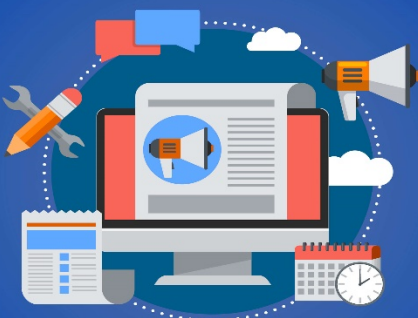


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The Sweet Lodge at Rosetta, 32

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The apartment many people say is a luxurious studio. It is so called because it is meticulously and sensitively furnished by Shudipa. Her craze for decorative pieces touches upon all the corners of the apartment. The drawing room is distempered off white and she likes to keep it both modern and traditional. She has sprawled the drawing room all over with cultural artifacts and potteries from different parts of the country. She does not allow people to sit in the drawing room unless there are special guests. Another thing is she has an abnormal love for pillows and small mattress well covered with satin cloths studded with traditional Indian jewelries and stones. If anyone by chance sleeps off upon the tightened and ironed bed known to be the throne of her inimitable empire, his miseries will know no bounds! Her strange fascination for multi layers of colours along the curtains all over the house is another facet of her character you can see. The corner tables are particularly noticeable with a variety of tiny toys and some chiseled hand-made show pieces. The most predominating presence in this drawing room (Boithok Khana) is that of the black bull's horns mounting high and erect from the transparent snow white marbled floor with an indestructible pride!

Shudipa teaches at BC Roy International School and is greatly admired by the association of teachers and office staff for her highly sophisticated manners and formalities and her clothing. Female teachers literally keep whispering the whole day during intervals of classes about the colour, texture, stitches and the choice of her sarees and matching ornaments. Some of the teachers tend to go to the extreme of envying her aristocratic tastes and frown their eyebrows at her. Shuidpa never wears the same saree twice a week. So, one can easily assume that she has in her stalk a very remarkably rich collection of uncommon sarees. She likes sarees the most and says it blends her personality perfectly. In reality the number of her sarees has crossed the limits of one thousand mark recently and two wardrobes are jam-packed with sarees unable to accommodate any more! She needs sarees and she reiterates-

I need sarees because I have to go to school and I must look as formal and sensible, fashionable and nice as possible.

I feel very comfortable and formal with a saree on.

Shudipa has her only daughter Raima picking up all her fashion tips and nuances from her mother who is already famous as you know amongst the avant garde circles of Dhaka. People who know Shudipa also know that her overspending habits revolve around her home and beautification. Raima is a pretty young girl now with short blonde hair and medium height. Her eyes are particularly attractive and make them visible to any careful observer. Her eyeballs keep rolling like a frisking deer prancing and plodding their weary way. One cannot help taking a look at her fleshy cheeks and bright red smile. And don't forget one truth that Shudipa's thoughts hover around her only daughter, her most precious possession.

While ruminating upon her past with a Pakistani guy living in the same apartment she shared quite a lot of her intolerable and desperate truths of life. Though her narrative followed exaggeration as always due to her high sense of superiority, she made a free rein to how her deep romantic affair culminated into a failure after marriage. She turned emotional while unfolding those stories of pathos to Arshad.

My life was extremely happy in those days when Abbu (father) used to have a very good job with a higher pay. The value of currency was greater and we used to have a luxurious life. I was quite a stubborn person since childhood and insisted on having whatever things I chose to have. My father could indulge in such yearnings of mine. My life was that of a globe trekker, for I would roam around the neighborhood like a Feriwala (moving person with attractive things in a bag hanging on his shoulder). People called me tom boy since I used to climb the guava and mango trees at the gray backyard of our house in the village, play with the boys football and hide and seek. I got hurt on many occasions for my recklessness and tried to hide the injuries either on my toes or knees or elbows from my mother. My mother, aware of my silence during pains from the wounds, held me by the hand and grew a red hot iron with anger and severely rebuked me with reproachful words which sometimes pierced thorough my heart with an unbearable pain. I thought then if she was at all my real mother! Why did she call me names with harsh

words when I was silent with pains in the wounds? Instead of being cute, sympathetic, and loving why did she behave in such abnormally negative manner? She was abnormally harsh on me”

Arshad was very delighted to hear all these vignettes drawn from her childhood memories. He was surprised to know that she was quite an assertive girl with boyish manners and that she liked to enjoy a life free from all the frowning eyebrows of established taboos and sick social norms. Shudipa has become extremely different now and many changes have dawned upon her personality over time. As she grew up quite freely and fearlessly amongst the innocent minds and amidst an unadulterated bucolic atmosphere, she didn't bother about maintaining social restrictions which are commonly expected of grown up females from relatively conservative Bengali families.

Taking a long breath she muttered,

But the golden days of innocent joys of life came to an end and soon I found myself incarcerated in hundreds of regulations both within and without the family.

Arshad replied in the tone of appreciation,

It must be a different perception of yourself when you discovered yourself as a woman.

Though Arshad spoke to her on friendly terms, he occasionally showed his repressed desire for her companionship. Shudipa seemed to have felt interested to talk about what it means to feel like a woman and how the perception of the changes from childhood to womanhood makes one feel so seriously about her social parameters in a conservative Bengali family and its society. Aged 37 now, Shudipa still emphatically holds an irresistible charm about her. She does not possess the traditional beauty epithets that are attributed to those typically homegrown beautiful ladies of Bengali families. Such pretty young ladies from middle class families are sought after highly by established and eligible suitors as soon as they are found young enough and marriageable. Most parents in the conservative Bengali families would feel happy to get their beautiful daughters married off to government officers with a permanent job. Any romantic affair of love in such families is sternly treated and on many occasions suppressed by force.

Shudipa did not know that she was maturing to be a full grown young woman though her manners still remained childish. In the eyes of the family and that of the society she became an adult woman needing to be on guard from all male friends now. She would no longer go out and play with them within the viewing of the neighborhoods' eyes. Her father was very strict about her movements in the neighbourhood and regulated her stay outside. She would go to school with her father in the morning and come back home with her uncle or brother.

I hated being monitored on my way to school and on my way back and many of my classmates laughed at the fact that I was escorted by an elderly guardian because I might give indulgence to my free flowing childish habits. But..... Now being a mother I realize why my parents were over concerned about me."

Shudipa's performance in class was satisfactory and her teachers told her father that she would pass the exam with flying colours. She was very sincere at her studies. In the meantime, Shudipa happened to meet a very handsome young man in the neighbourhood. He came to their house with her brother and he was a new friend of his. He is pretty tall with hazel eyes and dark eyebrows. He had a commanding physical structure and it charmed her at first sight. She took a fancy to him and her cheeks began to grow red like a blushful bottle of wine. Not much was known about this young man but he came to this house with a guitar in his hand which gave an impression that he might be a musician. His charming manners immediately caught the attention of everyone in the house. Some of them also made comments such as,

What a handsome young man he is! What polite gestures and gentlemanlike manners!

The thing that happened afterwards actually constitutes the plot of the glorious story of Shudipa's life! Who knew, the momentary surprise that his appearance and presence created on the first flight would soon dwindle? Syed exchanged short but fair speechless messages with Shudipa as long as he was in the house and the bubbles of love began to sprout forth in her heart like new spring leaves overwhelming the branches and twigs of youthful trees demonstrating a sudden springing into life! She madly fell in love with him at first sight. Wisdom says Love at first sight does not always deepen into deep love or into any serious commitment. She did not even talk to him for 5 minutes long except for answering some ordinary queries by a stranger to avoid looking uneasy amongst unknown faces. She liked the way he talked and smiled, the way

he glanced at her. Her amiability with her parents impressed her so much so that she jumped over in joy and burst into lyrical ejaculations!

Amma (mother) isn't Syed vai very decent and well mannered. Isn't he very handsome?

She exclaimed with a sure and uninterrupted gesture. Her mother's reply was quite subdued and guardian like.

Yes he must be from a respectable and educated family and his upbringing came from good parenting no doubt. But beware of the charms of such young men at this critical and transitional phase of your age."

Shudipa having been warned by the worldly wise remark of her mother took little notice of what she meant and cashed subconsciously more on her approving of his personality and upbringing as if this was a moral support enough from her mother to dream about dipping deep into a romantic relationship with him and the thought of being in love for the first time seemed to have captured all her body and spirit with an inexplicably curious shiver. Many happy thoughts and dreams crossed her mind. She was found absent minded nowadays and seen smiling to herself alone without any reason! She would often go to the rooftop to celebrate her romantic rites and rituals for the hero of her imagination. She would relish the moments of private contemplation over her hero while taking a walk around the garden full of the fumes of sweet honey and musical murmurings of the beetles. She began to recall how his hands were fair and his chiseled long face fascinated her fancy.

His lips moved slowly with his teeth surfacing brightly with smiles and his eyes flushed with a glory and charm enough to pierce through your heart. His neck was long and smooth like the transparent surface of statue made of stone and alabaster.

Shudipa began to weave a fancy around the image of Syed and in dreams started feeling his presence so intensely. The orchard garden behind the house in summer was heavy with an overpowering sweet smell of mangoes and guavas ripening to the core and the gentle gale of wind was caressing over them making the dewy thick ripe juice spread all over the place excessively. So was Shudipa's soul, full off the juice of a newly born emotion of love and mind

was crowded with romantic thoughts as to how to see him again and speak a hundred words without speaking anything.

Syed visited the house another day in the evening and this time accompanied by a few of his friends with her brother. He approached her gently with his usual polite gestures and a little conversation ensued between them.

Syed: How are you doing Shudipa? How about your studies? He said.

Shudipa: My studies are going on fine and I have exams knocking at the door.

Syed: Oh then we should not play any music tonight. I really did not know about your exam. I am sorry. Your brother insisted.

Shudipa: Please take it easy. It is so nice to hear your voice and hear you sing.

Syed's humbleness and sincere words of concern for her studies before exam won her heart a few inches further. She felt like basking in the pleasant and romantic sunshine of someone's love and elderly affection she dearly admires and loves. He played a few modern love songs with his guitar by looking mostly at her face as if the words were uttered for her only! The song titled "Oh my love! How dearly I love and admire you but my heart wishes to love you more" Cupid's arrow finally pierced deep into our Psyche's heart when upon leaving after his heart winning performance he whispered to her-

The words were for you, dear. I will await your song for me then!

Shudipa upon hearing these incredible words blushed like touch-me-not plant in the tubs across the roof top. There came a ruddy glow on her cheeks her heart started beating fast and profusely. This is for the first time she felt like a woman with all her feminine softness and grace engulfing her whole being. Their relationship surreptitiously ripened despite all warnings from the house and all negation from her father. She followed her heart without prevailing to bother about the future. By the way, after her exam some proposals of marriage kept coming from various prospective corners. Shudipa's father discussed the matter with other elderly members of the extended family. In a settled marriage a lot of calculation takes place from the bride's side such as investigating the family background, education, financial solvency, upbringing of the

suitors etc, since the guardians' sole preference is to ensure a happy married life of their daughters. Again, the calculation gets even tougher when it comes to choosing a bride and on many occasions many girls can't run this competitive race let alone win it! Such calculation for perfection often victimizes quite a lot of marriageable women since no one is perfect the way it is anticipated by the male suitors! So Sharif Shaheb, Shudipa's father preferred Government employees to business entrepreneur suitors. Proposals from abroad also were discussed with utmost priority. But her father was prudential about the fact that sending his only daughter abroad would greatly empty his heart and he would not be able to see his daughter whenever he would wish to. With a heart heavy with grief he sighed-

I have brought her up with all my love and affection and left no stone unturned to fulfill her wishes and yearnings ever since she was born to us. I feel very weak to think of getting my daughter married. I feel broken to see my daughter follow the ways and manners of her in-laws. I feel shaken to see her leave my home desolate, my child that I so lovingly reared up all these 19 years!

With these words he burst into tears, a sight which no one ever imagined before as Sharif Shaheb never shows dejection and despair on his face. He was known as the strongest man at heart in the family. A father in him rose at the prospective vision of his daughter leaving him and his house soon. However, a proposal from a university lecturer finally came to the forefront of all the other ones. This proposal came from a young prospective scholar teaching at a university and was going to pursue his higher studies abroad who would accompany his wife along. So his family was in a hurry to find a better half for him and pack up both for their journey to Europe in just two weeks. Despite the fact that there was a disagreement over Shudipa's going abroad with any suitor, this proposal had a different charm about it since the purpose of the suitor was to accomplish scholarly pursuits. All relatives agreed on such a prominent and prospective suitor for Shudipa.

This young man will make a good husband, I believe, and will give more time to my daughter. He will make her happy with his greater knowledge of life and world.”
Observed Sharif Shaheb.

Next Friday would be the wedding as two families unanimously decided. Invitation cards were printed. All preparations were taken in a quick succession. The orchard garden behind the house overlooked a yard spacious enough to decorate well with lights. The whole house was alight with bright red, yellow and green sparkling lights and began the celebration of the wedding ceremony. The seating arrangement was done by the decorators hired from the professional experts. Sharif Shaheb did not let any fault surface in the scene and did his best to make the ceremony look successful quite in keeping with the honour of his highly educated would be son-in-law. The women in the family went on a great shopping spree and Shudipa's mother and aunts went to buy jewelries, the bridal sarees and other necessities. The celebratory mood swept over the hearts of all in the house except the bride, the centre around whom all these celebrations and splendor gathered momentum.

Shudipa gave her heart to Syed already and dreamt of a sweet home with him! So, she was the least bothered about the hard realities of life and quite negligent about how financial stability plays a vital role in maintaining a family properly. Her hours were now passing by on rosy wings in her romantic bower of bliss, an ideal pastoral home in the rosy sanctuary of her heart, far away from the horrors of real life. She like Raina in Shaw's *Arms and the Man* idealizes and phantasizes her romantic hero. She keeps his photo inside her book and keeps stealing a look of her hero when it was safe to hold it on her hands to worship her idol of love! The celebrations were in full swing. Shudipa remained heart-broken and silent, however. She wrote a letter to Syed who had no idea about what was going on. He was living with his family and literally had no income for himself. Finding no other alternative upon a meeting, they decided to elope and marry since Shudipa knew she would not be able to persuade her family to accept the person he loves.

On Thursday, the day before the wedding ceremony she left on her table a letter. It went thus,

Dear Abba and Amma (parents),

Peace be upon you always for all that you have done for me. I am grateful to you both for my life and blood and the pains you have taken to help me rise on my own feet. I know what I am going to tell you now will break your hearts to pieces but I have no alternative as I have always loved to follow the beatings of my heart rather than accept things

imposed upon me. I also know that I will incur your wrath and displeasure by deciding to marry Syed, the man I dearly love. I won't be happy with anyone I know. Please forgive me and my lapses..

Shudipa.

This letter cast a shockwave through the whole house and her parents gave way to dejection and despondency. A wave of despair superseded the mood of celebration in the house. Red, amber and green lights lit around the whole house went on sparkling creating an atmosphere of fantasy but the interplay of light and darkness it created had blurred the aspirations of the house by now.

Quite a few months passed by but Shudipa's family did not bother to know about her at all, nor did they try to find their whereabouts. Sharif Shaheb had to go through bouts of nervous breakdown several times after this event and he lost his face before the whole family. He suffered a shock that was still pecking into his vitals. So, he must never forgive Shudipa for what she has done by maligning ruthlessly the family's prestige and pride.

Shudipa was living with her in-laws who later on were discovered to have descended from a Pakistani family and they did not much bother about Syed's marrying a Bengali girl. For the first time she heard them speak in Urdu in the house about everything of which she was thoroughly unfamiliar. Syed's parents didn't like him for his overspending habits and extravagant manners and show-off. Despite being rich Syed's father did not welcome the newlyweds and his daughter-in-law. Syed did not earn steadily and earned only barely enough money to have a picnic for a day or two by arranging stage shows with his band of musicians. He was the lead guitarist of the band "**Vagabond**" and the band was desperately struggling in the streets of Dhaka to get noticed. Shudipa felt humiliated and shocked to know about his means of livelihood. She requested him to study and finish his graduation to find a job or sit in the office of his father. He was enraged and shouted at her with the highest pitch of his voice,

Who told you to marry me? I don't want to study and work. I love music and will pursue it only.

Shudipa was thunderstruck at his anger towards her over a matter she never expected to happen. She continued her studies however with lot of hardship with the secret support of her brother as her in-laws didn't like her to go out and study. They forced her to remain indoors within the four corners of the wall and do household chores. Life became miserable when Syed started showing signs of moral degeneration by coming home late drunk. Their conversation went violent once,

Is this why you wanted to marry me? Is this why I came to you with all my trust on you?

Do whatever you like. Leave me if you wish and find someone better than me.” Replied Syed.

He was under the excessive impact of drinking and his family was negligent about his immoral doings. He went to the extent of even hurting his wife. Shudipa's image of Syed as a polite gentle man suffused with glory cracked immediately and the hero that he worshipped fell from her grace forever. She would never go back home to show her lost face to her parents, neither would she stay at this house anymore. She left the house the other day and met a close friend of hers. She stayed there for a few days and in her world of perpetual darkness now came a news. Rizia elated with joy reported

You are going to be a mother soon.

Shudipa was speechless for a few minutes with tears rolling down her cheek. Such a happy news she could not compare with anything for the moment but she greatly missed Syed because she was carrying his love in her being. Syed came to know about it quite late and promised to lead a very honest and stable life from now by earning on a regular basis for the family and that he would remain pledge-bound to her from now on. At first she refused to go with him but later she agreed but now they would live together in a separate house away from the lifelessness and hopelessly prosaic atmosphere of her in-laws house. Syed hired a small house at Mohammadpur area of Babar Road and they began to live there happily for a month until the question of paying the rent was raised. Syed failed to pay the house rent, let alone the utility bills even in the third week of the current month. Proper treatment required for his wife remained neglected and the overall household ambience was like a ramshackle building utterly malnourished. Repeated calls and pressure from the owner sickened Shudipa and she could not

bear the insults hurled against her and her husband every month like this. Picking up violent quarrels over required necessities became an everyday phenomenon in the house.

The conflicts rose to its apex when one day Syed violently misbehaved with Shudipa when she insisted upon his paying the house rent on time. Over-drunk and barely-conscious Syed hit upon her forehead hard during a heated argumentation between the two. It caused a severe injury a few weeks before her delivery. She looked worn-out and emaciated barely taking care of herself. Who would have taken care of her at this critical phase of life? Who would pamper her and her yet unborn baby? The news that Shudipa was suffering unbearable mental pains wriggled her brother to affection and immediate action. The first ever child to be born in the family tree to add great charm and excitement awaiting overwhelmed him to his depths and the uncle, overjoyed, gay and happy, went to bring her back to the abode of peace that she left to explore her illusion long back. However, without letting his father unleash his anguished heart and sorrows over the proposal of bringing her back home at these pressing circumstances, Moin with his wife Mita headed towards the place where Shudipa was almost bed ridden with a mixed feeling of joy and hope. Moin and Mita were too happy over the thought of the new baby's arrival to a family long torn asunder by an excruciating grief. Shudipa was found sobbing and grieving over her utterly lonely state at such a moment in her life.

Having a baby is the greatest happiness for a mother but I can't express the ecstasy of motherhood. A sense of guilt and loneliness enshrouds me every moment. I am feeling the existence of a flesh and blood in my being! What can be more rewarding for me as a woman than feeling the taste of motherhood? What an unbelievably heavenly feeling! Abba would have been speechless at such a news had I not followed my irrational youthful illusions 3 years ago and the celebrations to welcome the first child of the house would have far outweighed those of a wedding!

On seeing her brother who had been by her side at all odds on the first flight, she burst into tears and held him by the hand unable to stand on her feet yet. Mita kissed on her forehead and wiped her tears.

Don't cry like a child anymore. Is this anytime to cry? You are going to be a proud mother soon. You know how happy we are! We are here to take you back home.

Shudipa's world overcast with clouds of sorrow suddenly as it were drenched with rhythmic patters of rain. It was a feeling of being at home. A happy sigh of relief came over her face. Yet the face of her father and mother reminded her of how she shocked their hearts like anything. She would not be able to face them again for such an unpardonable offence she caused!

Her sense of reason refused to get back to her father's place she dishonored so severely but her physical inabilities could not but accept it. She was driven directly to the hospital and admitted there. The whole family was informed and people came crowding towards Nirupom Mother care Hospital at Lalmatia. Her condition required rest to recuperate. Her parents after long three years got to see her through the glass panes. Tears were rolling down the cheeks of both of them.

Is this how I wished to see my beloved daughter? How would I bear the pains on her face now? She followed her own life and never looked back. Did I ever forsake you, my child? Shocked and shaken I was but I never.....I never..... He could not speak anymore.

Two days later Raima was born amidst torrential rains outside and the news spread in a lightning speed all around. The whole house engulfed the baby with all their love and satisfaction. Shudipa's father held the baby and touched its soft and tender, fresh and innocent little face. He seemed to have forgotten all the sorrows and pains he suffered this long with the awakening of his heart full of gratitude and glory.

The baby's face takes after you abba. Round and unmoved! Observed Mita

Her mother kept on looking at Shudipa's father and how his face was glowing bright with an unspeakable contentment and happiness. The baby brought back to the family an unalloyed joy after a long time of emptiness. About two years later Shudipa's father got to see her beloved daughter and the first grandchild of the family. Tears of both bliss and sorrow welcomed her. Raima did not know what happened afterwards as she had spent 16 years of her life with her mother only and her grandparents and uncles by her side. Syed and Shudipa got separated legally as things aggravated to their extremes between them and the bubbles around her defeated imagination of the hero finally burst into a dramatic disillusionment!

She feels now quite a defeated but a resilient woman without having to regret over the decisions she took long back and for her indescribable sufferings and psychological pains. She didn't give way to despair or blamed her fate but calmly endured the pains of separation. A sadder and a wiser woman now she wouldn't regret the depredation her faith in love brought in its train and the disastrous consequences her life suffered and turned her imagination upside down. She would be on her own again! She would move forward with a renewed vigor and pride!

Now she is recalling in the cozy corner of her meticulously furnished house how the orchard garden resembled the ripeness of her life. She now dreams of having to walk with her bouncing handsome womanliness in the garden full of mango trees bursting with juice to the core and feel the sense of touch of the maturity of nature deep in her body and spirit. She murmured,

The orchard in summer is brimming with flies and bees sipping the juice and swarming around the mouth watering and intoxicating fragrance of the roses, marigold and night queen with the silver moon beams pouring forth. The dew drops on them and the ripeness I see is what I desire to celebrate in my being. I love it! I do love it!