

## The Marriage of the Chatterjees

It had been months since the last time Mr. and Mrs. Chatterjee had discussed anything unrelated to the keeping of the house, the barbershop, the television programming for the week, and whether they wanted Chinese or pizza for dinner—only takeout, of course, as they were getting too old to go “out on the town,” as Mrs. Chatterjee liked to say. Not that they could, of course; the entire town shut down at 6 p.m., save for a 24-hour Denny’s.

They were both reaching 60 after 40 years of marriage. Their 41<sup>st</sup> was coming up in a few weeks, but there wouldn’t be much ceremony. They had agreed a few years back that there would only be gifts for Christmas and birthdays, which they bought for themselves.

Truth was, there wasn’t much ceremony in anything they did anymore. Mr. Chatterjee went to the barbershop at 10, cut hair till 5 (with a break for lunch), then went home. Mrs. Chatterjee milled about the house, occasionally tending to her vegetable patch, which she placed in the front yard so that she could chat with passers-by. She timed her dinner preparations so that she finished at 5:15, right when Mr. Chatterjee came home.

Today, she had spent her afternoon harvesting this season’s crop of baby tomatoes. There were two.

Mr. and Mrs. Chatterjee sat down to their lamb and two baby tomatoes. As Mrs. Chatterjee was serving the curry in the silver dish some uncle or the other had gotten them for their wedding, Mr. Chatterjee turned to her and said, “What am I living for anymore?”

Mrs. Chatterjee paused. She set down the silver dish and looked at him, truly looked at him for the first time in she couldn’t remember how long. His creased face, his strangely straight



teeth, the few hairs he had left on his head that he stubbornly demanded he comb. His wet lips that he kept licking, which he parted to ask again, “Reema, what do you think I’m living for?”

She was about to respond with a *what do you mean?* before he cut her off. She knew that he saw her lips part, and yet he cut her off.

“When I was a child I lived for myself. When I was in my twenties I lived for you. In my thirties and forties, I lived for our children. Now, what am I living for?”

He delivered this monologue with ease. He had rehearsed. The question was concise, open, and ambiguous—loaded. Mrs. Chatterjee wondered what had prompted her husband to ask it. Maybe it was how, over the course of the past few months, her lips had become fuller, her perfume stronger, her nail polish brighter.

Dread set in. He must have recognized that she was changing. Did he know why? She knew why, why she felt lighter, sunnier, freer.

Mrs. Chatterjee began seeing Harry four months ago, in the middle of the rainless summer. He was five years younger than she was—not that it made a difference at their age, he would say. She was watering her vegetable patch when he walked up to the fence. She didn’t remember what he had come to ask her, but she did remember that she offered him a glass of lemonade. It was something she saw a character do on *Friends*, the TV show she watched to learn about American culture when they had just moved here.

As Harry had sipped his lemonade, sat where Mr. Chatterjee was sitting right now, Mrs. Chatterjee remembered staring at his eyes, gray, smiling, and surrounded by the deepest crow’s feet she had ever seen. She finally understood what people meant when they said that the eyes



were the “window to the soul”. He caught her looking, and she blushed, but her gaze didn’t waver. He smiled, and so did his eyes.

“What am I living for?” rang her husband’s question, again. Mrs. Chatterjee snapped out of her daydream. She sat in silence. She looked at him and cocked her head. He sighed, as if he knew she had no reply.

“Nevermind,” he said. “Pass the lamb. Please.”

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From an outsider’s viewpoint, the next week was the same as the last had been. There were no changes in Mr. and Mrs. Chatterjee’s daily lives. The two went about their respective businesses, Mr. Chatterjee’s being the barbershop and Mrs. Chatterjee’s being the garden.

Today, the business was particularly slow. Mr. Chatterjee had swept the floor three times already and had resolved himself to looking through a stack of old *Better Homes and Gardens* magazines that he used to decorate the table in the waiting area. His mind was swimming with thoughts about The Dinner, as he had started referring to it in his head with some amusement.

It had been seven days since Mr. Chatterjee had delivered his dinner-table speech, but the look Mrs. Chatterjee gave him hadn’t escaped his memory: panic, masked by contrived confusion. She must have known what he was trying to get at; that’s why things were so tense. He had tried to broach the subject previously, but he had just been met with *you’re being ridiculous! or of course not!*.

He didn’t understand why Mrs. Chatterjee was so nervous about discussing getting a dog. They had owned dogs in the past when their children were still young. And it wasn’t like they couldn’t care for one; Mrs. Chatterjee was home all day, and they didn’t take vacations anymore.



They could get an adult dog so that they wouldn't have to put in the work of training a puppy. A slow, wise animal, like a St. Bernard or a Mastiff.

The bell above the barbershop's door jingled and Harry walked in. Mr. Chatterjee smiled, welcoming him, and ushered him into the chair.

"What will it be today, Harry?" Mr. Chatterjee said in his Indian-tinged American accent, reserved for outside-the-house use, as he threw the cloak over him.

"The same that it is every week, Ramesh," said Harry with a chuckle.

Mr. Chatterjee cut hair in silence. Other barbers liked to chat with their clients, but he thought that doing so made them unprofessional. Besides, most customers appreciated the lack of awkward conversation; they could just close their eyes and listen to the Muzak playing in the background.

Mr. Chatterjee finished Harry's haircut, collected the \$20, and swept the store a fourth time.

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At 5:15, Mrs. Chatterjee heard their car pulling into the driveway. She was spooning rice into a serving bowl as Mr. Chatterjee walked in. She placed it on the table next to the bowl of chicken curry and plate of cucumbers and carrots.

After the ritual minute of *hello-hi-how-was-your-day-it-was-fine*, they settled down to eat in silence. Mr. Chatterjee wanted to say something to follow up last week's monologue. The speech he gave a week ago was perfect—a carefully crafted layer of groundwork that would allow him to build his argument for getting a dog over time.



He thought for another few minutes, watching Mrs. Chatterjee spoon chicken and rice into her mouth. Mrs. Chatterjee paused and looked up at him.

“Why aren’t you eating?” she asked.

Mr. Chatterjee snapped to attention.

“Reema, I’ve been thinking about what I said last week,” he said.

Mrs. Chatterjee froze mid-chew. She set her spoon down, swallowed, and looked at him.

“What about it?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“I want to talk about a change,” said Mr. Chatterjee in a somber tone, “that I think will be good for the both of us. Ever since the kids left the house, I know that things have changed between us. For the worse. And I want to revitalize our marriage, and I think I know how. But—”

Mr. Chatterjee was interrupted by a violent cough, and then another, from Mrs. Chatterjee. They turned into a coughing fit that sent tears streaming down her face. She got up and ran to the bathroom. Mr. Chatterjee sat in his seat, frozen from shock and confusion. He heard retching, then the sound of the toilet flushing. Mrs. Chatterjee exited the bathroom, saying that she felt ill and that she was going to bed.

Mr. Chatterjee began to slowly get up to help her, but she said that she was fine and not to worry. He sat down to finish his dinner but only ate a few more slices of cucumber and carrot before he threw the rest away. That night, he slept on the sofa.

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“It was terrible, Harry,” said Mrs. Chatterjee. “I ran to the bathroom, forced myself to vomit, and told him that I was ill. He slept on the sofa. When he came in to get ready this morning, I pretended that I was asleep. I was too nervous to talk to him.”



She turned to look at Harry. They were lying in her bed. It was 1:00 p.m; Mr. Chatterjee wouldn't be home for at least another four hours.

"He knows. I just know he knows," said Mrs. Chatterjee. "I don't know how, but he must. He's been trying to bring it up during dinner for the past week, saying things like, 'my life has no meaning,' and, 'things are different between us'. He's trying to get a confession out of me. And it's getting to me. I'm starting to crack, Harry."

"How could he possibly know, Reema?" Harry said. "We've been so careful. Carefully scheduling, covering our tracks—and besides, you won't have to hide it for much longer. We're going to leave soon." He sat up and cocked his head to the side. "Aren't we?"

"Harry..." began Mrs. Chatterjee, trailing off. "I don't know. I need some more time. To get things in order, to tie up loose ends. And I have to think about my children, and how I'm going to tell them."

Harry was silent. He got up and began putting on his clothes.

"Harry, don't go," said Mrs. Chatterjee. "We have a few more hours, at least."

Harry ignored her. He finished getting dressed and began walking out of the bedroom.

"Just make up your mind, Reema," he said, as he vanished from her sight and out the back door.

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Mr. Chatterjee had spent the next day preparing for the final push. He had run through exactly what he would say in his head and was adding the finishing touches as he drove home.



He pulled into the driveway and walked up to the front door. His hand rested on the door's handle for an extra moment before he opened it. He found Mrs. Chatterjee sitting at the table with a solemn look on her face—she had been waiting for him.

Mr. Chatterjee slowly walked over and sat down. He stared at Mrs. Chatterjee, waiting for her to say something. His father had told him that the best way to win an argument was with silence—make the other person uncomfortable. So he sat, unspeaking; but he was growing more nervous every moment, her bulging brown eyes cutting into his.

He was the one to break the silence.

“Reema, things have changed between us. And we need to address it.”

Mrs. Chatterjee said nothing. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but closed it and looked away. She shifted in her seat.

“I think you know why I want to have this conversation. I’ve tried to address it in the past, but you’ve ignored me. I don’t want to let this go any longer. Reema, I want a d—”

“Ramesh, I’ll stop the affair!” exclaimed Mrs. Chatterjee with anguished eyes.

Mr. Chatterjee’s mouth hung open for a beat before he finished his sentence: “—og. I want a dog. Affair? What do you mean affair?”

He sat up straighter, leaned in, resting his elbows on the table.

Mrs. Chatterjee was frozen, except for her twitching eye. They sat staring at each other for another few seconds before Mrs. Chatterjee began to sob.

She got up and rushed to the bedroom. Mr. Chatterjee followed her and stood silently in the doorway, watching her. She retrieved a dusty suitcase from on top of their armoire and, without bothering to clean it, haphazardly stuffed any of her belongings that she could find in it.



Clothing, jewelry, pictures—all of it was jammed into any crack of space she could find among the other items.

Mr. Chatterjee just stood there, watching her. He had absolutely no clue as to what he could have done, what he should have done. Mrs. Chatterjee, still sobbing, had finally finished her packing. She hadn't looked at him once. She picked up the phone and dialed a number.

“Harry? Harry? Come. Now,” she said, through her tears.

Mr. Chatterjee was crying now as well as he pieced together what she was saying. He walked to the living room and sat on the sofa while she remained weeping in the bedroom. Five minutes later, the doorbell rang. Mr. Chatterjee didn't move.

Mrs. Chatterjee came out of the room with her suitcase. She opened the door and thrust her suitcase onto the waiting Harry. She ran to his car and he began to follow, but not before he saw Mr. Chatterjee. They made eye contact for a split second before Harry looked away and scurried after Mrs. Chatterjee, closing the door behind him.

Mr. Chatterjee remained seated. He breathed a sigh of relief; it was as if he had been waiting for something like this to happen. The tension had been cut, the rubber band snapped. And it wasn't his fault. For the first night in a while, Mr. Chatterjee slept easily.

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It had been over a week since Mrs. Chatterjee had left. It was Sunday, the only day on which Mr. Chatterjee closed the shop early, at 4:00. Mr. Chatterjee was sitting on his front porch with his eyes closed, basking in the golden glow of the dusk when Harry's car pulled up. He was petting a massive, old St. Bernard that was sitting silently next to him.



Mrs. Chatterjee stepped out of the car with a folder in hand. Harry kept staring straight ahead, not even glancing at Mr. Chatterjee. Without a word, she walked up the porch stairs and handed it to Mr. Chatterjee with a pen. They were divorce papers.

Mr. Chatterjee flipped through them and signed them, nonchalantly. He handed them back to her. Mrs. Chatterjee stood in front of for a moment, expecting a response of some sort. He stared at her. When it became apparent that he wasn't going to give her one, she let out a sigh and trudged back to Harry's car, divorce papers in hand.

Mr. Chatterjee watched them drive off and went back to his half-sleep, petting his dog. He heard nothing but panting and the birds. He was at peace.