A Suitable Boy

Vikram Seth

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Extract

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To
Papa and Mama
and
the memory of Amma

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Part One

'YOU too will marry a boy I choose,' said Mrs Rupa Mehra firmly to her younger daughter.

Lata avoided the maternal imperative by looking around the great lamp-lit garden of Prem Nivas. The wedding-guests were gathered on the lawn. 'Hmm,' she said. This annoyed her mother further.

'I know what your hmms mean, young lady, and I can tell you I will not stand for hmms in this matter. I do know what is best. I am doing it all for you. Do you think it is easy for me, trying to arrange things for all four of my children without His help?' Her nose began to redden at the thought of her husband, who would, she felt certain, be partaking of their present joy from somewhere benevolently above. Mrs Rupa Mehra believed, of course, in reincarnation, but at moments of exceptional sentiment, she imagined that the late Raghubir Mehra still inhabited the form in which she had known him when he was alive: the robust, cheerful form of his early forties before overwork had brought about his heart attack at the height of the Second World War. Eight years ago, eight years, thought Mrs Rupa Mehra miserably.

'Now, now, Ma, you can't cry on Savita's wedding day,' said Lata, putting her arm gently but not very concernedly around her mother's shoulder.

'If He had been here, I could have worn the tissue-patola sari I wore for my own wedding,' sighed Mrs Rupa Mehra. 'But it is too rich for a widow to wear.'

'Ma!' said Lata, a little exasperated at the emotional capital her mother insisted on making out of every possible circumstance. 'People are looking at you. They want to congratulate you, and they'll think it very odd if they see you crying in this way.'

Several guests were indeed doing namasté to Mrs Rupa Mehra and smiling at her; the cream of Brahmpur society, she was pleased to note.

'Let them see me!' said Mrs Rupa Mehra defiantly, dabbing at her eyes hastily with a handkerchief perfumed with 4711 eau-de-Cologne. 'They will only think it is because of my happiness at Savita's wedding. Everything I do is for you, and no one appreciates me. I have chosen such a good boy for Savita, and all everyone does is complain.'

Lata reflected that of the four brothers and sisters, the only one who hadn't complained of the match had been the sweet-tempered, fair-complexioned, beautiful Savita herself.

'He is a little thin, Ma,' said Lata a bit thoughtlessly. This was

putting it mildly. Pran Kapoor, soon to be her brother-in-law, was lank, dark, gangly, and asthmatic.

'Thin? What is thin? Everyone is trying to become thin these days. Even I have had to fast the whole day and it is not good for my diabetes. And if Savita is not complaining, everyone should be happy with him. Arun and Varun are always complaining: why didn't they choose a boy for their sister then? Pran is a good, decent, cultured khatri boy.'

There was no denying that Pran, at thirty, was a good boy, a decent boy, and belonged to the right caste. And, indeed, Lata did like Pran. Oddly enough, she knew him better than her sister did – or, at least, had seen him for longer than her sister had. Lata was studying English at Brahmpur University, and Pran Kapoor was a popular lecturer there. Lata had attended his class on the Elizabethans, while Savita, the bride, had met him for only an hour, and that too in her mother's company.

'And Savita will fatten him up,' added Mrs Rupa Mehra. 'Why are you trying to annoy me when I am so happy? And Pran and Savita will be happy, you will see. They will be happy,' she continued emphatically. 'Thank you, thank you,' she now beamed at those who were coming up to greet her. 'It is so wonderful – the boy of my dreams, and such a good family. The Minister Sahib has been very kind to us. And Savita is so happy. Please eat something, please eat: they have made such delicious gulab-jamuns, but owing to my diabetes I cannot eat them even after the ceremonies. I am not even allowed gajak, which is so difficult to resist in winter. But please eat, please eat. I must go in to check what is happening: the time that the pandits have given is coming up, and there is no sign of either bride or groom!' She looked at Lata, frowning. Her younger daughter was going to prove more difficult than her elder, she decided.

'Don't forget what I told you,' she said in an admonitory voice.

'Hmm,' said Lata. 'Ma, your handkerchief's sticking out of your blouse.'

'Oh!' said Mrs Rupa Mehra, worriedly tucking it in. 'And tell Arun to please take his duties seriously. He is just standing there in a corner talking to that Meenakshi and his silly friend from Calcutta. He should see that everyone is drinking and eating properly and having a gala time.'

'That Meenakshi' was Arun's glamorous wife and her own disrespectful daughter-in-law. In four years of marriage Meenakshi's only worthwhile act, in Mrs Rupa Mehra's eyes, had been to give birth to her beloved granddaughter, Aparna, who even now had found her way to her grandmother's brown silk sari and was

tugging it for attention. Mrs Rupa Mehra was delighted. She gave her a kiss and told her:

'Aparna, you must stay with your Mummy or with Lata Bua, otherwise you will get lost. And then where would we be?'

'Can't I come with you?' asked Aparna, who, at three, naturally had views and preferences of her own.

'Sweetheart, I wish you could,' said Mrs Rupa Mehra, 'but I have to make sure that your Savita Bua is ready to be married. She is so late already.' And Mrs Rupa Mehra looked once again at the little gold watch that had been her husband's first gift to her and which had not missed a beat for two-and-a-half decades.

'I want to see Savita Bua!' said Aparna, holding her ground.

Mrs Rupa Mehra looked a little harassed and nodded vaguely at Aparna.

Lata picked Aparna up. 'When Savita Bua comes out, we'll go over there together, shall we, and I'll hold you up like this, and we'll both get a good view. Meanwhile, should we go and see if we can get some ice-cream? I feel like some too.'

Aparna approved of this, as of most of Lata's suggestions. It was never too cold for ice-cream. They walked towards the buffet table together, three-year-old and nineteen-year-old hand in hand. A few rose-petals wafted down on them from somewhere.

'What is good enough for your sister is good enough for you,' said Mrs Rupa Mehra to Lata as a parting shot.

'We can't both marry Pran,' said Lata, laughing.

1.2

THE other chief host of the wedding was the groom's father, Mr Mahesh Kapoor, who was the Minister of Revenue of the state of Purva Pradesh. It was in fact in his large, C-shaped, cream-coloured, two-storey family house, Prem Nivas, situated in the quietest, greenest residential area of the ancient, and – for the most part – over-populated city of Brahmpur, that the wedding was taking place.

This was so unusual that the whole of Brahmpur had been buzzing about it for days. Mrs Rupa Mehra's father, who was supposed to be the host, had taken sudden umbrage a fortnight before the wedding, had locked up his house, and had disappeared. Mrs Rupa Mehra had been distraught. The Minister Sahib had stepped in ('Your honour is our honour'), and had insisted on putting on the wedding himself. As for the ensuing gossip, he ignored it.

There was no question of Mrs Rupa Mehra helping to pay for the wedding. The Minister Sahib would not hear of it. Nor had he at any time asked for any dowry. He was an old friend and bridge partner of Mrs Rupa Mehra's father and he had liked what he had seen of her daughter Savita (though he could never remember the girl's name). He was sympathetic to economic hardship, for he too had tasted it. During the several years he had spent in British jails during the struggle for Independence, there had been no one to run his farm or his cloth business. As a result very little income had come in, and his wife and family had struggled along with great difficulty.

Those unhappy times, however, were only a memory for the able, impatient, and powerful Minister. It was the early winter of 1950, and India had been free for over three years. But freedom for the country did not mean freedom for his younger son, Maan, who even now was being told by his father:

'What is good enough for your brother is good enough for you.'

'Yes, Baoji,' said Maan, smiling.

Mr Mahesh Kapoor frowned. His younger son, while succeeding to his own habit of fine dress, had not succeeded to his obsession with hard work. Nor did he appear to have any ambition to speak of.

'It is no use being a good-looking young wastrel forever,' said his father. 'And marriage will force you to settle down and take things seriously. I have written to the Banaras people, and I expect a favourable answer any day.'

Marriage was the last thing on Maan's mind; he had caught a friend's eye in the crowd and was waving at him. Hundreds of small coloured lights strung through the hedge came on all at once, and the silk saris and jewellery of the women glimmered and glinted even more brightly. The high, reedy shehnai music burst into a pattern of speed and brilliance. Maan was entranced. He noticed Lata making her way through the guests. Quite an attractive girl, Savita's sister, he thought. Not very tall and not very fair, but attractive, with an oval face, a shy light in her dark eyes and an affectionate manner towards the child she was leading by the hand.

'Yes, Baoji,' said Maan obediently.

'What did I say?' demanded his father.

'About marriage, Baoji,' said Maan.

'What about marriage?'

Maan was nonplussed.

'Don't you listen?' demanded Mahesh Kapoor, wanting to twist Maan's ear. 'You are as bad as the clerks in the Revenue Department. You were not paying attention, you were waving at Firoz.'

Maan looked a little shamefaced. He knew what his father thought of him. But he had been enjoying himself until a couple of minutes ago, and it was just like Baoji to come and puncture his light spirits.

'So that's all fixed up,' continued his father. 'Don't tell me later that I didn't warn you. And don't get that weak-willed woman, your mother, to change her mind and come telling me that you aren't yet ready to take on the responsibilities of a man.'

'No, Baoji,' said Maan, getting the drift of things and looking a trifle glum.

'We chose well for Veena, we have chosen well for Pran, and you are not to complain about our choice of a bride for you.'

Maan said nothing. He was wondering how to repair the puncture. He had a bottle of Scotch upstairs in his room, and perhaps he and Firoz could escape for a few minutes before the ceremony – or even during it – for refreshment.

His father paused to smile brusquely at a few well-wishers, then turned to Maan again.

'I don't want to have to waste any more time with you today. God knows I have enough to do as it is. What has happened to Pran and that girl, what's her name? It's getting late. They were supposed to come out from opposite ends of the house and meet here for the jaymala five minutes ago.'

'Savita,' prompted Maan.

'Yes, yes,' said his father impatiently. 'Savita. Your superstitious mother will start panicking if they miss the correct configuration of the stars. Go and calm her down. Go! Do some good.'

And Mahesh Kapoor went back to his own duties as a host. He frowned impatiently at one of the officiating priests, who smiled weakly back. He narrowly avoided being butted in the stomach and knocked over by three children, offspring of his rural relatives, who were careering joyfully around the garden as if it were a field of stubble. And he greeted, before he had walked ten steps, a professor of literature (who could be useful for Pran's career); two influential members of the state legislature from the Congress Party (who might well agree to back him in his perennial power-struggle with the Home Minister); a judge, the very last Englishman to remain on the bench of the Brahmpur High Court after Independence; and his old friend the Nawab Sahib of Baitar, one of the largest landowners in the state.

1.3

LATA, who had heard a part of Maan's conversation with his father, could not help smiling to herself as she walked past.

'I see you're enjoying yourself,' said Maan to her in English.

His conversation with his father had been in Hindi, hers with her mother in English. Maan spoke both well.

Lata was struck shy, as she sometimes was with strangers, especially those who smiled as boldly as Maan. Let him do the smiling for both of us, she thought.

'Yes,' she said simply, her eyes resting on his face for just a second. Aparna tugged at her hand.

'Well, now, we're almost family,' said Maan, perhaps sensing her awkwardness. 'A few minutes more, and the ceremonies will start.'

'Yes,' agreed Lata, looking up at him again more confidently. She paused and frowned. 'My mother's concerned that they won't start on time.'

'So is my father,' said Maan.

Lata began smiling again, but when Maan asked her why she shook her head.

'Well,' said Maan, flicking a rose-petal off his beautiful tight white achkan, 'you're not laughing at me, are you?'

'I'm not laughing at all,' said Lata.

'Smiling, I meant.'

'No, not at you,' said Lata. 'At myself.'

'That's very mysterious,' said Maan. His good-natured face melted into an expression of exaggerated perplexity.

'It'll have to remain so, I'm afraid,' said Lata, almost laughing now. 'Aparna here wants her ice-cream, and I must supply it.'

'Try the pistachio ice-cream,' suggested Maan. His eyes followed her pink sari for a few seconds. Good-looking girl – in a way, he thought again. Pink's the wrong colour for her complexion, though. She should be dressed in deep green or dark blue ... like that woman there. His attention veered to a new object of contemplation.

A few seconds later Lata bumped into her best friend, Malati, a medical student who shared her room at the student hostel. Malati was very outgoing and never lost her tongue with strangers. Strangers, however, blinking into her lovely green eyes, sometimes lost their tongues with her.

'Who was that Cad you were talking to?' she asked Lata eagerly.

This wasn't as bad as it sounded. A good-looking young man,

in the slang of Brahmpur University girls, was a Cad. The term derived from Cadbury's chocolate.

'Oh, that's just Maan, he's Pran's younger brother.'

'Really! But he's so good-looking and Pran's so, well, not ugly, but, you know, dark, and nothing special.'

'Maybe he's a dark Cad,' suggested Lata. 'Bitter but sustaining.'

Malati considered this.

'And,' continued Lata, 'as my aunts have reminded me five times in the last hour, I'm not all that fair either, and will therefore find it impossible to get a suitable husband.'

'How can you put up with them, Lata?' asked Malati, who had been brought up, fatherless and brotherless, in a circle of very supportive women.

'Oh, I like most of them,' said Lata. 'And if it wasn't for this sort of speculation it wouldn't be much of a wedding for them. Once they see the bride and groom together, they'll have an even better time. Beauty and the Beast.'

'Well, he's looked rather beast-like whenever I've seen him on the university campus,' said Malati. 'Like a dark giraffe.'

'Don't be mean,' said Lata, laughing. 'Anyway, Pran's very popular as a lecturer,' she continued. 'And I like him. And you're going to have to visit me at his house once I leave the hostel and start living there. And since he'll be my brother-in-law you'll have to like him too. Promise me you will.'

'I won't,' said Malati firmly. 'He's taking you away from me.'

'He's doing nothing of the sort, Malati,' said Lata. 'My mother, with her fine sense of household economy, is dumping me on him.'

'Well, I don't see why you should obey your mother. Tell her you can't bear to be parted from me.'

'I always obey my mother,' said Lata. 'And besides, who will pay my hostel fees if she doesn't? And it will be very nice for me to live with Savita for a while. I refuse to lose you. You really must visit us – you must keep visiting us. If you don't, I'll know how much value to put on your friendship.'

Malati looked unhappy for a second or two, then recovered. 'Who's this?' she asked. Aparna was looking at her in a severe and uncompromising manner.

'My niece, Aparna,' said Lata. 'Say hello to Malati Aunty, Aparna.'

'Hello,' said Aparna, who had reached the end of her patience. 'Can I have a pistachio ice-cream, please?'

'Yes, kuchuk, of course, I'm sorry,' said Lata. 'Come, let's all go together and get some.'