



Family Matters
and
Other Complications

Assorted Stories and Poems Crossing Many Borders

Latika Mangrulkar

**Family Matters and Other
Complications:**

*Assorted Stories and Poems
Crossing Many Borders*

By
Latika Mangrulkar



Eloquent Books

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Eloquent Books
An imprint of Strategic Book Group
P.O. Box 333
Durham CT 06422
www.StrategicBookGroup.com

ISBN: 978-1-61204-938-0

Printed in the United States of America

*Edited, with an Introduction
by Shivaji Sengupta*

For

*My father, Madhav Tatwawadi, as we
celebrate his centenary this year*

And

*My mother, Malati Tatwawadi,
Together they made family matter*

*“If you cannot get rid of a family skeleton,
you may as well as make it dance”*

Author Unknown

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Introduction

Reflections of trans-nationalism in the writing of Latika Mangrulkar: **Shivaji Sengupta**

Latika Mangrulkar is a writer, social worker, humanist, and an activist. The four functions are obviously related: a social worker is a humanist, very often an activist, and sometimes she is a writer. In Latika's case, however, it is the writer that describes her the most. In the time I have known Latika Mangrulkar I have realized that writing is the conduit through which she has realized herself. She lives, she works, she acts, but it is through her writing that she has become most aware of herself, others, and the world.

An interesting question would be how does writing help create this awareness? Is writing simply a process of recording words that one hears, sees, and thinks, or is it an inscriptional presence with which one makes a difference to the world? Since writing is both an outward and an inward process, a symbiosis between acting and writing, in Latika's case it is by being both a social worker and a writer—she makes herself known not only to the outside, but also to herself, through a process of self-reflection and ever-increasing awareness.

Her role as a social worker has created an impact in the communities she has worked with. It has also induced in her the sort of self reflection that can only come with highly meaningful contact with others around critical issues of life and death. This, in turn, has stimulated her to write, thus increasing in her both self awareness and awareness of the world.

However, in order to appreciate the symbiosis between social work and writing, we also need to understand another important concept, the concept of the field.

To a social worker, field represents the space where life—and work—happens. It determines the process and dynamics

of interaction. To a writer, the field is the blank page with distinct physical parameters (a writer cannot ignore this and write beyond the page!) Perceptually, this blank space controls and limits the writer's response to the world. It is at once space in which life is described—a *tabula rasa* of inscriptions—and a symbolic representative of the field in which life happens.

Finally, in terms of the self, there is the Hindu concept of the body as the field—*kshetra*. Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* says:

The field denotes

{the body}...knowledge

is knowledge of the field and its knower.

The writer, inspired by Krishna, knows her own body—the *kshetra*—the field in which everything external converges, and then, expresses itself. Since the field is also life, in the sphere of human activity there is a symbiosis between the three fields: the self, the external world, and writing.

For many years, Latika Mangrulkar has been a social worker as well as writing short stories and poetry, capturing the varied nuances of life. The stories in this anthology *Family Matters* are mostly about Indians in America, fellow Indian Americans whose experience emanates out of a specific aspect of Indian culture, clashing with, and being mutated by American mainstream culture. In many cases the clash is between the first and second generation of immigrants, i.e., the offspring born and brought up here. In others, it is the women who have been affected by their experiences here made them consciously opt for the change, much to the chagrin of their husbands, relatives, and friends.

Thus, one can discern an immigrant paradigm of desire, control, displacement, and integration in these stories. Desire is pervasive but rarely forms a plot-expedient. It does not always stand out as an element in the plot. Desire in many

of these stories is an ambiance, an ethos, the root energy that makes things happen: Sheila loses her *mangal sutra*, a necklace Hindu married women from Central India wear in the same way Christians and others wear the wedding ring and she is determined to track it down; an extremely successful professional woman's relationship with her husband is in an alarming state of violence and deterioration, hurtling toward a divorce, primarily because of his insecurity resulting from his wife's success; a housewife realizes her extraordinary talents as a poet, much to her husband's irritation and dismissive ignorance of poetry, so that she is compelled to leave her marriage and into the arms of another—Pakistani!—poet, stunning the husband and all their friends. In all of these stories desire is the prime energy that moves the plot to its subsequent events.

In other stories, it is control, a sort of counter-desire that kicks in as soon as desire is sensed in an effort to bring the individual to do as society and social institutions bid: a teenage son commits suicide, unable to cope with the pressure his parents put on him about his future career. He wanted to be an artist, but his parents want him to be a doctor. In another story, a daughter and her mother fall out for the rest of their lives because the daughter decides to marry an African American, a fellow law student.

Displacement in these stories, like desire, is also all pervasive, an original sin that becomes a fundamental cause for one to leave one's homeland, settling in a foreign, usually a First World, country. Appropriately, the first story opens showing cultural displacement, a vivid description of how the immigration officials deal with the *mangalsutra* maiden referred to earlier.¹

¹It would be interesting to compare this immigration scene with the one in which Jing Mei's mother undergoes with the immigration officers in San Francisco in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*.

Finally, there is integration, the ultimate stage in the immigrant paradigm in which she becomes an integral part of the adopted land and its culture. This happens through different phases of training and adaptation usually through graduate, professional studies, finding jobs, getting married (a sort of physical integration!), settling down by acquiring property, having and rearing children. All these are evident in the stories of this anthology.

As we read the stories about Indian immigrants, however, we become gradually aware that, despite the solidly immigrant settings, they are also quite universal in their appeals. Desire, control, displacement, and integration are not just Indian American but human phenomena. These stories can be read by anyone and be appreciated because of their fundamentally human appeal.

They are universal, not just in the ethnic sense, but also in terms of gender. Although Latika Mangrulkar is a woman, and has a deep commitment to women's issues, often the stories delve into men's psyche too. Several stories readily come to mind. One involves a man who is driven to violence toward his wife when, in a fit of blind anger over something absolutely trivial, he threatens to stab her with a kitchen knife. In another, a man, whose wife has left him, sits alone during the holiday season, lonely, miserable and depressed, his body curled up in a lounging chair like a fetus, sleeping, wishing it would all end when he is pleasantly surprised by someone's sudden presence. An American woman, married to an intellectually aggressive man, narrates a story in which her husband makes a flippant comment about another man's wife at a party and all hell breaks loose. A father rues the suicide of his son because he had insisted upon the study of medicine instead of letting him study music which is what he wished for. There is a story of a father caught between an all-out cold war between his wife and his daughter who has married an African American lawyer.

What Latika tries to show through these stories and character studies is that Indian American men are just as vulner-

able to the cultural differences as the women are, and are perhaps in an even more difficult situation because of their typically male expectations.

The universality of these stories is not only the result of the themes of desire, control, displacement, and integration that are present worldwide but is also achieved through the positioning of the subject matter, or the subject position.

Subject matter is what a story is about. The *Mangal Sutra Maiden* is about a woman's determination to find the replacement of her lost marriage necklace, despite the callousness of the friend who was entrusted with the responsibility of bringing a new one that her mother had sent her from India. The subjects of these stories make them typically Indian American on the one hand, but the subject positions make them universal.

In contemporary writing, there are multiple layers of the self, often split into different characters. The characters become ventriloquists, each representing a different voice of the author. The selves are located in different conversations, participating in jointly creating the story.

For example, some of Latika's stories tell the same story from different characters' perspectives, the mother's and the daughter's in the two stories involving the daughter marrying an African American against her mother's wishes in *The Color Matters* and *Does Color Matter*. Read together, they make us aware of an interactive positioning in which what one person says positions the other, for instance when the daughter, through a dialogue with herself, justifies her desire to marry her African American boyfriend and, at the same time, reflects her mother's opposition to it.

This concept of 'positioning' as a term describes a far more fluid and dynamic sense of the multiple 'selves' which is in fact very often the case which immigrants find themselves while attempting to integrate into a new culture. Their different 'identities' are 'called forth,' as they confront new situations that challenge their ethnicity. They are actively reconstructed in conversations between people or in other

discursive contexts. By contrast, in more socially stable contexts, such as life back in the homeland, each person's role—the father's, the mother's—is more fixed, static, structurally formalized, and ritualistic, thus leaving little room for capturing the more subtle and complex aspects of interaction that immigrants face in their adopted land. In Latika's stories one of the most interesting phenomena is the way these various perspectives of the same incident create the subject position.

A subject position incorporates both a location for persons within a field of activity, and certain fundamental rights for those persons in that field. In other words, a subject position not only defines the subject (person), but emphasizes the rights of that person. In the story, *Living Hope*, for example, the writer slowly develops the subject position of the protagonist, Asha, the middle daughter who is stuck with all the responsibility for her sick mother. The story starts with having Asha in a desperate quandary: should she fly to India to be with her bed ridden mother who may be in a serious health crisis, right at a time when her presence was needed at her work where they were in the last stages of presenting a project and so much depended on her.

Latika, the author, handles the plot, slowly and deliberately, so that readers realize that Asha is in a truly unenviable position, bearing all the responsibility for her mother's wellbeing, financial and emotional. Latika is successful in underlining Asha's predicament through the last speech of the mother where she reiterates her indebtedness, not to Asha but others who have done so much less for the mother. Once having taken up a particular position as her own, Asha inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of her own position and in terms of these particular images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice of the short story.

In most of these stories the central concern is one of acquiring a sense of self and interpreting the world from that perspective while allocating meaning to each of the multiple positions described in them. Sometimes it is through

binary oppositions such as male/female, father/daughter, but at other times it is through the aligning of the genders as in *Color Matters*, where Mita's father and mother-in-law join together to console and support her mother in her time of absolute distress.

Finally, we come to Latika Mangrulkar's use of the language. Human language is a system of signs emitted by people, spontaneously in speech. In writing, it is a continuous and deliberate juxtaposition of signifiers and signified, "signifier" denoting the word, and "signified," the concept behind the word. Together, these two form a binary, but they also tend to veer away from each other during human speech; but dictionaries stipulate that the bond between these two stay stable, thus dependable in making meaning.

However, in creative writing this binary between the signifier and signified is constantly in a state of tension. Latika uses the English language with direct use of metaphors and other figures of speech, prying open that bond; but in her writing she also tries to return to the stability of the bond. She does this with frequent use of Indian words.

Writers coming from diverse cultures, political ideologies, and attitude towards authority (both institutional and governmental) like Latika tend to use creative language in a direct, confident way, giving little impression to their readers that what they are saying can be interpreted in many different ways. They have a story to tell, and they tell it. This can be regarded as direct language narrative, where, not only the gap between the binary minimized, but also the gap between the event and the ambience of the story.

Latika's technique of direct language narrative is to tell a story with very clear intentions and clear focus. Thus, the language is direct, taking its authority from stable social bonds. These things are the way these things are, her narrative seems to declare, because the words she uses to describe them are stable in meaning themselves. Her language reminds one of Jhumpa Lahiri, C.P. Snow, and Barack Obama, to mention only three. What is common among these three writers is their unshakable confidence in the English lan-

guage they use, and that confidence—and this is a very critical point!—that confidence is drawn from the quiet certainty about the stability of the social systems she is involved in. In other words, as Swift used to say, “proper words in proper places.”

Not all writers do that. In Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, for instance, a stream-of-consciousness novel about a slave girl who was given away to a priest by her mother who had two other babies and couldn’t take care of all of them the narrative comes from deep within the characters and seems completely out of touch with the real world. The reader is never quite sure what the words mean! Thus, some authors use language, not simply as a narrative technique to tell a story, but, at the same time, to create in the reader questions about the very authority of language.

As seen in a number of the poems in this anthology, Latika’s use of the language is very similar to what Morrison does with language. Structurally and linguistically, these poems might seem to contradict some of the things I have written about Latika’s direct narrative language, though the poems reinforce my view on how the author manipulates the subject position.

Traditionally, poetry does not mean; but *is*. It asserts its presence by its different rhythm from prose, through its rhyme scheme, especially Latika’s poetry, announces specific emotions which are themselves representatives of different immigrant and gender-related themes. For instance, in *Persona Non Grata*, Latika describes the typical Indian woman, forever serving, self-effaced, at once a non-entity, but also ever-present. She writes:

Mother of all mankind
 The eternal voice
 A voice no longer heard
 For we have declared her
A Persona Non Grata
 A woman out of bounds

A woman breaking the frame
 A woman beyond expect
 So we declare her
 A *persona non grata*

The staccato lines have a subliminal onomatopoeic effect, making each sentence in the verse taut and cryptic. Latika creates a sense of how a woman is taken for granted. There are the opposites: “The eternal voice/A voice no longer heard . . .,” followed by a terse declaration: she is a *persona non grata*. There is definitely direct narration here, the same confidence that her prose words denote, without a shadow of doubt. However, the rhythm is scary: a drum beating, announcing something ominous.

In sharp contrast is *Flying Solo*. Given the condition described in the above poem, what can a woman do?

Against the wind
 Against the tide
 Beyond tradition
 Trying to bind

Notice the nursery rhyme like rhythm of these lines. In almost Anne Sexton fashion—she rewrote popular nursery rhymes giving them a cynical, contemporary pro-women twist—Latika’s *Flying Solo* throws caution to the wind, literally and metaphorically. She writes:

“You can’t, they say”
 “You shouldn’t” some proclaim
 “I will,” I say
 “I should,” I proclaim
 Fears may overtake
 Worries beset
 Yet I ride
 All alone, on one side
 Just a bit astride

In other words: flying solo, she declares an independence that both reflects her own internal personality, but one that has also been molded as a result of her forty years in the United States.

I am privileged and honored to be asked to write this introduction to Latika Mangrulkar's first published anthology of short stories and poems. Not only she is my friend, but she and I have been in this country for almost the same number of years; have similar middle class backgrounds in India; and share some of the very same experiences narrated by her in these stories.

Last, but hardly the least, she and I have similar social concerns that face our adopted country. I know Latika is involved in a host of other writing projects involving what I call immigrant, but she calls transnational issues (probably a more apt term considering the dramatic increase in the change of locations for immigrants, especially the phenomenon of going back and forth from the adopted to the homeland) and this book is the first step toward Latika Mangrulkar's *ouvrés*—her final body of texts about the Indian diaspora in the United States.

1

The Mangalsutra Maiden

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, actually not really that long ago, a young maiden from far away land of India traveled westwards to the vast continent of America. This maiden was young and naïve, a tall, teak sapling, certainly not a conventional beauty by any means. Her eyes spoke of centuries of myths and legends, her walk was that of a confident college girl.

Her face tinkled with laughter of joyful abandon. A strange combination of tradition and modernity this maiden was, so few knew what to make of her. A mysterious damsel, too independent for Indian gallants she met, too exotic for the western rovers that would cross her path.

An adventurous young spirit called Sheila; she was strong like a rock, 'a shila'. A shy maiden, our young Sheila was, as she set foot on that impersonal New York airport, one late August afternoon.

Draped in the traditional sari, she was carrying a large brown envelope, a silent visa to this land of opportunity, the cache of good fortune, this wondrous world of American academia. It was the Scarlet Letter of the twentieth century. The X-ray pictures inside that folder, a vivid reminder that the germs from the third world would not be allowed into the pristine New World.

Remember this was long, long ago, a time before we had yet to hear of SARS or the bird flu. That is how far back in time this tale happened.

There she was this young maiden from the orient, a dark chocolate face in a hall full of ruddy, white men. She made her way gracefully, looking exotic in her deep green sari. She stepped lightly, swinging her long black braid across her narrow hips unknowingly, becoming more and more nervous as she moved through the winding line.

Inch by inch, person by person, the queue moved and she with it. A gruff, round-faced man hollered across the gleaming Formica barrier, “Miss, turn around!”

A child of an army veteran, a daughter of an autocratic father, this twenty-something Sheila, turned around. Not questioning, even for a second. She waited, holding her breath, for what felt like eternity but in real time, only a few nanoseconds.

“Now you can turn around again,” another command boomed in her ears.

Half a dozen white men, immigration officers all, their eyes ready to pop, were glaring at her. Suddenly it dawned on her. Her thick, black braid, flowing to her knees, a shining wild cobra curling ever so slightly was melting into her dark green pallu. The likes of this they had never beholden before.

In a land of blondes and brunettes, short-cropped hair and shoulder-length tresses, Sheila’s flowing mane had created a flutter. It was this hair that was to enthrall another one, a fellow student, who like her was a mixture of the old and new.

Befitting the Bollywood films, the hero of our tale, Sanjay, wooed Sheila with songs and ballads. Before she realized what was happening, he had asked her to be his bride.

Sanjay was not really his name just the one he had chosen, short and sweet. His real name was a long complicated south Indian one, so hard to say, even for our north Indian maiden, Sheila, who tried to be highly cultured and highbrow, you see.

Like the name, their romance too was short and sweet, though the marriage long and bitter. After all, it was a hurried wedding without a proper Hindu Brahmin to witness it. For none could be found in those old days to conduct the sacred rites in this Wild West.

It suited Sanjay and Sheila fine. Such unconventional, untraditional were the couple of our tale. The justice of peace officiated. He asked the groom to place the wedding band on

the bride's finger. Much to his surprise, Sanjay pulled out a black-beaded, gold necklace.

It was a *mangalsutra*, a symbol of eternal bond of holy matrimony.

A sacred tie, this was meant to be, not only for this life but also for seven births to come; the dream of a true Hindu maiden. One and only concession to tradition Sheila, the decier of antiquated customs and binds, had allowed to be made.

This magical *mangalsutra* had been tucked away, at the very bottom of Sheila's suitcase. A thoughtful gesture from her mother, Sumitra, in case this wayward daughter of hers decided to marry in that far away land of America. Along with the necklace, this loving mother had packed a sari, a brilliant magenta Banaras silk. Just another little reminder of the ancient heritage this wild child was moving away from.

Disdainful of all rituals she may be, but Sheila did not want to miss a chance to drape one of these lovely garments. Her lissome body could not resist the sensuousness of the satiny silk; a genuine temptress our maiden could be.

It was only this finery. No ritual no ceremony, just tying of a *mangalsutra* wearing a brilliant magenta silk sari. What a sight to behold when the judge bellowed his command, "Now you may kiss the bride."

A look of total terror overcame the young couple. They glanced at each other absolutely dismayed. However unconventional or untraditional they pretended to be, to kiss in public was so shameless, you see.

In the new world, who would ever know? So they grabbed each other clumsily, locked lips hastily. Such was the beginning of marital bliss for Sheila and Sanjay, telling sign of the trials to be.

They began building their nest with the help of family and friends. Not too long after, a blue envelope arrived from across the seas. Sanjay's parents were coming. Suddenly, a chord of fear struck in Sheila's heart.

How was she going to please these older folk? She had heard through the grapevine that they were not happy to have their only son find a bride all on his own.

Not only that, their beloved son had dared to choose a woman not from their caste, a girl from the North, where no one understood what tradition really meant, let alone how to be a true Hindu, too. Being modern people with proper manners, these educated and English-speaking South Indian elders had said nothing. Now they were coming to see for themselves.

Sheila knew not how to escape. So she hurried and scurried to put the house in order. Cleaned and dusted and made sure everything was neat and tidy. She learned traditional cooking and made fresh masala and curry or two.

One day as she fretted and pattered with this or that, the latch on her *mangalsutra* came loose and before she knew, it was gone. The gold latch had become undone and the finely woven chain of black beads and gold had slipped off her neck.

She looked here and there and everywhere but the gold necklace was not to be found. What was she going to do? Half dead with exhaustion after searching and worrying, she was totally worn out. Sanjay came home. Her forlorn face, made him ask, “What, my darling, is the matter? Why are you so sad?”

Sheila could control her tears no more. They flowed and flowed. The dam had burst. Sanjay took her in his arms and asked again, ever so gently, “What, my dear is the matter?”

Little by little, she told him.

“Not to worry,” said our hero, “we will find an answer. Amma and Appa will not be here till summer—we will find a way.”

So sure of himself did Sanjay sound, in all his bluster and boldness, Sheila almost wanted to believe him. She wrote to her mother, as she was accustomed to, the very next day. All the details of her tale poured forth. Her tale of woe was

generously interspersed with the wet marks of the tears she tried so hard to hold back.

So it was on a day, when this letter was fresh in Sumitra's mind, that Sameer, our shining knight, wearing his western style blue jeans and red-checked shirt, showed up at the doorstep. Thinking of her far away daughter's great plight, Sumitra took off her own *mangalsutra*, a loving sign that spoke of the decades of her ties with Sheila's Baba.

She put it in Sameer's hands. The son of an old family friend, Sumitra trusted Sameer like her own. He too assured her again and again. He would get the precious necklace to her daughter as soon as his feet touched the American shores.

Sameer came back, at least Sheila supposed so, but she did not hear from him. She waited and waited. Finally she called but no one would pick up the phone. She dialed morning and evening, late at night, and wee hours of dawn but there was no one to pick up the phone. Those were the days of no answering machines or voice mail, pagers or cell phones were unknown, too. Sheila dialed again and again till she was almost blue.

It was getting nearer and nearer to the day Amma and Appa would arrive. How could she face them with a naked neck, no visible sign of marriage vows adorning on her body. She was desperate. Sheila again tried to call, morning, noon, and night.

Finally someone picked up the phone, "Hello," he said.

"Hello, is this Sameer, thank god you are there!"

"Who is this? Sheila?"

"Who else would it be? Where have you been? Where is the *mangalsutra* Ma sent?"

"What do you mean? Where is the *mangalsutra*? Didn't you get it? My friend Raj, from New York, was to have brought it to you long time ago!"

"What do you mean, you sent it? It has not reached me yet; is it coming by pony express?"

“Wait a minute, Sheila, let me call Raj. I will call you right back.”

He did, true to his word, call back in fifteen minutes “I am sorry, Sheila, but Raj just told me he lost the necklace. I am so sorry. I thought you had gotten it I was wondering why you hadn’t called. Of course, even if you had, you could not have reached me. I travel so much these days. I am really sorry that it did not reach you.”

Sameer had a reputation for being a bit irresponsible. At least that is what the family said. He had not been able to make up his mind what college to go to or what subject to major in. Of course, such indecisiveness is only a sign of a lackadaisical attitude, the elders maintained.

Stories of his carelessness were legend. In the end, everyone thought he was not a reliable young man. He was brilliant academically and highly insightful in solving great intellectual dilemmas, but for everyday common sense he did not get his fair share, they clucked.

Suddenly, all these stories and rumors about Sameer made total sense. Sheila’s worry about her in-laws skewed her vision. She laid into Sameer in a way as no one before or since had done. Our Sheila had truly gone mad.

Such an attack naturally shocked Sameer. Even his highly demanding father had been gentler in comparison. His mother too, for her Sameer was the brightest star; there was nothing wrong this golden son of hers could do. Sheila spewed out her rage, becoming shriller by the minute, calling him every name her fancy could conjure.

How could he lose something as precious as a *mangalsutra*? No, he must have sold it. After all, it was twenty-four-carat gold and for a poor student on a paltry fellowship this could be a lot of money. She went on and on. That last accusation was the final straw.

Sameer hung up. Generations of ties were instantly severed. He vowed never to have anything to do with her or anybody connected with her.

How did it happen, Sameer asked himself? The crime did not deserve such severe punishment. Once more he swore he would have nothing to do with Sheila and her kin. Among his friends, on that elite Ivy League campus, stories about the *mangalsutra* maiden and her viciousness became the butt of jokes.

For Sheila it was a time of great despair. Sanjay tried to console her, but his words fell on deaf ears. She dreaded the day her in-laws would arrive.

Sheila was truly distraught. A traditional reaction for this untraditional maiden, she had so wanted to please her husband just like the ancient *Devi*. She thought she had failed miserably, horribly.

Months passed. The in-laws came. No one noticed the missing *mangalsutra* or at least said anything, because they were such polite and proper people. They tried to understand their new daughter-in-law. They made peace with their son's choice, a bond their son could not honor.

The romance waned. Now Sheila could not do enough or anything right. The more she tried the worse it got. After decades of constant conflict, Sheila, "the rock" had enough.

Sanjay was surprised at the new limits she dared set. He balked. All hell broke loose. Waters turned turbulent, sweeping each of them in different direction. Two lost beings swimming all on their own one more time.

Finally she had found her core—her sheel—the hidden strength that was being gnawed at bit by bit. With time she blossomed again, like the yucca tree—a little late, yet with all its glory.

She went back to school and refreshed her skills. Part of the new workforce, taking on a new role, Sheila once again came into her own.

The more challenges she faced, the faster she worked, making a name for herself carving out a place that was all her own.

Many years passed.

One day, as Sheila rushed from one assignment to another, she missed her flight. Stranded in a crowded airport one more time, she opened her computer. Sheila tried and tried but it would not boot. Frustrated, she had mumbled under her breath, but loud enough to be heard, “Damn you, even you won’t work today!”

“Who are you talking to?” said a voice. “Not me, I hope!”

She turned to her side and looked into the deepest brown eyes she had ever seen. They belonged to a graying man, near sixty, looking quite sprightly and dashing. A smile escaped her lips. “Sorry, not you. It’s this damn machine.”

“Oh! You talk to machines, too? So do I, but do they answer back for you?” he asked with mischief in his coffee-colored eyes.

“No, I don’t!” she said in an exasperated tone. “I just missed my flight and if I don’t get this done and send it, I will miss another deadline and that would be terrible.”

“Here! Let me try. I know a little about these damn machines.”

Grateful for the offer, Sheila passed the laptop to him. A total stranger, yet somehow he looked familiar. He reminded her of someone. He felt he, too, had seen this woman before. Where, he could not figure out.

A few minutes later, the stranger had the program running. Sheila heaved a sigh of relief. “Thank you so much—I couldn’t really thank you enough. I don’t even know your name?” she looked questioningly.

“I am Sameer”

“Sameer?”

“Sameer Srivastava, and you?”

“Sheila, Sheila Dravid.”

Then it suddenly dawned on her. His expression lightened, but he did not know why.

“Oh! My God! Sameer, it’s you!”

He looked baffled “Don’t you know me? I am Sheila from Karol Bagh, your neighbor in Delhi. Oh my God! Remember the *mangalsutra* Ma had sent?”

For a brief moment, he bristled and almost got up to leave. She touched his arm gently and pulled him back. “I am so sorry about all that happened. The way I spoke to you. I wish I knew how to ask for your understanding. Could you forgive me, please?”

So she told him the whole story about the messy marriage, the old fashioned in-laws, the awful epic tale of suffering and anger. There had been so much pain that she could no longer bear it. He had his own tale of sorrow and loss. He had never really settled down, and never found a woman he wanted to be with. “Fancy meeting you like this,” he said. “I better get going or I will miss my flight, too.”

Within a flash he was gone. The knight had reappeared. Sheila wanted to hold him back, make him understand, but he was gone.

Lost in the fast moving crowd, his long legs ended at the gate. She ran after him, but the steel doors had swallowed him.

Sheila still searches for him every time she walks across an airport, looking for the helpful stranger who was no stranger after all!

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