

## *Ram Ram*

Praise be to Ram, prince of the fourteen universes and beyond. I will not leave this room and go to this wedding. What they are calling a wedding. No *kanyadaan*, no *ganthibandhan*, no tying the knot, no walking around the fire. Who will cry for the bride who is to be given away to a new family? Our Raja, my Raju. Wedding ceremony to be held in some hotel, okay, okay, that is the way it is done in this country, but no priest! What is this? Wedding only two weeks away and I have come all this way to America to see drinks, and dancing, and feasting on non-veg food? What kind of marriage is this, I ask you? Wedding date has not been set by astrologer but by husband-to-be's job. All this I am learning for the first time.

Come to America. Your presence at Raja's wedding is a must. We will arrange visa, ticket, transport, what have you. Even Raja called me. "Please come Ajji," she said. It will mean a lot to me to have you here." My Raja is getting married. Imagine! Those little girls, last time I had seen them, six, seven years back, no ten maybe, hardly they stayed one week with me then rushed off to Sharma Rao's family, and all three had become sick. Their stomachs no longer knew India. For me they will always be my little girls in frocks and knee socks who said Ajji, *dudh pasand* like little kittens mewling for their mother's milk. And I would heat up the milk and put two spoons of sugar apiece. How sweet are those memories!

So what is an old woman to do? I pack my bag. *Chee-ka-go*. So many instructions I have to follow. Customs, passport check in New York City, retrieve suitcase, recheck bag to *Chee-ka-go*. So far I have seen only strange things. Who can describe?

Big cars, yes, big buildings, okay. Big, big streets. Not like our narrow lanes. But what have they done with the people? And animals? I am missing giving a chapatti every morning to my little Devi. Who will give that poor cow a chapatti when I am gone? Surely not Ramesh. Why that useless son Ramesh could not have come with me! He is almost as unknown to me as America, with his pipe-smoking and strange life going here and there to this friend and that—most certainly he eats meat—and yet he says no to America, even though Sharma Rao was willing to pay the ticket—he said there will be nothing for me in America—imagine this country so many people fight tooth and nail to get to. So I managed without him. I am here now. All my body parts are connected to me. *Ram, Ram.*

So many worries have consumed me in all the time of waiting for visa, passport, what not. What will I eat? Should I take my own masala? Who will make chapattis? I have heard machines do everything for you here. Ramesh says what for you are worrying for all these things. They will take care of you. They will wait on you hand and foot. *Ram Ram.* Last thing I worried about was Raja's wedding. Now, come to find out it is no wedding at all. Swear upon God I will not leave this room. Let them have their fun. As if marriage is fun. Still to this day I can remember my own marriage. Hardly was I fifteen years old. Imagine Raja has known this Manesh fellow for five, six years, and only now they are getting married. First time I saw my husband was right there at the marriage ceremony itself! Praise be to Ram he had given to me a husband who did not beat me. He was a good man, praise be to Ram, only he died too early. What is to be done?

Raja is loving the saris I have brought from India. Just yesterday my eyes filled with tears seeing her. The whole family. Was it really them? How to say it? No words will suffice. The whole family there to meet me at the airport. Only thing missing was a garland of flowers. But who needs such silly formalities? I am not needing such things, but my friend

Rumila has told me her family greeted her with a garland when she visited. I suppose these things are nice if your family thinks of them. In one second I had forgotten all the pains of sitting on the airplane for hours and hours, my stomach in such knots. My Anu! My Usha! My Raju! And Sushila looking so different. My own daughter, I hardly recognized her. As if someone has put feathers back on a plucked chicken. And Sharma Rao—how he has changed! He has lost hairs on his head, and what he has remaining he has grown long like a girl. How unusual. Still he has that mischievous grin. And impatient as ever! Moving me along when all I wanted to do is stand and look at my girls, who are laughing and smiling, and even touching my feet! Imagine. What good girls! But they are not girls. They are young women. Dressed in American clothes. Blue jeans and what have you, more like rags than clothes. Sharma is driving a car! They are all talking so fast. Anu, sweet Anu, holds my hand just as I used to hold her hand. As if I am a child. I speak to them in Hindi and they reply in English. Okay, okay, let it be.

We are sitting all together in living room. This one room five families can live in! Like a palace. Sharma Rao has done well. Hardly am I feeling tired at all from the journey. Such is my happiness to be with these girls. Special, special wedding saris. One for each ceremony. Saris I have brought for Anu, Usha and Sushila also. Best silk. But these days even Indian ladies are wearing nylon, Dacron, rayon to cinema palace, wedding, thread ceremony, diwali, what have you. *Ram, Ram*. When our own people are making the most beautiful silk saris—Benarasi, Kancheepuram, Madrasi, Orissi, my God—how many choices we have—the sound of a silk sari as you walk—like a little bird settling its feathers—not like those synthetics that sound like newspaper trash running down the street. Myself, I will only wear white. Widow has no option. So be it. At one time I am very much liking color. So much I am liking all the colors. Green is my favorite, or blue. Of course groom's family will be giving actual wedding sari, but also Raja will wear one chosen

by her uncle Ramesh, as is our tradition. Also I have brought her beautiful blue/green silk for *Ghari Puja*, and beautiful pink/green colored for after actual ceremony. Such a beautiful bride she will make. My Raja. Sad she is dark like her father and not fair-skinned like Sushila.

“But Ajji,” Raja is telling me. “We are not doing that. I only need one sari. We are just having a dinner in a restaurant the night before. Manesh’s family is hosting, and I am just going to wear a dress for that.”

“What is this? Priest is not coming day before?” Sushila puts her hand on mine. “Mother,” she is telling me. “There is no priest. They will be married before a judge.” Hardly can you imagine the shock to my ears. Must be I am not hearing correctly.

“Why you have brought me all this way when wedding is like this?”

Now my daughter is telling me I am not being reasonable. Truth be told, some mothers and daughters are like spoke and wheel, but that is not Sushila and I. We have never travelled together. I will go one way, she will go the other.

“How Raja can be getting married without all our traditions?”

“Mother,” she is telling me. “Even I did not have such a wedding, so how can I impose it on my own children?” True, true, she and Sharma Rao married only in front of a judge—but, okay, okay, Sharma Rao is of different caste—this stain we are bearing on our family. He is a good man. Praise be to Ram. Almost like a Brahmin. But now children of children can turn the tide back to good traditions. Even as a young girl, that Raja had her eyes set only on America. Now I see she is settled here like good food settles in the stomach. Hardly does she seem like she came from Mother India at one time. She is scientist like her father. Very, very smart girl. Let it be. Maybe in India there would have been no husband for her. Who can say? Still, she has found this boy. I am learning this Manesh is from Brahmin

family, thanks be to God. She must be married under eyes of God. Otherwise what is the meaning?

All family is looking at me with funny eyes. Am I saying something funny? Hardly have I landed in this country only to find out all this way I have come and for what? Now am I feeling tired. Such tiredness, my bones are themselves weeping inside my body.

Many years I have not thought of my husband, then all this night long I am thinking on him. Hardly one wink of sleep I have had all night. Must be this wedding business which is of such a worry. Children did not know their grandfather, but he was a good man. Hardly did I realize my good fortune until he was gone. *Ah re Ram*. How to say? So busy was I, rising at four each and every morning, turning the tap on for the water to come, starting the fire to make hot water for morning bath. Preparing *atta* for chapatti, milkman coming with the fresh milk, children needing attention, though this man has given me only two. In those days also being a good daughter-in-law—taking care of his parents. Okay, okay, sometimes I am complaining. His mother is criticizing me. Not enough salt in rice. Curds too watery. Nothing, nothing I can do to make her happy. And he is not saying anything. Those days I am very angry with that man who calls himself my husband. What a mouse he was. Then, like that, God has taken him from me with heart attack. Why I am thinking of all this now? Who can say?

“Ajjī, Ajjī!” I hear Anu’s sweet voice. Here she is, bringing me tea. “Sit, sit,” I tell her. “How are you feeling today?” she asks me. “Are you feeling better?”

“Okay, okay. Hardly have I slept one wink,” I tell her, “but I am okay.”

“Ajjī, do you want to take a walk to the lake today?”

I look at her face—so much serious in those big eyes—eyebrows just like her father—straight and strong. At least she has not cut her hair off like these American girls.

“Okay, okay, let us go see this lake. Tea is very good. Like home. But strong. Dear Anu. Always she has been attached to her Ajji.” She smiles at me. She has grown tall. Maybe she is thinking I am silly drinking tea Indian way, pouring little bit on saucer and drinking old-fashioned way. Tea cools nicely. No burning of lips.

“You have taken your breakfast? Why you did not stay in India with your Ajji?” She looks at me and laughs. “Still, you come back to India with me. We will find you a *pucca* Brahmin boy.” Again she laughs. Nothing I say she will take serious. As if I am making jokes.

“I have my job, Ajji. I like it. I don’t want to get married yet. I’m not ready.”

“What not ready? I myself was married at age fifteen. By sixteen, I am having your mother. By eighteen, my Ramesh is born. Already you are how old?”

“Twenty-five, but it’s not like that anymore. I want to get settled in my career before I get married and have children.”

“*Ram, Ram*. What is this talk? What is this career? Does it give you children? Family life? Happiness?” She is telling me she wants to write for some newspaper about terrible evils in the world. “There is no dearth of evil in the world, but when you believe in God, then no harm can come.”

“I don’t believe in God, Ajji.”

Just hearing those words come her lips I feel I should run back to India. “Never should I have allowed you to be taken from me!”

These days I cannot walk quickly like before. Slow, slow like an elephant. We must cross a big road. This I cannot do alone. Cars go so fast! Anu takes my hand. Then I see this Lake Meesheegan. Never have I seen such a big lake. Like a sea. Waves come and go. A very beautiful sight. Little diamonds on the water.

“Anu, I am feeling tired. Is there some place to sit?” She leads me to a bench under a tree and we sit and watch the lake. Now I am happy. Ram, Ram. She holds my hand.

“What do you want to do while you are in America?” she asks me.

“Do? I just want one thing, and that is to be with you.”

She laughs. “Don’t you want to see New York City and Niagara Falls and Washington, DC? You can come with me to San Francisco and see the Golden Gate Bridge.”

“Yes, yes very nice. We will see.” My friend Rumila, her son is living in some place, New Jersey, it is. What kind of place it is I don’t know. She has seen all those things. She tells me she has seen tallest buildings in the world. Wah wah. So what? I am thinking. How to explain. Old woman like me wants only one thing. To see family. All this I am thinking in front of Lake Meesheegan. Waves come and go. Such is life. Come and go. And yet too much may go sometimes.

Anu tells me Raja’s husband-to-be will come for dinner. And in the following week his family will arrive from New Delhi. I want to know about this family. Who are they? But Anu knows nothing. She thinks his father is big barrister. His mother also some VIP. Half-time they are living in England. Half-time in New Delhi. This I am learning just now. So much am I learning.

Slowly, slowly we return to this apartment. So big. I will tell Rumila. They are having four bedrooms. Imagine. Sharma Rao is having his own study. Sushila is having her own study. Books, books everywhere. So many books. Yet, nowhere am I finding Vedas. Thanks be to God I have brought my own prayer book. Nowhere in this world will I go without it.

“Aji,” Usha, says. “Come in here. I want to play this piece for you.” Usha is practicing on that big instrument. Some music she will play at the wedding. She has won all kinds of awards. I have seen them in her room. Cello competition. Good for her. Such talented girls. Who can say America is not good for

them? Even this much I can see. I am listening to this music she is playing and it is making me feel very sad. Like our Indian music. So much sadness. My preference is for vocal singing. Bhajans. When you sing to God, God is listening. That is my belief. Who to tell? Usha has some boy. He is like Sharma Rao. In sciences. Good. Good. I will meet him, she tells me, at the wedding. Still I am not telling them I will not leave my room. So be it.

Not one word am I uttering at this dinner. Sharma Rao has cooked chicken. Whole family is eating non-veg. I will take my rice and curds. One thing I am liking in America is rice has no stones. Such clean rice. Pulses also, very clean. But curds have no flavor. This boy Raja will marry is talking, talking all the time. Words are flowing from his mouth like water from a tap. Hardly can I understand one thing he is saying. Ajji, he asks me, how do you find America? Fine, fine I tell him. He has brought me chocolates. As if I am a child. He is not a bad-looking fellow. Family is Gujarati, Panjabi, perhaps. What of it? Why I should say anything? All I am asking is one small thing.

“Why you are not marrying my granddaughter according to our tradition?” I am asking him. “Is it too much I am asking?” Finally I am asking. Hardly can I sit quietly any longer.

“*Ah re*, let him be,” Sharma Rao says. “These are modern kids. Let them do as they please.”

“Today they will get married. Tomorrow they will get divorced. What good is it?”

“Ajji,” Raja says to me. “We take our marriage very seriously.” Now she takes this boy’s hand and holds it. He is smiling like a monkey. “How you get married isn’t as important as knowing you love each other. We’ve spent a lot of time together. We know the good and the bad. I think we will be very happy together.”

All dinner plates get cleared. Family running here and there. No more talk. No more interest in what Ajji has to say.



What Ajji is thinking. Why bother with this old woman from old country who knows nothing?

So much commotion. Hardly have I seen Sushila and Sharma Rao speaking to each other. So be it. Such is married life. Raja is telling everyone what to do, when to do, if to do, how to do. Her sisters are fighting with her. I am happy in this little room they are giving me. Each day I am praying to Ram to bring some sense into this family. All have become lizards, changing color to suit this soil. I too have travelled this great distance, but landing on new soil, do I suddenly change my colors? Yesterday they were green like a mango, today they are red like American apple. I am weeping. They are saying, Ajji, you will see. The wedding will be very, very nice. So much fun. Dinner, dancing, speeches. Come to India, I am telling Raja's husband-to-be. There you can get married properly. This man is laughing. Imagine. Always he makes me think of a monkey. What to do?

And on day of wedding so much commotion. Shouting. Laughter. Still I am not going. Let them go. Let them be happy. For what they are needing me here? I am happy in this room saying my *sholkas*. Maybe they will forget me here. Good. I will not emerge from this room. *Ram Ram*.

Previous evening I am sitting at dinner table in restaurant. So much noise. Everyone taking pictures, no one sitting down. I am hoping for *Ghari Puja*, garlands placed on parents, bride and groom colored in turmeric, priest to break coconut. No ceremony, no nothing! Just talk and more talk. Boy's parents come and say their hellos and go away. They are fancy people, important people from Delhi. Her sari must be costing minimum twenty hazar rupees. She is wearing more gold than goddess Laxmi. Why they should waste time talking with old woman like me? No other grandparents are living. Maybe it is time for me to go. Why I am hanging around on this earth? Wedding today will be the same. Why I came to this place? Just cars and buildings. Shops so big you will get lost. No people

to talk to. No vegetable market. No temple. No Chandrama to sweep the floor every morning. How I miss hearing her gossip. How I miss scolding her because of all the spots she has missed. That girl can be so stupid.

“Ajji, are you ready? We’re leaving!” I hear Anu calling my name. Door is closed. She is knocking. I will not open. “Ajji, are you in there? Open up.”

“What is it child? Leave me. I am not feeling well.”

“Open up. What’s the matter?”

Slowly, slowly, I open the door. She is looking at me with her face painted with lipstick and colors on her eyes. So pretty, my Anu, in the silk sari I have brought for her. Then Usha comes. She has told Raja she is not wearing cosmetics nor is she wearing the beautiful sari I have brought for her. She is wearing instead a long skirt with top and big, long scarf.

“Come on Ajji, we’re leaving.”

“No, no, *beta*, leave your Ajji here.”

“You have to come. You can’t stay here.”

“Your Ajji is not suited for these things. Dinner, drinks, dancing—you people go have your fun. I am happy here only.”

“But Raja will be really upset if you don’t come.”

“No one is caring for my upset. No priest, nothing, nothing of our tradition at all.”

Both girls are looking at me. They are looking one to the other. What to do with this old, useless woman? Hardly am I knowing how wet are my cheeks. Sharma Rao is calling from the door. I can hear his voice travel down the hallway. I can hear he is very impatient. Poor man, he is losing his firstborn. Hardly does he realize what is happening to him. Only when you sing the song at the wedding do you realize how sad you are to see your daughter go. How will he know this feeling? Of course, I myself, because Sushila married out of our tradition, and Ramesh has never married, I could not enjoy this moment. *Ram, Ram*. Life is all sadness. Where is the joy?

They are taking me by the arms. They are pulling me. How they can treat an old woman like this? Anu is telling me, remember when you made Raja almost drown in the Ganges? How she can compare this with that? I was saving her soul. As a young child she could not know what good I was giving her. A lifelong of blessing. A dip in the Ganges. She was washed of all her sins. Now she will be needing yet another dip. Sharma Rao is looking very, very angry at myself; his eyebrows are pressed together and he is looking as if he has a great pain in his neck, though he is looking quite handsome in his fancy black suit.

“Sharma Rao,” I am saying. “Why you are forcing me?”

“You are being silly,” he is telling me. “You have come all this way for this wedding. What nonsense are you up to? Acting like a child. Come along. We will be late. Sushila has gone ahead with Raja. Such commotion you are causing. You should be ashamed.”

He is the one with no shame. Anu, Usha, they are holding me by my arms. Actually they are hurting me. They are not letting me go. They are laughing actually. *Ram Ram*. Why Ram has caused me this much pain? None of my prayers has he answered. What use God is? Still I go on praying to him. Every day I am praying. *Sree Ram, Jaya Ram, Jaya Jaya Ram*. Oh Ram, help me, if not in this life, then the next. I beseech you.