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“Family Ties that Bind ... and Choke!”

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“Mommy, come here! Now! Nanamma is making me angry again.”

“Komal, come here and talk some sense into your daughter!”

Here we go again, thought Komal, exiting her room. As she walked to the living room tastefully decorated with artifacts from India as well as those picked up on travels to Africa and Mexico, the slender youthful-looking woman dressed in black pants and rust-colored blouse tied back her shoulder-length hair with a scrunchie. Really, these fights between her mother and her only child were getting worse as days went on. Amma was trying to maintain what she thought was her position as the head of their women-only household, while Indu was trying equally hard to rule it.

“Indu, could you please stop shouting like that? And Amma, I told you that I had a headache and wanted to rest.”

“I’m not the one that called you first,” was her mother’s immediate and childish denial. At 65 years old, she looked like a slender piece of dried ginger with glasses and gray hair in a bun, dressed in a white sari. For all her apparent fragility, however, Komal knew how feisty she was. “Besides, your daughter was trying to sneak out of the house, and I was just doing my duty by warning you. By the way, I am glad that, finally, you acknowledge that you need to rest, something that I’ve been telling you to do for ages. Spending all hours of the day at the workshop or at the boutique is hardly what a woman of

your age should be doing. If we were still living in India, you wouldn't be like this. Why, in the old days...”?

If she had told her mother this once, she had said it a hundred times. Still, it was worth repeating. “Amma, I'm not doing any of this just since we live in the US, but because I'm the part owner of a business. Both of our costume jewelry boutiques are doing very well, but it takes work to keep them that way. As for my age, I'm not even 41. I am healthy, and being active makes me happy. So why shouldn't I work?”

Indu was 20 years old, and had the psyche of a normal American girl, but at times, she could act just like her grandmother. She crossed her arms at her midriff, looking like a model in her carefully accessorized outfit of designer jeans and cropped yellow top. “Mom, I have to agree with Nani on this matter. Dad's life insurance money should be enough for us to get by. Why should you be stressing out over this jewelry business?”

“We could certainly get by on your father's savings, but we definitely wouldn't have the money for any of the luxuries you are so fond of. Remember the Mazda Miata that you had to have for college? How about the trip to Europe with your friends? And ...”

“All right, all right, you don't have to go on. At any rate, why must *you* do all the work? Let your partner, Mr. Das, do something at least!”

This just wasn't fair. Seriously, had these two any idea how hard it was to run a business? “Do something? Indu, he does most of the work. Who do you think does all the ordering? In addition, Rahul takes care of the inventory, accounts and payroll, and even manages the stores. All I do is design the jewelry and supervise the girls that make it.”

Amma's head stuck up like a crane contemplating the horizon, in what she assumed was a saintly air. “Well, I think that you should work out of the home, not be flitting around the city. Moreover, is designing costume jewelry something a modest widow with a grown daughter should be doing? Certainly your father and I didn't teach you that!”

“Baba taught me to use my brains for good things, not just to store gossip. I’m not sure just what *you* taught me.”

There, Amma, put it in your pipe and smoke it. Komal had a distinct urge to giggle as she remembered the line from some sitcom.

“*He Bhagwan!* You talk back to your aged mother like this?”

Amma was into her martyr role, and Komal sighed. “Look, I’m sorry for snapping like that, Amma, but I am forty-one years old, I have been through marriage and widowhood, raised a daughter, and am now running a successful business. I think I’m old enough to make my own decisions.” She was proud of her own achievements. Why couldn’t her family appreciate them?

“Now I can see where Indu gets her obstinacy from! At forty-one, you get your own way ... and at nineteen, she does whatever she wants. Wonderful, just wonderful!” Amma kindly made room for a third person in the fight, a talent honed in the *havelis* of her hometown in India, way back when.

“Mom, I’m, like, warning you. Tell Nani not to start with me.” Indu’s large dark eyes were beginning to shoot off sparks.

“Komal, I am going to be frank with you. I don’t like your daughter’s activities at all. In spite of everything I’ve told her, she says she is going out again with that boy Nikhil.”

The girl whipped around to face her grandmother, her straight black hair flying in a shining curtain. “Mom knows all about it, so you don’t need to tattle, Nani. I’m not just dating Nick; I’m going to marry him as soon as possible.”

“I’m certainly glad to hear that, seeing as how you have done everything but go through the formality of marriage with him,” Komal said *sotto voce* with downcast eyes.

Her words had an electrifying effect on Miss Drama Queen. “Mom, how ... how did you know? Wait a minute, have you been, like, spying on me? Don’t I have any right to privacy, like ...”

The UNiverse Journal

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Komal held up a slender hand to put a quick stop to the rant. “I’ve never spied on you, or invaded your privacy. But I do know you ... and I’ve seen you change. I am not saying anything about it, mind you. It’s your life, and as long as you’ve thought about it carefully, and know what you’re doing ...”

“Eh? What are you saying? Whatever it is, speak up. My ears are sixty-five years old too, you know!” However, Amma could see, and right now, she could see that she was being shut out of something juicy. News was power, and Amma craved it as much as old Cleo of Egypt ever did.

There were some things that couldn’t be shared, however. “I was just telling her that I am well aware of what she is doing, Amma. In fact, I’m happy that she has chosen an Indian-American, who understands her background. Now, all I want her to do is to graduate from college and find a job, before getting married. It is important for a woman to be independent.” Komal was dead serious about this.

“Nick is the owner of a very successful art gallery. As his wife, all I’ll have to do is arrange parties and look beautiful.”

Privately, Komal thought that Indu was off to a very good start in that case. With a good figure and a stunning face, she could face any competition down, she thought with a mother’s pride. But it wouldn’t do to encourage the girl to focus on her looks.

“Well, with a college degree, you will look even more beautiful and arrange better parties. No marriage until you graduate.”

“Marriage? You are talking of a girl from *our family* marrying a Mr. Nobody from nowhere? His parents are divorced and no one knows his mother’s family. Just because we are in America, it doesn’t mean that *khandaan* ceases to matter. Did you know that my family can be traced back to royalty? As for your father, ...”

“Nani, we are now in America. There is no royalty here. Why, even in India, nobody cares about that kind of thing anymore. If you have the money, you are king. Actually, Nani, you can get Mommy to design a crown with paste gems for you,” Indu sniggered. “You can wear it and then call yourself a queen.”

The UNiverse Journal

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Komal felt like a drum being whacked on both sides.

“Indu, you will not be rude to your grandmother. And I’m very firm on the subject of your graduating before getting married.”

“But that’s more than two years away! What if I swear that I’ll not drop out once I’m married?”

“Please, Indu, don’t fight me on this. It was your father’s dream that you get a college degree. I’m going to speak to Nikhil and his parents about it, and I’m sure they’ll be agreeable too. If you both are still have the same mind, we can have your wedding on the very first *muhurat* after you get your degree. All right?”

“You’re trying to separate us by playing the waiting game, aren’t you? Well, that won’t work! We’ll elope, and then what will you do?”

The old woman jumped into the breach with natural agility. “See what guts this child has? She is talking of eloping now. I say send her to her uncle in India and tell him to keep her home until we can find a suitable boy and marry her off.”

“If you so much as lay a finger on me, I’ll complain to the police and have you deported, you old ...” Indu’s voice had risen and was grating on Komal’s nerves. It was time to put the cards on the table.

“Stop yelling, both of you. I’ve had enough of these childish antics. Amma, Indu is not going anywhere. She has chosen her life-partner, and I’m okay with it. As for you, Indu, stop making faces at your grandmother and listen to me. Your father left funds for your education under my supervision. I wasn’t supposed to tell you about it because he wanted you to learn to be self-reliant. What you are getting as allowance is just the interest. If you graduate, I’ll release the principle to pay off your student loans. If not, I’ll put it in trust for your children.”

“You mean old witch; you hid my own father’s money from me! I’ll take you to court for this. I’ll have you declared incompetent.” Her daughter was literally bouncing off the walls in her temper, but Komal stood firm.

The UNiverse Journal

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“On what grounds?” she asked coolly. “Your father consulted a lawyer before finalizing his Will. You’ll find that you can’t break it. And you’ll also end up losing all you have, in paying your lawyer’s fees.”

“But, Mom, what you’re doing is blackmail! You know that I already have student loans. Even if I drop out now, I’ll be stuck with repaying ten thousand dollars!” wailed Indu.

“Exactly. Nikhil may not mind getting a wife without a college degree, but I don’t think he is the type to take on your loan.”

Amma was cackling with glee. “Ah-hah, she got you there, Indu! Komal, tell her you’ll give her the money only if she marries a boy of our choice.”

Komal stifled an insane urge to scream. “Stop it, Amma! Indu is nineteen and can be excused for being childish, but you should know better. Marriage is too important to be decided upon by anybody but the two that are going to start a new life together. I used to think that the old way was better, but now I believe in people deciding their own lives. In fact, ...”

“Why do you hesitate now? You’ve already made your opinion of the good old traditions very clear. Go on and finish what you were saying!” quoth the woman whose histrionic talents had been amply exhibited by her granddaughter.

“Yeah, Mom. Go on! Surely you can ruin my life some more?”

“I do intend to finish. I had planned on waiting to tell you later, but I think it is time.” Komal’s demeanor, rather than her words alerted her family.

“Are you putting me in a home?”

“You are cutting off my allowance, aren’t you?”

“I got married yesterday!”

“What?”

“What?” Two identical screams punctured the air. Komal spoke fast.

“Rahul proposed to me six months ago. His wife died more than ten years, and he has no children. He was lonely, but too shy to advertise for a life-partner. He said that he liked me a lot, but if I didn’t care for him in that way, things could go back to being the way they were. Well, I thought about it. He is a good man, and I found that I liked him too, and made my choice. I cared very much for your father, Indu, but he has been gone for seven years now. I will always respect his memory, but I get lonely, too.”

Of course, Indu had to bring up something that Komal wanted to avoid at all costs. “Oh, my God, Mom, will you be having, like, *sex*?”

Red-faced, Komal blurted out, “That’s none of your business!”

Amma inadvertently came to her rescue. “Komal, how could you do this to me?” she moaned. “How will I ever hold up my head in our community? Whatever will your aunt say when ...”

“Sarla *Mami* hasn’t talked to you in ten years’ over the dispute over Papa’s mother’s jewelry.”

Indu cut in. “Who cares what the old hag will say? Have you thought about how I will feel in front of my friends...”?

This, Komal could handle. “All your friends have at least two sets of parents and a whole crowd of step-relatives. They’ll just think you are ‘weird’ to be making much of such a trivial thing. We’re both mature adults and of similar age. It’s not as if Rahul is twenty years my junior or something equally crazy!”

Her words barely registered. Survival instinct had kicked in. “But what am I to do? This house won’t be big enough for all of us, so when he moves in, I’ll have to move out. I can’t afford a place of my own on what I make with part-time jobs. If I increase my work hours, I’ll have to cut down on my credits, so it will take me forever to graduate! And I can’t cook, either!”

Panic always found companionship. “Where will I go?” moaned Amma. “Are you going to kick me into the street? Whatever you do, please don’t send me to your brother. His wife will kill me for sure. To think that I personally handpicked such a monster for my only son!”

The UNiverse Journal

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“Amma, stop crying! I’ll never send you away. And Indu, you can stop panicking. Rahul just bought a four-bedroom, three-bath house with its own garden, in the suburbs. He wants both of you to move in with us. If you do so, we can sell or rent out this condo. Whatever we get for it can be added to the education fund. But if you both don’t want to move, you can continue to live here together.”

That last suggestion ... didn’t go far.

“You want me to live with *her*?”

“You think *she* is my choice of room-mate?”

Amma suddenly caught at something Komal said, like a cat grabbing a yummy little bird flitting by. “Did you say he had a garden? A real one, not just a few terracotta pots?”

“The house has three bathrooms? Does that mean I can have my own john?”

Really, heredity had gone a little too far in her case, thought Komal, trying not to smile. Who could have thought that grandmother and granddaughter could be so alike? Then she realized that she might have to spend her old age with another version of her mother and shuddered.

“Yes, it is a real garden with flower beds and a few trees,” she managed a smile. Family was family, after all, and she did really love these two. “Rahul and I have discussed it, and yes, you can have a bathroom. But, we don’t want you both being unhappy living with us, so the decision is yours to make.”

The transformation was complete. “Unhappy? With my own john? Along with no rent, and good food, and a big payoff in the end? How weird you are, Mom ... Mommy ...sweetheart! Don’t worry, I’ll definitely graduate. Who knows, if Nikhil doesn’t get a bigger place, I might even go to grad school before marrying! Ha, ha!” Knowing Indu, she just might, mused Komal.

“*He Bhagwan*, it is the one thing I’ve always yearned for. There is nothing like having *chai* surrounded by flowers. You know, I have heard that your Mr. Das is from a high-class community. Even if not, this Rahul knows high-class when he sees it. He chose you, didn’t he? Heh, heh!” Amma was being coy?

“All we want is for you to be happy, Mom! Now go and rest up. Do you want any Tylenol, Advil or Aleve for your headache?”

“Komal, no matter what I say, I do love you. I like living with you and this *badmaash* granddaughter of mine. If I object to her marriage, it is only because I haven’t met this boy yet. Bring Nikhil to meet me, Indu, and I’m sure that I’ll like him. I’ll make *gulab jamuns* tomorrow.”

“Oh, Nani, that is so sweet of you. I’ll go right away and invite him for dinner tomorrow. In fact, I could drop you off at the temple, and pick you up in an hour’s time. That would give Mom time to rest also.”

Komal’s jaw dropped as she dazedly looked from her mother to her daughter and back again in the bizarre tennis match of words.

“Very good idea, Indu. She really needs peace and quiet to get better. I also need to perform pujas for the well-being of my daughter and new son-in-law. Do you think I need to change?”

“Nani, if you looked any better, all the temple priests will be after you!”

Amma actually giggled. “*Badmaash!* Go and get your car keys.”

“They’re right here. Come on, Dadi, let’s go. Bye, Mom.”

“Don’t worry about cooking, Komal. We have plenty of leftovers. Bye!”

“Bye!”

Both breezed out, closing the door with a click. Komal stood, still stupefied, trying to assimilate all that had transpired. She had anticipated a knockdown, drag-out, epic mother of a battle; instead, it had been an anticlimax. Never mind, she thought, moving to the phone to call Rahul. Life would never get boring with these two. There would always be fireworks when three generations of women tried to get along under one roof, as family ties bound ... and occasionally even tried to choke them!