

Different Shades of Being - Part 3

For Halima Abdi

By TheSpiralledEye

Soraya sighed happily and took a deep breath and soaking up the scent of turmeric and chilli powder as it curled in her nose. The meal in front of her was a favourite, karaikudi chicken, with extra spice. Anil placed down the plate of homemade naan and sat across from her, beaming ear to ear.

“They say spicy food can bring on labour.” He explained and Soraya laughed.

“If that was the case don’t you think I’d have done it by now?”

She rubbed her palm over her bulging belly, three days overdue so far and the anticipation was killing her. She had been stubborn when it came to making sure the baby’s gender was a surprise but now her date had come and passed she was eager to meet the little one. Would they be a boy or girl? Would they have her eyes or their fathers nose? She couldn’t wait to find out.

Anil took a mouthful of his own cooking and immediately started to sweat making Soraya giggle.

“Trust me to find the only Indian man in the world who can’t handle his spice.”

“You insist on double the amount of chillies the recipe calls for.” He moaned, “And I am at your mercy, so I sweat.”

“You poor martyr.” She sighed teasingly, taking her own first bite and moaning with happiness. “Perfect.”

Anil laughed, he had such a handsome laugh. It made her heart beat a little faster no matter what they were doing. She reached over to grab his hand only for the scene to melt away right before her eyes and-

The bed was empty.

She blinked, her alarm was going off as soft sunlight filtered through the windows. Another dream. She sat up in bed and stretched, trying to shake off the odd melancholy that settled over her at the realisation that it had all been nothing but a fantasy. Or perhaps a memory. It was hard to tell. Little bits of her past had been coming back to her lately, fake memories that she logically knew were nothing but ones and zeros programmed into the world she had made as Kayden and yet, they felt so real. She remembered the husband she had so callously decided to kill off to avoid having to cheat.

So much for that. She hadn't even had sex once in the weeks since arriving in this reality. She had a sneaking suspicion Saanvi was in the same boat and yet...they just kept going. It was surprisingly easy to fall into the rhythm of this life despite how different it was. There was a strange, simple satisfaction in going to work each day, in speaking with Manuel and her other faculty friends, slowly helping her students to master their texts in time for midterms. There was a sort of personal gratification that had never been present in her work in the other world.

She showered and dressed to find Saanvi about to head out the door. Her jeans were too tight and the long sleeved shirt she was wearing was conservative but did nothing to hide the large bust beneath.

“Where are you going?”

“To college?” Saanvi said with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m heading there in fifteen minutes after breakfast, why don’t you drive with me. It’s getting cooler now.”

“No, I’d rather walk.” Saanvi replied curtly, “I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Saanvi-”

“Bye!”

The door was closed before she could get another word in and Soraya hissed through her teeth. That had been happening more and more lately. Even when Saanvi did let her drive she insisted on getting out a block from the school to walk the rest of the way. It was childish really, she wasn't some high schooler anymore. Was being driven to work by your mother that embarrassing? She seemed to think so.

She helped herself to a simple breakfast, crunching down on the cereal still half remembering the spice of the chicken curry from her dream. The recipe had to be around here somewhere, perhaps she could make it for dinner tonight. She was quite the cook now after all.

She could pick up the ingredients with Manuel after work; he lived almost perfectly halfway between her house and the campus so she often gave him a lift. Especially since Saanvi had stopped wanting to ride with her. Well, it was a few streets out of her way if she was honest but she didn't mind. It didn't seem like much of a bother when it was Manuel.

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Saanvi smoothed over her turtleneck one last time. It was a rich dark pink colour that brought out her eyes and complimented her skin. Most importantly, it hid her cleavage. She was getting sick of all the guys staring in class, it seemed like no matter where she sat in the lecture hall somebody had a good view and made a habit of looking. It was never either of the people she wanted to though.

Maya and Jack always treated her with respect, never perved on her; it was part of why she liked them. At the same time though, she was beginning to fear they didn't find her attractive at all and that idea was just unacceptable. Saanvi knew it was wrong to have a crush on two people at once but she just couldn't help it.

Maya and Jack couldn't be more different physically and yet they were both so damn hot. Maya with her long legs and dark lashes; and Jack with his broad shoulders and strong arms. She just wanted them both to wrap her between them and...well. Best not dwell on that fantasy in public.

She stepped into the hall and spotted the two of them sitting together, heads bowed and whispering and her heart flared with jealousy. What if they started dating? She wasn't sure her heart could take it; it was bad enough when your crush started dating somebody else but both crushes dating each other? Talk about heartbreak.

A boy wolf whistled as she walked past and Saanvi cursed the tightness of her jeans. It was like she couldn't win. She loved the tight fabric against her curves, making her cheeks bouncy and prominent. Yet she hated how people acted when they saw it. And it wasn't as if she could stop her hips from swaying sensually, that was just how they worked.

She sat down next to Maya and gave her a smile, secretly hoping she would lean over and inform her of what she and Jack had been talking about but she didn't. She did pass her a lemon drop though.

“Today is the history of journalism prior to photography.” She said, “This’ll liven things up a little at least.”

“Something sweet always does.” Jack nodded.

“Aw, you two flatter me.” Saanvi teased, knowing full well they were referring to the lemon drop but they all giggled anyway.

Saanvi tried to concentrate on the lecture at hand but it was difficult with the idiot Kurt not to subtly sliding his eyes up to her ass. She could see him in the reflection of her laptop screen. Saanvi tried to shuffle her bag behind her to block his view but it was impossible.

When class finally ended he gave her a wink as he walked by and Saanvi felt something in her snap as she stomped up to the professor’s desk as the rest of the class filed out.

“The boys in this class are pigs.” She complained to Professor Reynolds, “I can’t have a single day without them wolf whistling or making some comment about my body. Can’t you do something?”

Professor Reynolds sighed.

“My dear, I hate to say it this way but don’t you think you could do something about it yourself?” He said condescending.

“What do you mean?”

“Well the way you dress and act doesn’t help, it encourages them. The way you walk in such a suggestive manner when heading to your seat, right near their faces. I can’t really blame them for thinking you want that sort of attention.”

Saanvi’s face burned with humiliation and anger.

“I am just walking!” She cried, “I can’t help it that I happen to be sexy!”

Professor Reynolds face darkened.

“That is no way to speak to your professor, young lady.”

Saanvi felt her face flush further and without another word she turned on her heels and left, this was clearly a dead end. She made a special note to avoid any classes taught by this sexist old coot in the future.

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“That’s cardamon, I need turmeric.”

Manuel looked down at the little canister of spice in his hand and blushed.

“I just picked the most colourful one.”

They were standing in the grocery with arms full of the ingredients for the karaikudi chicken dish Soraya had been thinking about all day. When she had mentioned stopping by the shops Manuel had insisted on coming, gentleman that he was. She put up a show of telling him not to worry but secretly she was pleased. Manuel was lovely; handsome, funny, she’d decided he would be the target of her first foray into sex as a woman.

She was taking things slow though; the boyfriend experience, that’s what she was after. It wasn’t what she’d had in mind when she first got here but the more she rationalised it, the more she was coming to enjoy their small courtship. They hadn’t even kissed yet but she was sure Manuel was interested, he had to be. Why else would he insist on helping her whenever he could?

“Turmeric is...here!” Soraya smiled, reaching past him and blushing slightly as their bodies brushed. She held up the bright yellow powder in the glass shaker and Manuel sighed in defeat.

“Alright, I am caught. I cannot hold this secret back any longer.” He said dramatically, “I...I can’t cook!”

Soraya gasped in mock horror.

“It’s true, I live on instant noodles, my poor abuela, she weeps for me. Every time she tried to teach me we ended up with bread that may as well have been made of stone.”

“It’s alright.” Soraya said in mock seriousness, “I will help you through this.”

The two of them descended into laughter; enjoying their fake little melodrama. Soraya felt her heart speed up in a way that seemed familiar, like the dream she'd been having. The moment was ruined by a strange sense of guilt crashing over her though. There was nothing wrong with hanging out with Manuel, hell, he was hot, she liked him. That was the whole point of this exercise. So why did the idea of developing feelings for him make her feel so...bad?

“So this dish, it’s sounding better by the moment.” Manuel smiled, his voice slightly nervous, “Do you think perhaps I could come and try it? You have loads there for just you and Saanvi.”

Soraya’s heart stuttered; her mind torn between shouting yes and her heart screaming no. Manuel eating Anil’s fish seemed wrong. It seemed somehow disrespectful, and now that she thought about it so did her feelings. Her indecision must have shown on her face because Manuel immediately backed off.

“Sorry, that was rude, inviting myself to your house for dinner.” He said quickly. “I just...yeah, it looks so tasty! Maybe I’ll make it myself some time.”

“Sorry, I’d love to have you over for dinner some day.” She replied honestly, “Tonight just isn’t a good time.”

Manuel’s disappointment brightened slightly.

“How about we go out to dinner some time, no cooking for you. Just the two of us?”

“Like...a date?”

“Yes.” He nodded confidently, though she could see the nerves in his eyes.

Soraya smiled coyly.

“I’ll think about it.”

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“How was class?”

“Fine.”

“Did you-”

“I’m going to my room.”

Soraya huffed, that was rude even by her new standards. Clearly something was bothering her daughter but she knew from experience trying to talk about it would just result in her freezing her out further. No matter, food fixed everything. One mouthful of Anil’s recipe and Saanvi would feel better.

The spices began to marinate in chicken fat and the delicious smell from her dream began to fill the kitchen. It made her mouth water and her heart ache for some reason she couldn’t quite put her finger on. She continued, chopping up the extra chillies and boiling some rice but as the dish got closer and closer to completion a lump began to form in her throat.

It was stupid! This reaction made no sense! And yet, as the smells coiled in her nostrils more memories drifted into her mind. This was the dish she and Anil ate on their first ever date. He had spent a year perfecting his own version of the recipe and then made it on their anniversary every year or whenever she asked for it. It was *his* dish; and despite having not programmed any of this Soraya was suddenly hit with the knowledge that this was the first time in over a decade she’s ever made it.

She had never cooked this dish without her late husband. Ever.

She scooped the finished product into bowls and put it down at the table. The empty chairs seemed to taunt her as Saanvi sat down, paying more mind to her phone than the plate of food. It made anger boil up inside Soraya’s chest.

“What do you think of the food?” She asked, trying to prompt some sort of recognition out of her daughter.

Saanvi took a mouthful and shrugged.

“Kinda spicy, don’t you think?”

Soraya bit the inside of her cheek before shovelling a great spoonful into her mouth. The chilli's burned, the taste was great but it wasn't right. She'd missed some step, mixed up the proportions somewhere. This didn't taste like the food from her dream, it wasn't Anil's recipe. She'd messed it up.

Her eyes began to burn in frustration and she tried to blink away the moisture. It had been so long, too long, what if she could never make Anil's recipe again? She should have written it down! Stupid!

"Mom, you okay? Is it too spicy?"

"No!" Soraya slammed the spoon down on the table, "It's not spicy enough!"

She stood up quickly in frustration, turning back to the kitchen and grabbing a handful of chillies to chop. She slammed the knife down hard on them, crushing up the seeds as she went before throwing them down on her bowl. She knew before she'd even tasted it that it wouldn't help. She'd overdone it, now there would be nothing but chilli spice overwhelming the whole dish.

"You're acting weird."

"This is your fathers dish!" Soraya cried, "Don't you know that? You didn't even notice!"

Saanvi made a strange face; an expression somewhere between irritation, hurt and confusion before she stood up and dumped her own still full plate up by the sink.

"So?"

"So?! Don't you care, this is the first time I have made it since he..."

"I don't even remember him."

"How can you say that!"

"Because it's true!"

The two of them stared at one another and then, to Soraya's horror, Saanvi began to laugh.

“Wow,” She giggled bitterly, “That...actually hurts. Like...I am actually upset right now that I don't remember my own fake father.”

Fake father.

The reality of the situation came crashing down over Soraya and she turned away, staring at her own distorted reflection in the spoon. Of course Anil wasn't real, she-*he* had just programmed it in. His name was Kayden, he had a fetish he'd wanted to live out and instead he'd somehow ended up so caught up in the world he'd forgotten it. Well, not forgotten, but pushed it so far back in his mind that it may as well have been. When did he start thinking of himself as a she? As Soraya? And why did doing the opposite now feel so...wrong?

He forced a laugh, it sounded fake even to his own ears but Saanvi-Henry, didn't say anything.

“I'm going to bed.”

“Okay.”

He was left alone with nothing but an empty kitchen and the storm of feelings swirling in his stomach.

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Henry tossed and turned in bed, making a conscious effort to think of himself as well as he. He'd gotten so caught up in this fantasy it had become a second life, right down to the memories. He didn't dare bring it up to his moth-bring it up to Kayden in case he sounded crazy but after their argument at dinner he had a sneaking suspicion he wasn't the only one remembering Saanvi and Soraya's past.

He curled up in a ball feeling frustrated and alone. It wasn't his fault he couldn't remember his father in this life; Kayden had made it that he was long gone. Dead for over a decade and...Henry hated him for it. It felt almost like his mother had murdered his father; illogical as that sounded.

Not to mention his confusion when it came to Jack and Maya. He had come here for some hot, interracial lesbian sex so Maya was the obvious choice. Not to mention she was funny and smart but he couldn't deny that Jack was those things as well. The obvious answer for the hot coed threesome of his dreams but somehow the whole idea didn't seem

so fetishy anymore it just seemed to be what he wanted. Because he was falling in love with both of them.

Henry groaned, pushing his palms into his eyes. How did everything get so complicated; this was supposed to be simple! A buzz from his side table made him blink away the stars in his vision to see his phone lit up.

Jack: Party at mine this Saturday! Be there or be square!

Henry snorted, smiling to himself as he tapped out a reply.

Saanvi: What do you have against squares, huh? They are a top tier shape and you know it.

Jack: Triangle supremacy all the way, baby!

Henry felt his cheeks heat as he reread the last word over and over again. It was obvious tongue in cheek, Jack probably would have sent the exact same message to anybody; platonic, nothing to read into. And yet Henry held the phone to his chest, letting it rest against his breasts and let himself pretend.

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To say things were tense in their home was an understatement. Both still being men deep down Kayden and Henry, still flipping back and forth between their personalities, decided it would be best to ignore their little spat. Things were so awkward though that just resulted in them barely talking, living like ghosts wafting past one another barely interacting.

Soraya would come home to find her carefully planned dinner in the fridge the next morning, Saanvi waving it off saying she grabbed McDonalds on the way home. Why she would choose to eat fast food over her lovingly made dishes was beyond Soraya and she found herself slowly filling with a new kind of frustration. Saanvi seemed to be rejecting everything Indian about them. She never wore any Indian style clothes, not even the western style things Soraya had bought her with an Indian flair. She didn't eat Indian food and she was yet to ever try a bindi.

At first she thought she was just irritated that Henry wasn't taking advantage of the things she had so painstakingly set up but then she realised it was more than that. In fact, she hated it when Saanvi wore sexy clothing; it felt wrong to see her daughter like that.

"I made you a lunch box!" Soraya tried one morning before Saanvi could dash out the door, "Dhall and naan!"

Saanvi scrunched up her nose.

“No thanks, it’ll stink up the whole area.”

Door slammed.

Soraya felt her lip wobble but held back, carefully placing the lunchbox into her own bag for the day.

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“Soraya?”

She looked up from picking at her naan to find Manuel looking at her with concern. They were seated in the faculty lounge for lunch as usual and Soraya suddenly realised she hadn't heard a word Manuel had been saying.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“I asked if it was racist to ask an Indian woman out for Indian food.” Manuel blushed, “I’ll be honest, I don’t know much about Indian cuisine but the meals you bring for lunch and the recipes you’ve talked about sound delicious so I guess I was wondering if we could go out for some one night. If you still want to go on a date after all. All good if you don’t I won’t-”

“Manuel?”

“Yes?”

“Breathe.”

The man gave a breathy laugh.

“Sorry, it’s been a while since I knocked a woman off her feet.”

“Not that long.” Soraya teased and Manuel blushed.

“I just...really like you.” He said seriously, “Sorry if this is coming off too strong, I just want to make it clear that this will be a *date* date. Not some excuse to have a fling.”

Soraya felt a warm smile spread over her face; Manuel really was such a gentleman. There was something so nice about a man making his intentions clear, even more wonderful that those intentions, from the outset, were romance. Not sex, not fetishising her accent, just...love. Or at least the potential for love, she really shouldn't let herself get caught up in that idea.

“No, going out for Indian food with an Indian woman isn't racist, at least I don't think so.” She answered, “Buuuuut...”

“Buuuuut?”

“Well, I don't know any Indian restaurants.” She giggled, “Why would I?”

“Oh, I don't know any either.” Manuel blinked before they both laughed. “Okay, I have an idea.”

Soraya took a bite of her lunch and actually enjoyed it as she listened.

“Let's find a random Indian place and you can tell me how authentic it is.”

“You know I don't like that word, India is such a big place, the same curry could be totally different depending on where in the country the recipe originated.”

“Well-”

“Manuel, I am teasing, that sounds like a wonderful idea.”

He beamed and Soraya felt her heart ache in a way that was brand new.

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Maya flopped down on the grass with a dramatic sigh and Saanvi giggled.

“Something is telling me you're not in a great mood.” She said with a smile.

“What gave it away?” Maya deadpanned.

“Oh nothing, I am just very good at reading people.”

Maya stuck her tongue out and the girls giggled.

“So, come on, you clearly want to vent. Get on with it.”

“It’s my ex, Charlotte.” Maya sighed, “She wants to get back together.”

Saanvi felt her brain short circuit as new information overloaded it. Who knew one sentence could hold so much power. One, Maya’s ex was a woman, two she had an ex, three that ex wanted her back; the last part made Saanvi flare with jealousy and it took a lot of self control to keep it off her face.

“Okay.” She replied carefully, “And how do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know, Charlotte was exhausting.” Maya sighed, “I still can’t figure out if we were together for so long because she was my first girlfriend and I was scared of finding another or if I genuinely loved her.”

“It must be hard...being y’know...”

“Gay?”

“Y...yeah.”

“You can say it you know, just be careful, say it three times in a mirror and you summon a gay like beetlejuice.” Maya wiggled her eyebrows and Saanvi snorted in laughter, suddenly feeling very stupid for dancing around a word.

“I don’t think I want her back.” Maya said after a while. “Too much drama.”

“Is there...anybody else you like. I always thought you and Jack were pretty close.”

“Nah, I’m gay as fuck.” Maya giggled, “Guys are, okay I guy, I can be with them but I prefer a ladies touch, y’know. I supposed if I had to be with a guy, Jack wouldn’t be a bad option.”

“Well, that’s nice to hear.” Jack announced, making both of them jump as he appeared, seemingly from nowhere behind them. “If you ever need a beard I am here.”

The two of them fell into a joking discussion of their life as beard and hidden lesbian while Saanvi watched from the sidelines. Knowing Jack was straight and Maya was gay....that didn’t really help her work out which she was. It had to be one or the other though right? Otherwise she was just being greedy. It was just a matter of figuring out which one of her crushes was well, real. Then she could ask that person out. Once she built up the courage of course.

“Anyway, since I am not in need of a beard, how about we talk about something important.” Maya clapped her hands.

“Our upcoming midterm?” Saanvi suggested.

“No! Jack’s party!”

“Oh yeah.”

“What are you wearing?”

“Oh come ooooooon.” Jack groaned, “I’m going to study, that’s how boring you’re being right now.”

Saanvi and Maya ignored him.

“I don’t know.”

“How about that crop top, the yellow one? With the gold bits hanging off it you wore during the first few weeks of term?”

Saanvi knew the one, it was a modern, Hindi ‘inspired’ shirt, the type she’d stopped wearing of late.

“I thought you looked super hot in it.” Maya added and Saanvi felt herself blush.

“Well, maybe I could wear it again...”

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Saanvi stood in front of her closet, half the clothes were on the floor, or her bed. She had tried on what felt like a thousand combinations and none of them felt right. The yellow crop top was sitting in the centre of her bedspread. She knew Maya liked it on her and that made her want to wear it but she just couldn't seem to make it work. All the matching clothing she owned was so...Indian. She just wanted to fit in tonight, all the time really; she remembered her first few weeks here and shuddered, disgusted in herself for fetishizing her own body and culture.

Her fingers glided across the vibrant fabrics of her collection of Indian outfits. She pulled out a gorgeous saree, its deep blue adorned with intricate golden embroidery. It was gorgeous, but not the sort of thing one wore to a college party and she certainly couldn't wear it with the crop top. On the other side of the closet, her eyes were drawn to a sleek black cocktail dress. The little black dress was a classic for a reason yet it felt so...ordinary, so boring compared to all the colourful, Indian options.

In the end she wound up somewhere in the middle. American style blue washed jeans, the yellow crop top and a black leather jacket. With light makeup and a yellow pendant for flare. She smiled in the mirror, feeling confident for the first time that night; she could feel it, she would get her answer at this party. Jack or Maya; which one was for her?

“Is that what you're wearing to the party?” Her mother asked, appearing in the doorway.

“What, you think it's too revealing?” Saanvi rolled her eyes.

“No, you look nice, I just think it's a bit cold out for a crop top like that.” Her mother replied, “Why not wear a sweater at least.”

“Because I want to wear this.” Saanvi replied curtly, grabbing her bag, “And I am not a child so I can wear what I want.”

“I never said you couldn't-”

“You don’t have to, mom, I can read between the lines y’know.”

“Y’know is not a word. I taught you to speak better than that, and speaking of, why can’t we speak Hindi to one another anymore, it’s like you’re deliberately trying to avoid it!”

“Ugh!” Saanvi stamped her foot, “Can you just get off my back about every little thing? I am going out, I’ll stay with Maya tonight.”

“Saanvi-”

“Save it!”

She was so overhear mothers overbearing attitude; it seemed like she could never do anything right. She was doubly glad she wasn't taking any of her courses, even if it was weird for a Journalism major to not have a minor in English. She slammed the door as she left and immediately felt bad; they had been at each other's throats for a while now and she wasn't sure why. It just seemed like everything her mother did irritated her so much she couldn't help but blow up.

Maybe there was something bubbling under the surface but she didn't want to go looking. She just wanted to sort out her love life and have a fun time; so that is exactly what she set out to do.

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Jack's place was small, it had to be for a couple of college students to afford but that wasn't stopping him from throwing an absolute rager. Saanvi stepped inside and immediately could tell the house was inhabited by only guys, it had that distinct smell of male deodorant and sweat all frat houses had. To her surprise, it brought a smile to her face. This party felt right somehow, unlike the other one. The fact that Jack was walking toward her with open arms and a wide smile had a lot to do with that.

“Saanvi!” He yelled, embracing her warmly. Saanvi took a moment just to enjoy the feeling of those strong arms around her and the heat of his chest before pulling back somewhat reluctantly. “You look fire!”

“You think so?” She blushed.

“Absolutely! Come in, grab a drink.”

A cool can made its way into her fingers and she shivered at the chill, it was some sort of premixed cocktail, the cheap kind college parties were famous for and she gulped it down eagerly. The sweet flavour of passionfruit coated her tongue so much she could barely taste the alcohol. In no time at all she had drained the can and looked around for a bin but found none.

“Where should I put this?” Saanvi asked Jack only for him to grin ear to ear.

“Nowhere, we’re playing wizard sticks.” He grabbed a roll of duct tape from the nearby shelf and offered her another drink, taping the base of the new can to the top of the old one.

“What the heck is wizard sticks?” Saanvi laughed.

“Oh man, you’ve never played? It’s simple, every time you finish a can you attach your next drink to the top of the last one, by the end of the night the two people with the longest wizard staff, or stick, still standing use them to fight. First person’s stick to break loses.” Jack explained.

“That sounds completely stupid.” Saanvi grinned, “I am in.”

“Well you’d better hurry up!” Maya’s arm suddenly slung itself around her shoulder, “I am already two cans up on you.”

Saanvi felt her face turn pink, feeling Maya’s bare skin against her own; then it gave her an idea.

“Maya! Bring it in, girl!” She hugged her friend tightly, the same way she had Jack when she first walked in.

It felt lovely, and she felt arousal build inside her in the same way it had hugging her male friend. As she pulled away she did her best to hide her frustration; how was she supposed to pick between the two when they both turned her on an equal amount? Not to mention both of them were amazing friends, both physically and romantically she was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Or perhaps it would be more apt to call it a soft place and a hard place...

“Why so serious all of a sudden?” Jack teased, “Don't tell me you're such a lightweight that two canned cocktails has you drunk already!”

“You wish.” Saanvi gave him a playful swat, “I am just getting started.”

Somewhere in the house, somebody turned the music up and Maya squealed.

“I love this song, Saanvi let's dance!”

She hardly had any say in the matter. Maya was already tugging her to the patch of floor people seemed to have designated for dancing and was shifting from side to side in time with the deep bass of the music. Saanvi didn't hesitate to join and laughter filled the air as they moved to the rhythm. Whoever had selected the playlist had chosen a mix of popular songs, and Saanvi couldn't resist the urge to sing along, her voice blending with the pulsating melody.

She drained another can and attached a third, then a fourth, chasing after Maya as they alternated between snacking in the kitchen and dancing in the lounge. Jack set up a beer pong table and his own wizard stick swiftly grew as he filled cups and played with Saanvi and Maya cheering from the sidelines.

Saanvi couldn't remember the last time she had felt so free and happy. So...herself. She remembered that awful party from a few weeks ago; why had she even gone? She didn't know anybody. It was the exact opposite experience to this; this party is what she had been waiting for, the ultimate college experience.

The night passed in a blur of sound and images until Saanvi found herself with Jack standing in the middle of the yard, each holding a staff made of beer and cocktail cans.

“Kick his ass!” Maya yelled, “Or hers, I don't pick sides!”

“Coward!” Saanvi yelled back.

“Neutrality is for the weak!” Jack stammered before laughing forward.

Like kids playing Jedi, Saanvi and Jack laughed, wacking the cans against one another until the duct tape finally gave way and they both broke apart and the small crowd that had gathered cheered.

“I win!” They both proclaimed.

“You both win!” Maya said gleefully, throwing an arm around them both and causing the three of them to topple over onto the grass in a fit of laughter.

“Oh man, I love you guys.” Saanvi sighed, hastily adding, “And friends of course. Not, yeah uh, yeah I love my friends. Buddies. Pals.”

Jack snorted.

“Pals? What are we five?”

“Don't tease her, she's flustered.” Maya elbowed him before shuffling around Saanvi so that the Indian woman was between the others. “Do you have a cruuuuush on one of us?”

“No!” Saanvi said far too quickly.

“You do!” Jack smiled, “I bet you do! Which one of us is it? I have been trying to peg you since the start of term.”

“Holy crap, keep your kinks to yourself, dude.” Maya laughed.

“No I mean, if Saanvi is gay or straight not-oh fuck I am way too drunk for this.”

Saanvi felt like she was going to explode; this was the perfect time she just had to choose whether to confess her feelings to Jack or Maya. Male or female just...why couldn't she decide?!

“I can't pick!” She wailed, pressing her palms into her eyes. “You're both too good!”

“Wha?”

“What do you mean?”

“I like you both.” Saanvi sighed, “I have been trying to figure out if I like girls or guys and...well you're both equally sexy! You're making it impossible!”

To her horror and humiliation, they both laughed. Saanvi wished the ground would swallow her up.

“Oh no, honey. Don't be upset, I'm sorry for laughing.” Maya wiped at the tears threatening to fall, “It's just that, I can't believe the pressure you've put yourself under, you know you don't have to pick just one right?”

“What do you mean?”

“You're bi.” Jack shrugged, as if it were the most simple thing in the world, “you like girls and guys and that's totally fine.”

“It is?”

“Of course!” Maya giggled, “Even I experimented with guys, remember.”

“Yeah but you decided on girls in the end.” Saanvi pointed out but Maya just shrugged.

“And you don't have to, I'm me you're you. Just be Saanvi, Saanvi.”

Just be Saanvi. It seemed so simple when somebody else said it out loud; she had been confused as to who Saanvi even was lately but here something finally clicked into place. She was Indian. She was American; and she was bi. That wasn't much but it was a start and it felt...right.

She rolled over in the grass to face Maya and fueled by the alcohol in her system, reached her neck forward and pressed their lips together. The connection was instant and electric. Maya moaned, opening her mouth slightly and deepening the kiss as she raised a hand to Saanvi's cheek. She could hear the sound of somebody moving away behind her and Saanvi pulled away to see Jack trying to quietly remove himself.

“Where are you going?” She asked with a wry smile.

“Uh, I thought you ladies might like some privacy...?”

Maya and Saanvi shared a look.

“Nah, get in here.” Maya said with confidence, “Or rather, shall we all go to your room?”

Jack looked like the cat who got the cream and Saanvi couldn't even blame him; what guy didn't dream of having a threesome with two hot girls in college? Giggling and stumbling, the three of them made their way through the party and up the stairs to the second floor where the bedrooms were. The music was muffled, but still audible as Jack opened the door to his room and they followed him inside. The bed was pristine, while the rest of the room was utter chaos.

“Were you expecting company tonight?” Saanvi teased, leaning up against his chest and pinning him against the door.

“Well...” Jack blushed, “I figured it couldn't help to be prepared.”

“Good.” Maya appeared, pressing her both against Saanvi and sandwiching her between them. “Now, enough talking you two, let's have some *fun*.”

She pressed her lips to the back of Saanvi's neck, pushing aside her dark hair to suck and lick along the curve of her throat. Saanvi gasped, throwing back her head a little so that Jack could run his hands over the flat of her stomach. He gently pushed her back enough that his hands came to rest on her ample chest and they both groaned.

“Not gonna lie Saanvi,” He said huskily, “I have been wanting to grab these since day one.”

“Perv.” Her huff of laughter turned to another moan as he slipped a hand inside her top to brush against her nipple.

“You love me.”

“Fuck yeah.”

Maya tugged at her shoulders, pulling her gently back toward the bed and down onto it. The two women explored one another's bodies, Maya gently removing piece after piece of clothing. Saanvi couldn't help the excited smile on her face when she finally got to tug down that same skirt that had caught her eye in study group all those weeks ago.

Jack joined them and Saanvi took her time undressing him as well. She wanted to savour this experience and compare and contrast every part of her two lovers' bodies. Despite the alcohol in her system she had never felt more sure of herself; or her want for them both. She pressed one hand to Jack's firm chest while the other stroked Maya's naked breast. Hard and soft, yet both so wonderful. The two of them embraced her and Saanvi could feel Jack's cock pressing against the cleft of her ass; as well as Maya's own mound against her own.

Saanvi wasn't sure what Heaven was like but it couldn't compare to this. Her breasts were crushed against Maya's; their lips together as they made out while Jack watched before they finally all gathered together in a line on the bed. She wasn't sure how they managed to organise themselves so well but somehow Saanvi ended up in the middle of the bed on all fours with Jack kneeling behind her, hands on her hips.

Maya was spread beneath her with her pupils blown as she shuffled her own hips below Saanvi's mouth. Maya gave her a look; it was hard to tell if it was a plea or an order but either way, Saanvi obeyed and lowered her mouth to Maya's pussy. She pressed her tongue to the woman's clit and was rewarded twice over; firstly with Maya's delicious moan and then a second later when Jack pushed into her.

Her walls burned and her whole body quivered as she struggled to concentrate on the task in front of her. Jack began to push in and out and Saanvi flicked her eyes up to see Maya, legs now resting on Saanvi's shoulders, watching them both. Fuck, this was so hot, not only was she being fucked but Maya was watching while Saanvi ate her pussy. This was the most passionate thing she had ever experienced. Not only that but she was having a woman and a man at the same time; she'd never felt so alive and satisfied in all her life.

Her pussy tightened as Maya's own began to shake. This whole situation was so hot, none of them were going to last long. Jack's thrusts were shallow, ensuring her inner walls were almost always fully stimulated and his tip was brushing against her G-spot.

Saanvi moaned into Maya's pussy and felt the woman shiver as the vibrations pleased her. Maya's legs wrapped around her head, rhythmically pulling her face closer and close with each thrust of Jack's cock.

Saanvi's pussy began to pulse, tightening around the cock more and more as her whole body became tense. The ecstasy was starting to fill her entire being and she thrust her own tongue deep inside Maya to keep from moaning too loudly. She lapped up the other woman's juices as they flowed freely and felt Maya's own pussy began to clench just like her own.

"Oh fuck, fuck I didn't wanna cum fi-first-! Ooooooh!" Maya threw back her head and squeezed her legs around Saanvi as she came.

Wetness squirted from her pussy but Saanvi kept going, gently scraping her teeth and tongue across Maya's sensitive folds as her brown orgasm washed over her. Jack thrust deep into her one final time with a guttural groan before finally stilling and beginning to soften inside her folds. Saanvi could feel the wetness and his seed dripping from her and she shuddered. She had been wrong before; *now*, she truly knew satisfaction.

The three of them slowly separated, collapsing onto the bed together in a naked huddle of warm bodies. Jack, ever the gentleman, took care of tidying them all up before throwing the blanket atop them. Saanvi hummed, resting up against his chest while Maya snuggled against her back.

"Not even midnight and I'm in bed." Maya tsked, "What sort of party host are you?"

"An amazing one?" Jack replied, pressing his lips to Saanvi's forehead.

"I'll say." She sighed happily, "I don't know about you two but I'd much rather stay up here in bed than go back downstairs."

They both hummed in agreement.

~

Soraya strolled down the bustling city street arm in arm with Manuel who was grinning like a kid in a candy shop.

"Wait till you see the place I found. It sure is something, when I saw their website I knew this was the place to go." He told her.

Her curiosity piqued by the vibrant neon sign that flickered in the distance. It read, "The Calcutta Elephant: Authentic Indian Cuisine."

She side eyed Manuel who's grin grew even more as he pushed open the ornate golden doors, the pair found themselves immersed in a sea of kitsch and colour. The interior of the restaurant seemed like a vivid explosion of Indian stereotypes. Walls adorned with oversized peacock feathers, painted elephants and gaudy tapestries clashed against each other in a chaotic display. Multicoloured LED lights in the shape of the Taj Mahal on one wall blinked intermittently, casting a garish glow over the entire room.

The air was heavy with the scent of incense, which masked any lingering aroma of spices that one might expect from an Indian eatery. The ceiling fan whirred above, its blades embellished with faux-gold and shimmering rhinestones, as if attempting to add a touch of glamour to the over-the-top setting.

"This place looks like a white man's idea of India threw up all over it." Soraya whispered to Manuel and he chuckled.

"I know, isn't it awful?"

"You deliberately picked a terrible Indian restaurant to bring your Indian date to?" Soraya said in disbelief and amusement.

"I thought it would be fun."

"You were right."

Soraya couldn't help but notice the waitstaff's attire. The men wore exaggerated turbans, their vibrant colours matching the walls. The women were adorned in heavily sequined saris that seemed to compete for attention with the flamboyant decor. They were obvious fakes, not the real kind but the sort you bought in costume shops that you just slipped on like a dress rather than wrapping. It was as if they were characters plucked straight from a Bollywood movie. On some level, Soraya figured she should have been offended, maybe even angry at Manuel but she couldn't bring herself to feel that way. It was clear he didn't think this was her culture at all, if anything she was having a laugh at the ridiculousness of this place with her.

Like giggling children they poured over the menu. It was an oversized tome, filled with all the usual suspects from butter chicken to masala and samosas.

"Let's get the Magical Maharaja Platter to share." She suggested, "Apparently it is 'a fine mix of authentic Indian cuisine from all over the country'."

"It sounds like it will be terrible."

"I know."

"Let's do it."

When her meal finally arrived, it was a spectacle of overindulgence. A mountain of rice adorned with golden almonds towered over a pool of neon-red curry. The plate was garnished with edible flowers, intricately carved radishes, and a tower of papadums that defied gravity. Samosas were stuck out of the mountain like little flags and buried beneath it all was the most store bought looking naan bread. There were enough carbs here to feed anybody for a week.

They tucked in and found that despite the brightness of the curry it was rather bland. The flavours were muted, overpowered by the unnecessary theatricality of the presentation. It wasn't awful though, completely edible but nowhere near the quality of Indian food she could cook herself.

"I think they threw a whole spice rack in here." She mused, nibbling on one of the samosas.

"Less is more sometimes." Manuel agreed, "It's not too bad though, if anything this makes me curious to try your cooking. If this is how bad Indian food tastes I can't wait to try some of yours."

The two of them laughed, eager to get going and sighing collectively in relief when they stepped out into the night air away from the cacophony of the 'authentic' Indian restaurant.

"So, for our second date, are we going to have bad Mexican food?" Soraya asked as they walked through the night.

"Second date? I must have done alright."

"You passed." Soraya said coolly, "But I think you could do with a visit to my office later, just to go over where you could improve."

"Oh?" Manuel laughed, "I think I can live with that."

The drive home was quiet, but not awkward. In fact, it felt almost homey, like they were a couple who had been together forever rather than having just finished a first date. There was still that strange guilt in the air, like she was betraying Anil somehow by having romantic feelings for somebody else but she did her best to shake it off. Reminding herself that this was all just a world she had created but...no, it was more than that. She was sure.

Manuel pulled up outside the house and put the car in park, he looked happy but also nervous before leaning over. Finally their lips pressed together in what she assumed was supposed to be a chaste first kiss but quickly involved open mouths and more tongue. She tilted her head and let the residual spice from the meal coat her tongue again as Manuel pressed as close as he seatbelt allowed.

A warm feeling pooled in her stomach and once again she was reminded of those young things in her class. How could she have ever fantasised about going to bed with somebody that age when Manuel was right here. Mature in every sense of the word. She didn't need to teach him how she liked to be held or touched; he seemed to already know and that was sexy in its own way.

“Saanvi is out tonight.” She whispered, “Some big party, she'll probably stay the night with her friends.”

“Are you...?”

“Inviting you inside? Yes.”

“On the first date?” Manuel smiled teasingly with a raised eyebrow and Soraya leaned over and pressed her lips to the stubble on his cheek.

“We're too old for all that rigamarole, don't you think?”

“Wow, say rigamarole again, your accent makes it amazing.”

“Hurry up and turn off the car.”

Giggling like kids, the pair of them quickly walked inside. Manuel had her up against the wall in seconds, hands now free to roam further without the confines of the car. Soraya's skin felt like it was burning beneath her clothes and her twin minds were at war with one another; for one it had been weeks in this body without touch for another it may as well have been a lifetime.

The memory of over a decade of lonely nights seemed to make every touch and kiss feel infinitely stronger and she was struck with the realisation that this was the first man to ever touch her after Anil. That guilt threatened to surge but then dissipated; her husband would have wanted her to be happy and Manuel did indeed make her happy; among other things, horny chief among them.

Her new pussy was growing hot and wet and she could feel a bulge pressing against it from Manuel's jeans. His hands reached up and cupped the back of her head as much as the wall would allow and ran his fingers through her dark hair before ducking away. Soraya barely had time to gasp before his mouth was on her neck, licking and sucking gently enough to not leave a mark but hard enough that it felt wonderful.

“Ohhhh...” She breathed, “T-that’s so nice.”

“I can do more than nice.”

They slowly made their way through the house, stopping to kiss and press against one another several times as they shed their outer clothing. Jackets were flung on the floor, buttons were undone so that by the time Soraya kicked open her bedroom door what was left was ready to fall off at the lightest touch.

She was so ready for this, a part of her wanted to rip the rest of Manuel’s clothes off right there and then and pull him down onto the bed but she didn’t. This was her first time in a few ways, she wanted to savour it. So she slowed down, breaking away from his lips for a moment to run her palms over his strong chest, enjoying the hair there and pushing the shirt off his broad shoulders. Those strong arms wrapped around her, flowing down her sides till they came to her skirt and gently tugged the waistband over her rump so that it fell to the floor.

Manuel was strong but gentle; loving, that was the word. His touch held so much emotion and it only made the fire inside her burn brighter. Soon they were down to their underwear and Manuel expertly flicked open the hooks of her bra to reveal the round, teardrop shaped breasts in full.

Soraya felt a surge of confidence move through her as Manuel’s gaze moved down; his eyes were full of lust but also wonder. Without a word he lowered his face down to suck at one of the nipples gently and Soraya was at a loss for words. It was as if her entire universe narrowed to that one pin prick of perfect pleasure.

“I am going to make it my life mission to hear that noise as often as possible.” Manuel mumbled against her neck, slowly guiding them back towards the bed.

Soraya grinned, reaching up to cup his face and kissing him hard before pulling him down onto the bed. The two of them scrambled, kicking off the last of their clothing before moaning as their naked bodies came together for the first time. Soraya could feel his cock brushing against her inner thigh, so close to her pussy it was teasingly painful.

“Please.”

“Your wish is my command.”

He took a moment to guide himself to her entrance before slowly beginning to push inside. Even now, when she could see the desperate lust in his eyes, he was treating her with such care. If she wasn't so desperately turned on right now she might have been moved to tears. As it was, she just wanted more.

Soraya bucked her hips up to meet his and they came together with a shaky gasp. For a second they still, treasuring the feeling of coming together for the first time before finally, Manuel began to roll his hips and Soraya flung back her head in ecstasy.

It was unlike anything she'd felt before. Her inner walls stretched and burned in the most delicious way, she could feel every inch of the cock penetrating her and each thrust somehow felt better than the last.

Manuel slipped his arms beneath her, crushing her chest against his own and Soraya sighed in pleasure. She could feel her nipples hardening against his warm chest, being subtly teased by the movements of their bodies. Her pussy was starting to tighten against her will, squeezing Manuel tighter and tighter with each thrust. His thrusts began hard and shallow, hitting the same tiny bundle of nerves that made her see stars over and over again.

“Oh, Manuel...I-I'm going to-! Oh fuck!”

For a moment there was nothing, then she felt *everything*. Every pore in her body seemed to tighten and release as a wave of pure ecstasy washed over her. Her pussy pulsed over and over, as her body writhed and Manuel held to her tight, fucking her through the orgasm until he too finally fell over the edge with a deep, guttural grunt that Soraya knew would be making an appearance in her dreams from this night on.

He pressed into her one final time, crushing them as close as two people could be before relaxing with a shudder and turning to the side. Soraya could feel him softening inside her and she couldn't help but tease a little, tightening around him a few times until he had no choice but to pull out from over stimulation.

“Cruel woman.” He chuckled, “That was...amazing.”

“Yes.” She agreed, curling up at his side. “Finding all your clothes could take a while...you should just stay the night.”

“I’d love to.” Manuel whispered, giving her another deep kiss. “And I promise tomorrow I won’t cook you breakfast and ruin all this by giving you food poisoning.”

“That seems fair.” She nodded seriously before pressing their foreheads together and laughing. This night hadn’t been what she had been imagining when first arriving and becoming Soraya but it was a thousand times better. She settled down, resting her head in the crook of Manuel’s shoulder and fell asleep easily; it had been so long since she’d felt so loved.

~

Soraya felt sad to see Manuel leave in the morning but she knew it was for the best; the last thing she needed right now was to give Saanvi more ammunition for an argument. She set some bread in the toaster ready for her daughter when she returned but it turned out to be a waste. By the time Saanvi finally returned home, well after lunch time, the bread had gone stale.

“Where have you been?” Soraya asked, “I have been worried.”

“I told you I was staying with a friend.” Saanvi rolled her eyes then winced, hungover.

“Yes but I didn’t expect it to take you all day to get home.” Soraya replied, “You could have at least sent me a text.”

“Stop acting so...”

“So what?”

“Motherly!”

“I am your mother, young lady.” Soraya said sternly, “A mother who has had it up to here with your behaviour lately. You won’t speak Hindi to me, you won’t eat my food, you won’t even let me drive you anywhere and now you’ve been gone almost a full twenty four hours without telling me!”

“So? I’m an adult and I can live my own life.” Saanvi scowled, brushing past her, “And what does it matter if I even speak Hindi at all? It’s not like I need to, we live in America, mom.”

Soraya felt her heart break a little at that.

“How dare you.” Soraya hissed, “You are a proud Indian woman whether you want to be or not. How would your father feel if he heard you speaking like that?”

“Well, he’s not here!” Saanvi yelled, throwing up her arms, “He’s not been here for a long time and whose fault is that?”

“Are you...blaming me?” Soraya gaped, her heart squeezing painfully in her chest.

“Yeah, you’re the one who made it that way!” Saanvi screamed, “How did you think that would be for me, huh? Not even having any memories of my own of him! If you had to make him dead, why couldn’t you have made it more recent!”

Saanvi’s shoulders were heaving, both women’s eyes were shiny with tears.

“You’re the one who made it this way Kayden.”

Kayden.

The name slammed into her like a tonne of bricks. She’d...she’d forgotten that she had ever been Kayden. She had gotten so caught up in this life and her history that she had actually forgotten that this was all supposed to be some fun, sexy adventure for her and...her friend. Not her daughter, the woman in front of her, who she remembered nursing and watching take her first steps, was actually Henry.

“I think...we need to take a step back.” Kayden swallowed, “This has gotten way out of hand.”

“Yeah.” Henry nodded, “I think it’s time we went back to the real world.”

The real world, it felt like a dream now. Kayden nodded all the same.

“That's probably for the best.”

The idea of leaving this life, of leaving Manuel behind felt so wrong. Things were finally going well for him in the romance department and what's more he felt...happy. Happy in a way Kayden had never felt before. Going back was the hardest thing he had ever done.

~

Kayden blinked open his eyes to find himself back in the real world, in his real, male body. Henry looked at him awkwardly, pulling away the machine parts until they were totally free. His apartment felt like it belonged to a stranger; it lacked the scent of spices that he had come to associate with home. He stood and wobbled slightly, his centre of balance was going to take some time to adjust to being back in this body. Kayden suddenly felt struck with a pang of homesickness.

“We'll feel better in a few days.” Henry said eventually, “Maybe we'll even laugh about this, how caught up we got.”

“Yeah.” Kayden agreed, though he didn't believe it for a moment.