able to absorb all the crowded lettering on the typed sheet without once needing to move her eyes. And then the sentences ballooned up disembodied, the words individually magnified, until they popped before her blurring sight. She felt a dizzying rush of blood to her head and was as close to fainting as she'd ever be.

After a while Zareen became conscious of the servants chattering in the kitchen, the cook laying the table for lunch, and as the initial shock wore off slightly, the news, with its tumult of ramifications, settled deeper into her sinking heart.

Feeling drained of strength and feeling each one of her forty years – she had crossed the distressing threshold the week before – Zareen hobbled over to the phone at her desk. With wildly wandering fingers she dialled part way through her mother’s number and then, thinking of the effect the news would have on Khutlibai, instead dialled her husband’s office. She heard three rings and then Cyrus’s preoccupied, ‘Hello.’

A wave of relief swept over Zareen at the thought of transmitting her anguish, and she began to cry.

‘What’s the matter?’ Cyrus’s panicked voice repeated the question,
Feroza: she said haltingly, sniffing between her sobs.

‘Feroza?’ Cyrus shouted, ‘What’s happened to Feroza?’

Zareen blew her nose, swallowed, and with a supreme effort of will, suspended her weeping to gasp, ‘She wants to marry a non.’

Cyrus found his wife huddled on their bed beneath the slowly rotating blades of the ceiling fan, her attractive eyes swollen, her elegant nose red. He gave her a commiserating hug and, pressing her beautiful head against his incipient paunch, scanned the letter silently. His eyes automatically focused on the significant sentences, the casual note their daughter had adopted stabbing his heart and guts like so many daggers.

Feroza wrote that she had met a wonderful boy at the University. Like he was also very shy. She had agreed to marry him. She knew they would be very upset, particularly her grandmothers, at the thought of her marrying a non-Parsee. His parents were Jews. The religious differences did not matter so much in America. They had decided to resolve the issue by becoming Unitarians. ‘Please, don’t be angry, and please try to make both my grannies understand. I love you all so much. I won’t be able to bear it if you don’t accept David.’

Zareen suddenly reached down, causing Cyrus’s reflexes to jump at the thought that his wife had fainted, and retrieved the photograph with the tips of her manicured nails as if the image was contaminated by disease. She showed it to Cyrus.

Zareen’s anxious eyes had already detected a sinister cast in her potential son-in-law’s blue eyes, a profile that struck her as actorishly handsome, phoney, and insincere, and frivolous gold-streaked, longish hair. But what upset Cyrus most were the pair over-developed and hairy thighs, which to his fearful eyes appeared to bulge as obscenely as a goat’s as they burst from a pair of frayed and patched denim shorts.

‘You’d better go at once,’ Cyrus said. ‘He can’t even afford a decent pair of pants! The bounder’s a fortune hunter. God knows what he’s already been up to.’

The last, an allusion to the imagined assault by those hairy thighs on the citadel of their daughter’s virtue, was not lost on Zareen. The furrow between her brows deepened and she withdrew into complete silence.

Ten days later, silently mouthing prayers, Zareen was on the Pan Am flight bound for Denver, Colorado.

The young Pakistani student sitting next to Zareen, awed by her handsome profile, the gust of exotic perfume, and the glitter of diamonds on her fingers, made a few desultory attempts at conversation. Finding her distracted and monosyllabic, he leafed through the flight magazine and, fidgeting forlornly in his seat, resigned himself to sleep.

After she had completed the twenty-one Yathas and five Ashem
Vahoos prescribed for such long and dangerous voyages, Zareen relaxed her grip on the crocodile-skin handbag on her lap. It contained two thousand dollars in traveller’s checks and five hundred in cash. Just before they left for the airport Cyrus had given her a slim envelope with a bank draft for ten thousand dollars. He had facetiously labelled it ‘bribe money’. She could at her discretion offer it, or part of it, to the handsome, hairy scoundrel to leave their daughter alone.

Alternately smiling, shaking her head, and making mulish faces, Zareen conversed astutely with her imagined adversary. Six hours after the Boeing had taken off from Karachi, her mind was still reeling from the murmur of last-minute advice and instruction imparted to her at the airport. She tried to remember all that Cyrus had said, all that Khutlibai—after she had fainted and been revived that day—had said, and everything that had happened at the clamorous rounds of daily family conferences once news of the letter had spread.

Behram and Jeroo had driven down from Rawalpindi, and Zareen felt enormously grateful at the way her relatives and close friends had rallied about, thankful for the stratagems the community had pondered and debated and for all their well-meant and useful advice.

For the subject was much larger than just Feroza’s marriage to an American. Mixed marriages concerned the entire Parsee community and affected its very survival. God knew, they were few enough. Only a hundred and twenty thousand in the whole world. And considering the low birth rate and the rate at which the youngsters were marrying outside the community—and given their rigid non-conversion laws and the zealous guardians of those laws—Parsees were a gravely endangered species.

There had been acrimonious arguments between the elders and the youngsters, who had grown considerably in the four years Feroza had been away, at the first hastily summoned family conference in Zareen’s sitting room.

While the air conditioner struggled to cool the horde—and grappled with the fluctuating voltage—the youngsters, candid in their innocence, wondered aloud why the news should strike their elders as such a calamity. They politely informed their parents that times had changed. They urged their uncles and aunts to enlarge their narrow minds and do the community a favour by pressing the stuffy old trustees in the Zoroastrian Anjuman in Karachi and Bombay to move with the times; times that were already sending them to study in the New World, to mingle with strangers in strange lands where mixed marriages were inevitable.

Jeroo and Behram’s daughter Bunny, who was by now a pert fifteen-year-old with light brown eyes and a dark ponytail she tossed frequently, said, ‘For God’s sake! You’re carrying on as if Feroza’s dead! She’s only getting married, for God’s sake!’
This outrage, coming after the insultingly patronizing tone adopted by the rest of the adolescents, was the last straw. The aunts, uncles, parents, and grandparents moulded their mournful features into pursed mouths and stern stares, and Jeroo, sensing the mood and consensus of the assembly, quickly quelled her daughter’s rebellion by yelling, ‘Don’t you dare talk like that! One more peep out of you, and I’ll slap your face!’

Across the room on a sofa, Bunny’s round-shouldered and self-effacing brother Dara, now seventeen years old and in his last year at school, sat back between two uncles and disappeared from view. All the other smirking, smug, and defiant little adolescents who had concurred with the girl’s sentiments and wiggled eagerly forward to sit on the edge of their seats, now opened their nervous eyes wide and looked at the forbidding presences uncertainly.

‘Apologize at once,’ Jeroo said. ‘You have no consideration for poor Zareen auntie’s feelings!’

The teenagers squeezed back in their seats and, safely tucked into the communal pack looking away from their cousin to the waxed parquet floor covered with Persian rugs, wisely withdrew their allegiance.

Bunny brushed her flushed cheeks with her fingers and without raising her bowed head, meekly said, ‘I’m sorry.’

This promptly fetched her Freny auntie and Rohinton uncle to their feet. Rohinton stepped up to the girl with stately deliberation and stroked her bowed head, while Freny lowered her bulk to share the cushioned stool with Bunny. Putting a placating arm round the tearful girl, Freny held her close and said, ‘Now, that’s my girl!’

After which, feeling called upon to reinforce community values, which were always in the process of being instilled, Freny dutifully said, ‘I’m sure your mother didn’t mean to sound so harsh. It’s just that we are so concerned for you. You know Parsee girls are not allowed into the fire temple once they marry out. You know what happened to Perin Powri.’

Perin Powri was the latest casualty. Having defied her family to marry a Muslim, she had died of hepatitis four years later. Although she had contracted the disease through an infected blood transfusion during surgery, many Parsees perceived the hidden hand of Divine displeasure. Honouring her last wishes, Perin’s family had flown her body to Karachi to be disposed of in the dokhma, or, as the British had dubbed it, the Tower of Silence.

Since the Parsees consider earth, water, and fire holy, they do not bury, drown, or burn polluted corpses. Instead, as a last act of charity, they leave the body exposed to the sun and the birds of prey, mainly vultures, in these open-roofed circular structures. In cities like Lahore, where there are too few Parsee to attract the vultures, the community buries its dead.

Perin Powri’s body was denied accommodation in the Karachi dokhma, and the priests refused to perform the last rites. Without the uthamna ceremony, the soul can not ascend to the crucial Chinwad Bridge, which,
depending on the person's deeds, either expands to ease the soul’s passage to heaven, or contracts to plunge it into hell. Without the ceremony, the poor soul remains horribly trapped in limbo. Perin Powri’s body was eventually buried in a Muslim graveyard, and the poor woman’s appalling fate was dangled as an example of the evil consequence of such an alliance each time the occasion arose.

The refrain was then taken up by other aunts, who were as well trained as circus horses, and the names of other transgressors were recited, with each offence illuminating a new and tragic facet of the ill-considered unions. The litany followed an established order, and the names of the earliest miscreants were arrived at last.

'You know how Roda Kapakia wept when she was not allowed into the room with her grandmother's body,' continued Freny in solemn tones, naming another misguided woman, who had married a Christian. 'She was made to sit outside on a bench like a leper! Would you like that to happen to you when your grandmother dies?'

Thus alerted, Khutlibai jumped to her role with alacrity. Sitting across the room on a sofa, on which she had been swaying as if silently praying, she at once hid the lower half of her face in the edge of her sari and, looking at Bunny through foxy and brimming eyes, pleaded, 'No, no, don’t do that! If you don’t attend my last rites, my child, my sorrowful soul will find no peace, and it will haunt this world till the Day of Judgment'. And, being Feroza’s grandmother as well, she pleaded, 'One child is on the verge of forsaking us. Promise me you won’t break this old heart also.'

Khutlibai had contrived to make her vigorous person look so crumpled and close to death while she spoke that all the relatives once more glared at the disgraced girl.

Bunny, suspecting her grandmother had adroitly removed her dentures, gaped askance at her collapsed mouth and hurriedly said, 'Please don’t worry, Granny, I’ll never break your heart.'

But a distantly related aunt from the Parsee Colony, respected for her forthright and abrasive manner and known as 'Oxford aunt' (her husband had spent a year in Oxford learning to repair truck and tractor engines), was conscious that in all this talk to benefit the girls, the boys had been neglected. Inhaling mightily to fill out her chest she burst forth to say, 'What do you expect our girls to do? Our boys go abroad to study and end up marrying white mudums. You can’t expect our girls to remain virgins all their lives!'

The aunts and uncles at once shifted their severe countenances to stare at the five boys scattered about the room until they squirmed in their seats.

Acutely conscious of her gangling thirteen-year-old grandson’s discomfort, the discerning Soonamai stroked the boy’s bony thigh and, in her quiet way, said, 'You won’t marry a parjat will you? You must marry
a nice little Parsee girl of your own choice. And don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Marry the girl you like.'

His buck teeth fanning out like white daisy petals, the excruciatingly slender adolescent gulped and tried to look as innocent, obedient, and accommodating as he could, while Soonamai continued to stroke his thigh with her soft, wrinkled hands.

The remaining boys scattered about the crowded room were coerced by similarly affecting dialogues to adopt corresponding attitudes. They dared not do otherwise under the scrutiny of their uncles, whose knowing eyes bored piercingly into theirs, as they displayed by their upright deportment and righteous countenances the resolute mettle that would keep them from marrying white mudums and from other equally alluring and infernal temptations.

These performances for the edification of the youngsters were staged with such regularity that the behaviour of both the young and the old was almost automatic, entailing no untoward effort.

Their parts played out satisfactorily, the children were summarily dismissed, together with the white-liveried and crisply turbaned new servant, who was passing the drinks and hors-d'oeuvres. Now the formidable think tank of uncles, aunts, parents, and friends, talking vociferously, settled down to the solemn business of thrashing out a strategy.

All options were considered, angles analysed, opinions aired. 'If this David fellow says this, you say that! If Feroza says that, you say this!'

Zareen was alternately instructed, 'Be firm. Exercise your authority as her mother!' and 'If you can't knock him out with sugar, slug him with honey.'

They further confused her by directing, 'Don't melt if she cries. If Feroza throws a tantrum, throw one twice as fierce!' and 'But be careful; if you're too harsh, she'll rebel. Once she becomes naffat, she won't care if you or I approve or disapprove.'

The Pakistani student in the seat next to Zareen's covertly eyed her from time to time. Intimidated by the range and ferocity of her grimaces, he quietly ate his dinner and, once again contorting his body to accommodate it to his narrow seat, fell fitfully asleep. Clutching her handbag beneath her sari, Zareen dozed on and off.