

Village People

Village people

The woman my husband is having an affair with came to dinner last night. She does this sometimes; rings the doorbell at just the right time. She also happens to be our neighbour, which is how she knows what time we usually eat.

‘Hungry?’ my husband asked, once he’d let her inside and she’d followed him into our kitchen. I had my back to them but I could see their reflections in the window. They stood at opposite ends of the dining table, talking but avoiding each other’s eyes.

‘She always makes too much food,’ my husband, Kirit, said, looking over in my direction. His voice always grows softer, child-like, whenever she’s around, as though he’s no longer sure of himself. I was spooning fish kofta onto our best white plates - a gift from my mother-in-law.

‘Oh no no,’ she said, breaking into an uneven peal of laughter. ‘I don’t want to intrude.’

There was a sudden pause whilst both she and Kirit waited for me to say something, to lay a soft blanket over their deceit.

‘We’re having fish kofta,’ I said, clearing my throat.

‘Fish kofta,’ she repeated, as though she had not conceived of the idea before. ‘You’re so adventurous. I wish I had your imagination.’

I heard the dining chair being pulled from under the table.

‘Well that’s her job,’ Kirit said, as though that answered everything.

For the past eight months I’ve been running a small catering business from our house. Two months ago we had an extension built which I now use as a kitchen. It won’t make us rich but I am earning enough to start saving, and it stops me having to ask Kirit every time I want to buy something.

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Nalina doesn't know how to cook, has never known. Just over a year ago she got divorced and I'm certain her inability to cook had something to do with it. Her husband was a decent man, naïve but well intentioned, like so many of us. He comes from a village in Gujarat not far from my own. The kind of man who probably thought a home-cooked meal was the very least he could expect from his wife. We used to have them over for dinner occasionally and I used to look at them and wonder how two people so different could end up man and wife. Though I suppose people might say the same of us.

My mother thinks every woman should know how to cook. She thinks cooking is part of a woman's armour.

I find it strange that both Kirit and Nalina went to India in search of spouses when they both grew up in England.

'We just want a good, clean, honest girl,' my mother-in-law had declared, three years ago when they first came to see me. 'Somebody who'll slip into our family. No airs and graces.'

I'll always remember how furiously my mother nodded, as though there was nothing she understood better.

Kirit and I were married beneath a red canopy in an empty yard that ran alongside a field of mustard. We fed the entire village; nobody had seen anything like it. And six months later I arrived into Leicester and into this house where we have lived ever since.

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'Mmm,' Nalina said, as she mopped up the last of her sauce with a piece of roti. 'How did you get the gravy so creamy? Is it yoghurt?'

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‘Cashew nuts,’ I said.

‘Oh, you’ll have to give me the recipe.’

Kirit and I exchanged a look. I’ve written countless recipes down for her over the years. Recipes she files away neatly into a red plastic folder, never to be looked at again. I’ve only ever eaten one thing she’s ever cooked herself. About two years ago she brought around a bowl of potato curry. Anybody can make a potato curry, but to look at her, her giddy eyes, her giddy smile, you’d have thought she’d made something particularly impressive. It didn’t have enough salt.

‘Kirit has been asking me to make fish kofta for a long time,’ I said, and watched as she looked over in his direction, smiling absently, as though learning something about him for the very first time.

‘More rice?’ Kirit asked, suddenly breaking into a heavy cough.

‘That doesn’t sound too good,’ she said. ‘Take some cough mixture.’

‘No cough mixture,’ I said. ‘I’ll give him some cloves to suck on during the night.’

I watched as they both looked at each other the way they sometimes do, united in their mockery. In the village I come from we don’t use drugs the way people do in this country. We tend to use what we grow instead.

‘Oh, before I forget,’ Nalina said, shifting her gaze towards me. ‘The reason I came here was to ask whether you’d make me some of your famous mint and coriander chutney. I’ve got some friends coming over on Friday.’

‘Chutney?’ I asked. ‘It’s so easy, didn’t I already give you the recipe...’

‘I know, I know, but it never tastes the same.’

Some time later the conversation turned to Nalina’s job.

‘They’ve put me on a performance review,’ she said. ‘I wish they’d just pay me out.’

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‘Yes,’ Kirit said. ‘I think you should just see it through til the end. Don’t give them any reason to let you go.’

‘The whole thing’s so stressful. Part of me thinks I should just resign.’ I watched her profile as she spoke; I don’t think I’ve ever seen her without make-up. Layers and layers of lipstick and foundation. I dread to think what state her bathroom sink is in once she takes it all off at night. I watched the loose, dark tangles of her hair. Me and some of the other ladies on our street have given her the nickname Miss India.

‘What do *you* think I should do?’ she asked, looking in my direction.

‘What would *she* know about human resources?’ Kirit laughed. ‘Or working in an office?’

Without saying a word, I cleared the plates off the table and went and put them in sink.

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Last year, a short while before Nalina filed for divorce, I saw her husband in the garden. It was the middle of summer and I was out in the greenhouse picking aubergines.

‘You’ve done well this year,’ he said, looking around at all of the things I’d grown – aubergines, cucumbers, different types of green beans, cauliflower. If there is a pleasure greater than growing and eating your own vegetables, I’ve yet to find it. ‘My father used to grow a lot of tomatoes on our land,’ he said, ‘when I was boy. But there’s no money in tomatoes, so now he grows peanuts. And my uncle grows tobacco.’

‘Here,’ I said, offering him an armful of tomatoes and aubergines. ‘You could make a good bharta with these. I’m sure Nalina could make something.’

He laughed. ‘If she knew how to turn on the hob that would be a start.’

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It was the first he had ever spoken of her in that way. 'I should have stayed in my village,' he said. 'I was better off there. Just because she's got a degree, she behaves like the Queen of England.'

I watched as an immense sadness swept over his face.

A week after that she kicked him out, telling him the house belonged to her as she was the one paying the mortgage. I watched from behind the net curtains as he loaded his car with two big boxes and a black bin bag that held the entirety of his possessions. I heard he went to live with his aunt in Thurmaston.

I wanted to tell him that Nalina couldn't simply throw him out of the house like that, that he should see a lawyer, but Kirit told me to stay out of it. The next time I saw him was at Sainsbury's, where he works.

'Let her have what she wants,' he said. 'I just want to be free of her.'

After that she bought herself a dog, a scruffy little thing that barked unexpectedly in the middle of night and that broke into the greenhouse and dug up some of my vegetables.

In the evenings I saw her take him for a walk. She wrapped herself in an expensive fur coat and the scraggly dog wandered aimlessly behind her. She called him Pluto and never let him sleep outside.

Whenever she came to the house, she brought him with her. One fateful night he pounced onto the sofa and tore the fabric. Another time he urinated over our curtains.

'It's okay,' Kirit said. 'She just needs to train him.'

'She doesn't need a dog' I said. 'She needs a man.'

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Late one morning I caught the dog in the greenhouse, digging up the garlic and the beetroot. The door to the greenhouse wasn't very secure, I'll admit, but the sight of that ugly dog digging up my hard work filled me with rage, and I yanked him by the collar and walked him through the half-fence and into Nalina's garden where I planned to tell her just what I thought of him.

It was only as I approached the side of the house that I noticed that the curtains were all pulled shut.

I peered in through a small gap. The inside of the house was dark save for a light on in the hallway. She's probably sleeping, I thought. I was debating whether to ring the bell or not when I saw Kirit's jacket on the sofa. It's a tatty old jacket – brown with a deep green stripe across the front of it. He says it's too comfortable to throw away. I must have stood looking at it for a good five minutes. I walked further along the house until I could better see the landing and I squinted until I saw his shoes by the door.

I spent the rest of that day peering out at Nalina's house from behind my curtains. I sat like that for hours, until the sun went down, imaging my husband's breathless body on top of hers. I felt my chest tighten. Where had he left his car, I wondered. He had driven it to work that morning. Then, just before six thirty I saw him leave her house, scurrying along the wall on the opposite side. And about ten minutes later our car came rolling up the road and into the driveway.

'What's for dinner?' was the first thing he asked.

'Nothing,' I said.

'Nothing?'

'I don't feel well.'

'A pizza?' he said.

'Whatever you want.'

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It was all I could think of that night; her smell on him. There was a stench of her perfume all over his body. Expensive no doubt, but cheap-smelling, like a mound of rotting flowers.

The following day was spent preparing food for an engagement party. Biryani and stuffed bitter melon. For me cooking is like magic – taking nothing and turning it into something. After it was all done, I drank half a can of diet coke and sat looking out into the garden. It was late summer and the last of the apples were threatening to fall from the trees. I thought of my mother, looked at the clock on the wall to see what time it was in India. If I could have packed my bags and left at that very moment I would have, but I had to wait for somebody to pick up all the food I had spent the day cooking.

The sky was just at the point of turning when I saw Pluto's wobbling reflection inch towards the greenhouse.

Wiping away my tears, I shot up and ran out into the garden.

'Don't you dare,' I said. We were stood opposite each other with about three feet between us, me and that awful dog who belonged to that slut next door.

'Are you hungry, Pluto?' I asked, suddenly deflated. 'Want to come inside?'

Earlier that month we'd encountered a rat infestation and I had started collecting apple seeds from those trees at the very back of the garden. I dried them in the sun and ground them, mixed them with some puffed rice and put small spoonfuls around the house.

It took a week before I could smell their decomposing bodies.

'There's a good boy,' I said as he wagged his tail by the kitchen door. I brought out the powdered apple seeds and mixed some into a heap of biryani which I set out in front of

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him. I watched him gobble it all up, licking the plate clean, leaving nothing but a single bone.

I thought of Nalina. I thought of all the times I had fed her, of all the Tupperware she'd returned over the years. And I watched as her dog wheezed and panted until he was nothing but a messy heap on my kitchen floor.

The body was still warm when I wrapped it in a sack and took it out into the garden. He was buried in a tornado of mud and tears but even as I did it, there was something deeply comforting about the feel of wet earth on my fingers.

And it was only later, once I'd calmed myself down, that I posted Pluto's dog collar through her letterbox.

There must have been some magic in that dog, because shortly after his death a mint bush shot up from the dark soil of his grave, green and heavy with glistening leaves. You can smell it the moment you open door.

For months afterwards Nalina walked the streets in search of Pluto, handing out flyers to anybody who'd have them.

'Why would somebody be so cruel?' she asked. 'What have I ever done to anybody?'

I comforted her the only way I knew how, by feeding her.

I imagine she'll want feeding until the day either one of us moves out. In another year who knows where we'll be? I might have saved enough to leave. Or the affair might finally be over. But for now we're still neighbours. For now she can still ask me to make her a pot of chutney because she doesn't know how.

'Here,' I said, when that Friday arrived.

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She invited me inside where a group of women in short skirts and plunging necklines were cackling around her dining table, glasses of champagne fizzing between them.

‘This is my neighbour,’ she said. ‘Such an amazing cook.’ I watched as she lifted the lid on the tub and dipped her finger in. ‘Mmm. How do you do it!’

A steady silence descended over the room as the women waited for me to divulge something.

‘The mint has to be good,’ I said. ‘It needs good soil.’

‘Is it from the garden?’ she asked.

I nodded.

‘You’re so clever, really.’

‘Clever?’ I laughed. ‘We’re just village people.’

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