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An Arranged Marriage

By Nell Freudenberger



Photograph by Kate Joyce

Theirs was the second-to-last house on the road. The road ended in an asphalt circle called a cul-de-sac, and beyond the cul-de-sac was a field of corn. That field had startled Amina when she first arrived—had made her wonder, just for a moment, if she had been tricked (as everyone had predicted she would be) and ended up in a sort of American village. She'd had to remind herself of the clean and modern Rochester airport, and of the Pittsford Wegmans—a grocery store that was the first thing she described to her mother once she got her on the phone. When Amina asked about the field, George explained that there were power lines that couldn't be moved, and so no one could build a house there. After she understood its purpose, Amina liked the cornfield, which reminded her of her grandmother's village. She had been born there, back when the house was still a hut, with a thatched roof and a glazed-mud floor. Two years later, her parents had left the village to find work in Dhaka, but she had stayed with her grandmother and her Parveen Auntie until she was five years old. Her first memory was of climbing up the stone steps from the pond with her hand in Nanu's, watching a funny pattern of light and dark splotches turn into a frog hiding in the ragged shade of a coconut palm.

Nanu had had five daughters and two sons, but both of Amina's uncles had died before she was born. The elder one, Khokon, had been Mukti Bahini during the war, while the younger, Emdad, had stayed in the village so that her grandmother wouldn't worry too much. Even though he was younger, it was Emdad her grandmother had loved the best: that was why she'd kept him with her. When you tried to trick God in that way, bad things could happen. Emdad had died first, in a motorbike accident on his way to Shyamnagar, delivering prescription medicines for her grandmother's pharmacy. Two months later, Khokon had been killed by General Yahya's soldiers. Those deaths were the reason that Nanu had become the way she was now, quiet and heavy, like a stone.

Little by little, over the six months that they'd spent e-mailing each other, Amina had told George about her life. She'd said that she came from a good family, and that her parents had sacrificed to send her to an English-medium school, but she had not exaggerated her father's financial situation or the extent of her formal education. She'd explained that she'd learned to speak English at Maple Leaf International, but

that she'd been forced to drop out when she was thirteen, because her father could no longer pay the fees. She'd also confessed that she was twenty-eight, rather than twenty-seven years old: her parents had waited a year to file her birth certificate so that she might one day have extra time to qualify for university or the civil-service exam. Her mother had warned her to be careful about what she revealed in her e-mails, but Amina found that once she started writing it was difficult to stop.

She told George how her father's business plans had a tendency to fail, and how each time one of those schemes foundered they had lost their apartment. She told him about the year they had spent living in Tejgaon, after having to leave the building called Moti Mahal, and how during that time her father had bought a single egg every day, which her mother had cooked for Amina because she was still growing and needed the protein. One night, when she had tried to share the egg with her parents, dividing it into three parts, her father had got so angry that he had tried to beat her (with a jump rope), and would have succeeded if her mother hadn't come after him with the broken handle of a chicken-feather broom.

Sometimes she got so involved in remembering what had happened that she forgot about the reader on the other end, and so she was surprised when George wrote back to tell her that her story had made him cry. He could not remember crying since his hamster had died, when he was in second grade, and he thought it meant that their connection was getting stronger. Amina responded immediately to apologize for making George cry, and to explain that it was not a sad story but a funny one, about her parents and the silly fights they sometimes had. Even if she and George didn't always understand each other, she never felt shy asking him questions. What level did the American second grade correspond to in the British system? What had he eaten for dinner as a child? And what, she was very curious to know, was a hamster?

It felt wonderful to have someone to confide in, someone she could trust not to gossip. (With whom could George gossip about Amina, after all?) It was a pleasure to write about difficult times in the past, now that things were better. By the time she started writing to George, Amina was supporting her parents with the money she made as a tutor for Top Talents; they were living in Mohammadpur, and of course they had plenty to eat. She still thought the proudest moment of her life had been when she was seventeen and returned home one day to surprise her parents with a television bought entirely out of her own earnings.

The other benefit of tutoring, one that she hadn't considered when she started out, was the access it afforded her to the computers that belonged to her wealthy pupils. She saw one of those students, Sharmila, three times a week; Sharmila's parents both had office jobs, and they encouraged Amina to stay as long as she wanted so that their daughter wouldn't just sit around with the servants all afternoon. Sharmila's mother confided that she thought Amina would be a good influence on her daughter's character; Sharmila was very intelligent but easily distracted, and was not serious enough about saying her prayers. "She has been raised with everything," her mother said the first time Amina arrived, a sweep of her arm taking in the marble floors of the living room and the heavy brocade curtains on the picture windows overlooking the black surface of Gulshan Lake, which was revealed, even at this height, to be clogged with garbage, water lilies, and the shanties of migrant families. "She doesn't even know how lucky she is." Amina nodded politely, but she knew that Sharmila's mother's complaints were a performance. She would put on the same show when her daughter's marriage was being negotiated, exaggerating Sharmila's incompetence at preparing a simple dal or *kitchuri*, so that the groom's family would understand what a little princess they were about to receive.

Amina had sworn Sharmila to secrecy on the subject of AsianEuro.com, and then they'd had a lot of fun, looking through the photos in the "male gallery." Sharmila always chose the youngest and best-looking men; she would squeal and gasp when she came across one who was very old or very fat. More often than not, Amina had the same impulses, but she reminded herself that she was not a little girl playing a game. Her family's future depended on this decision, and she could not afford to base it on some kind of childish whim.

According to her mother, the man should not be divorced and he certainly shouldn't have any children. He had to have a bachelor's degree and a dependable job, and he should not drink alcohol. He should not be younger than thirty-five or older than fifty, and he had to be willing to convert to Islam. Her mother also insisted that Amina take off her glasses and wear a red sari that she had inherited from her cousin Ghaniyah for the photograph, but, once it had been taken and scanned into the computer (a great inconvenience) at the Internet café near her Auntie No. 2's apartment in Savar, her mother would not allow her to post it online. "Why would you want a man who is interested only in your photograph?" she demanded, and nothing Amina could say about the way the site worked would change her mind.

"But the men will think you're ugly!" Sharmila exclaimed, when she heard about Amina's mother's stipulations. They were sitting on the rug in Sharmila's bedroom, with Sharmila's "Basic English Grammar" open between them. Amina's student was wearing the kameez of her International School uniform with a pair of pajama trousers decorated with frogs. She looked Amina up and down critically.

"Your hair is coarse, and you have an apple nose, but you aren't *ugly*," she concluded. "And now no one is going to write to you."

And although Amina had the very same fears, she decided to pretend to agree with her mother, for the sake of Sharmila's character.

As it happened, George did not post his picture online, either. He and Amina exchanged photos only once they had decided to become "exclusive" and take their profiles down from the site. When he saw her photograph, George wrote, he became even more convinced that she was the right person for him—not because of how pretty she was but because she hadn't used her "superficial charms" to advertise herself, the way so many American women did.

Amina hadn't believed that there was a man on earth—much less on AsianEuro.com—who would satisfy all of her mother's requirements, but George came very close. He was thirty-nine years old, and he had never been married. He had a master's degree from SUNY Buffalo and had worked as an aeronautical engineer for the I.T.T. Corporation for the past eleven years. He liked to have a Heineken beer while he was watching football—his team was the Dallas Cowboys—but he never had more than two, and he would think of converting to Islam, if that was what it would take to marry Amina.

Both of Amina's parents had hoped that she might someday go abroad, but it was her mother who had worked tirelessly with her at every step of the four-year journey that had finally led her to Rochester. If you counted their earliest efforts, it had actually been much longer than four years. When Amina was a girl, her mother had hoped to make her a famous singer, but once she discovered that Amina hadn't

inherited her beautiful voice she'd switched her to the classical Bengali wooden flute. Amina had found it easy to work diligently at her studies, but could somehow never make time for the flute; she had abandoned it in favor of "The Five Positions of Ballet," and then "Ventriloquism: History and Techniques," both illustrated in manuals that she and her mother checked out from the British Council library.

Amina's parents' first really serious idea had been to apply to American universities; Amina had written to ten colleges, six of which had sent letters back. The University of Pittsburgh had encouraged her to apply for a special scholarship. Even with the scholarship, however, the tuition would have been six thousand dollars a year—that was without considering the cost of living in America. Her parents had read the letter from Pittsburgh over and over again, as if some new information might appear, and they had shown it to all the Dhaka relatives, who had, of course, begun to gossip. According to Ghaniyah, they were accusing Amina and her parents of "sleeping under a torn quilt and dreaming of gold."

A few weeks after the letter came, Amina was listening to the Voice of America. She and her mother had got into the habit of tuning in to the broadcasts in Special English, and even after those became too simple for Amina they continued to turn on "This Is America." One day the program was dedicated to the different types of student and work visas, and the S.A.T., G.M.A.T., and TOEFL tests that foreign students might use to qualify for them. Amina was only half-listening (these were strategies that she had already considered, and all of them cost money) when the announcer said something that made her look up from her book. Her mother also paused, holding the iron above her father's best shirt and trousers, which were arranged on the ceramic tile as if there were already a man inside them.

"Of course, the easiest way to come to America is to find an American and get married!"

It wasn't as if she hadn't thought of this; ever since she was a little girl, she had loved everything foreign. When other girls traded their dresses for shalwar kameez, Amina had gone on wearing hers: she'd had to put on a white-and-gray shalwar kameez in order to go to Maple Leaf, but when she got home from school she changed back into a dress or a skirt. Her mother shook her head, but her father laughed and called her his little memsahib. Whenever he had money, he'd buy her a Fanta and a Cadbury chocolate bar.

Most of all, she had always loved fair skin. Her father was brown, and before she was born he had worried that she would be dark. But her mother was *ujjal shamla*, and Amina had come out golden, too. Once, when she was about eight or nine, she had said how much she loved fair skin in front of her father's business partner, who was as black as the fishermen who worked on the boats near her grandmother's house. Farooq Uncle had only laughed, but his wife had told Amina seriously that she had once felt the same way, and look whom she had ended up marrying. If you wanted one thing too much, she said, you sometimes wound up with the opposite.

Amina had never forgotten that advice. It was a species of Deshi wisdom that she knew from the village, and it was powerful, as long as you stayed in the village. The farther away you got, Amina believed, the

less it held. It was possible to change your own destiny, but you had to be vigilant and you could never look back. That was why, when she heard the announcer's joke on Voice of America, the first thing she thought of was the Internet.

The thing that had impressed her about AsianEuro.com was the volume of both men and women looking for mates. When Amina joined, there were six hundred and forty-two men with profiles posted on the site, and, even without a photograph, Amina's profile got several responses right away. As it turned out, the problem was not making contact but staying in touch. Sometimes (as with Mike G. and Victor S.) a man would correspond for months before he suddenly stopped writing, with no explanation. Other times she would be the one to stop, because of something the man had written. In the case of Mike R., it was a request for a photo of Amina in a bathing suit; for "John H.," it was the admission, in a message sent at 3:43 A.M., that he was actually a Bengali Muslim living in Calcutta.

Her father had used these examples as ballast for his argument that the people who joined those sites could not be trusted, but her mother had weathered each disappointment along with Amina, and her resolve to help her daughter had seemed to grow stronger as the years passed and her father's situation failed to change. They had never been like an ordinary mother and daughter, partly because Amina was an only child, and partly because they'd spent so much time together after she had to leave school, studying the textbooks they borrowed from the British Council: "Functional English" and "New English First." When Amina and George began writing to each other, she and her mother had discussed the e-mails with the same seriousness they had once devoted to those textbooks. She had not hidden anything from her mother (not even the Heinekens), and eventually they had both become convinced of George's goodness. They had been a team, analyzing every new development, and so it was strange for Amina, once things were finally settled, to realize that her mother would not be coming with her.

Amina had been e-mailing with George for three months when he came to Dhaka to meet her family. Their courtship had more in common with her grandparents'—which had been arranged through a professional matchmaker in their village—than it did with that of her parents, who had had a love marriage and run away to Khulna when her mother was seventeen years old. Her grandparents hadn't seen each other until their wedding day, but they had examined photos. She had thought of her grandmother the day she received George's photo as an e-mail attachment. The photo wasn't what she'd been expecting, but once she'd seen it she couldn't remember the face she *had* imagined. That face had been erased by the real George: heavy-cheeked and fleshy, with half-lidded, sleepy eyes. His features were compressed into the center of his face, leaving large, uncolonized expanses of cheek and brow and chin. His skin was so light that even Amina had to admit that it was possible to be too fair.

She had put her hand over half the photo, so that only the eyes and forehead were visible. They were blue eyes, close together, with sparse blond brows and lashes. Could I love just those eyes? she asked herself, apart from anything else, and, after a certain number of minutes spent getting used to them, she decided that she could. She covered the eyes and asked the same question of the nose (more challenging because of the way it protruded, different from any nose she knew). She had slept on it, but the following day at the British Council (an agony to wait until the computer was free) she'd been pleased to discover that the photograph was better than she remembered. By the end of the day she thought that she could love even the nose.

Her father went to meet George at the airport, and her mother came to her room to tell her that he had arrived—although, of course, she had been watching from the balcony. The taxi had stopped at the beginning of the lane, which was unpaved. Her mother had worried about George walking down the dirt road to their apartment complex (what if it rained?), and they had even discussed hiring a rickshaw. But they would have had to hire two rickshaws, with the bags, and hiring two rickshaws to take two grown men less than two hundred metres would have made more of a spectacle than it was worth. Even from her hiding place on the balcony, behind her mother's hanging laundry, she could hear the landlady's sons, Hamid and Hassan, on the roof, practically falling over the edge to get a glimpse of Amina's suitor.

“What is he like?” she asked, and her mother reassured her.

“He's just like his picture. Nothing is wrong.”

George said that he had known when he received her first e-mail that she was the one. When Amina asked how he had known, he was offended, and asked whether this was some kind of test. But Amina hadn't been testing him: she really wanted to know, because her own experience had been so different. With the men who had contacted her before George, she had wondered each time if this was the person she would marry. Once she and George started e-mailing each other exclusively, she had wondered the same thing about him, and she had continued wondering even after he booked the flight to Bangladesh. She wondered that first night as he ate with her family at their wobbly table, covered with a plastic map-of-the-world tablecloth, which her father discreetly steadied by placing his elbow somewhere in the neighborhood of Sudan, and during the excruciating hours they spent in the homes of her Dhaka aunts, talking to each other in English while everyone sat around them and watched. It wasn't until she was actually on the plane to Washington, D.C., wearing the gold-and-diamond ring they had bought in a hurry at Rifles Square on the last day of George's visit, that she finally became convinced it was going to happen.

Her visa required her to marry within ninety days of her arrival in the U.S. George wanted to allow her to get settled, and his mother needed time to organize the wedding party, so they waited almost two months. Amina's mother understood that it wouldn't be practical for George to pay for another place for Amina to live during that time, and she certainly didn't want her living alone in a foreign city. She agreed that Amina could stay in George's house for those months, but she made Amina promise that she and George would wait to do *that* until after the ceremony. She talked about the one thing that Amina could lose that she would never be able to get back.

In Dhaka, Amina had intended to keep her promise, although she didn't entirely agree with her mother. Especially after she got to America, and had time to think about it, it seemed to her that there were a lot of other things that could be lost in an equally permanent way. Her father had lost his business partner, for example, and he'd never found another full-time job; after that, they had lost their furniture, and then their apartments in Mirpur and Savar, and only Ghaniyah's father's intervention—securing the apartment in Mohammadpur at a special price, through a business associate—had kept them from becoming homeless altogether. These setbacks had taken their toll on her mother, who suffered from stomach ulcers and persistent rashes; Amina thought her mother was still beautiful, with her large, dark eyes and her thin,

straight nose, but her mother claimed to have lost her looks for good. Worst of all, her grandmother had lost Emdad and Khokon, and nothing she could do would ever bring them back.

Compared with those losses, whatever it was that Amina lost on the third night she spent in George's house was nothing. George had agreed to her mother's conditions, and had set up a futon bed for her in the empty room upstairs. On the first two nights, they'd brushed their teeth together like a married couple, and then George had kissed her forehead before disappearing into his room. There were no curtains on the window of the room where Amina slept, and the tree outside made an unfamiliar, angled shadow on the floor. Everything was perfectly quiet. Even when she'd had her own room at home, there had always been noise from the street—horns, crying babies, the barking of dogs—not to mention the considerable sound of her father snoring on the other side of the wall.

Ordinarily she wore a long T-shirt and pajama bottoms to bed, but on the third night she experimented by going into the bathroom in only a kameez. "You look cute," George said, and that emboldened her; when he bent down to kiss her forehead, as usual, she looked up, so that they actually kissed on the mouth. (This was something that they had done downstairs on the couch during the day, but not yet at night.) Amina tried to imagine that her plain, machine-made top was a hand-embroidered wedding sari, and, when she pressed her body against her fiancé's, a strange sound escaped from him. It was as if there were another person inside him, who'd never spoken until now. That small, new voice—and the fact that she had been the cause of it—was what made her take George's hand and follow him into his bedroom.

She was surprised by how unpleasant it was, how unlike that kiss in the bathroom, which had given her the same feeling between her legs that she sometimes got when watching actors kiss on television. It didn't hurt as much as Ghaniyah had said it would, but she was too hot with George on top of her, and she didn't like the way he looked when he closed his eyes—as if he were in pain somewhere very far away. On the other hand, it was sweet the way he worried afterward, anxiously confirming that it was what she wanted. He asked her whether she minded having broken her promise to her mother, and the next morning, waking up for the first time beside someone who was not a member of her family, she was surprised to find that she had no regrets at all.

She told George that she didn't need a wedding dress, that she was happy to get married in the clothes she already owned. She had ordered three new dresses before coming to Rochester, because tailoring was so much less expensive back at home.

"That's why I love you!" George said, slapping his hand on the kitchen table, as if he'd just won some kind of wager. "You're so much more *sensible* than other women."

Amina thought that it was settled, but later that night George talked to Ed, from his office, who reminded him that they would eventually have to show their wedding photographs to the I.N.S.

"Ed says a white dress is better for the green card," George said. "My cousin Jess'll take you shopping. Go get something you like."

Her mother wanted her to get married in a sari. Amina argued that that kind of wedding, with the gold jewelry, the red tinselled *orna*, and the hennaed hands, was really more Hindu than Muslim, and that as long as she was going to wear foreign clothes they might as well be American ones.

“No need for a red sari,” her mother conceded. “How about blue? Or green?”

“It has to be a white dress,” Amina said. “It has to be a real American wedding.

“Even a white sari,” her mother said. “Some of the girls are doing it. I saw it on *Trendz*.” Since she’d left, her mother had been spending hours every day in the Internet café in Savar. It was amazing to Amina that her mother could navigate even English sites like the Daily Star, where she knew how to get to the Life Style page, with its features on “hot new restaurants” and “splashy summer sandals,” its recipes for French toast and beef Bourguignonne, and its decorating tips (“How about painting one wall of your living room a vibrant spring color?”).

“A dress,” Amina said firmly. “That’s what the I.N.S. wants.”

Of course her mother didn’t really care about the dress, just as she would never consider visiting a restaurant (where who knew how dirty the kitchen might be) or painting one wall of the room where she brushed her teeth, chopped vegetables, and did the ironing “a vibrant spring color.” The white dress was a way for her mother to talk about a concern she had had ever since the beginning—that Amina and George were not going to be properly married, by both an American civil servant and a Muslim imam.

The wedding dress was sleeveless white organdie, with white satin flowers appliquéd on the neck and the bust. She and Jessica compromised by eliminating the veil, but even without it the dress cost more than three hundred dollars, not including alterations. Amina stood on a wooden box with a clamp like a giant paper clip at her waist, and tried not to cry.

“Smile!” the saleswoman said. “A lot of girls would kill for a figure like yours.”

“No kidding,” Jessica said. “I wasn’t that skinny when I was fourteen years old.”

“Don’t you like it?” the saleswoman asked.

“She’s dumbstruck. Wait until George sees you in *that*.”

Jessica chatted happily with the saleswoman as they paid for the dress with George’s card, but once they were in the car she asked Amina whether everything was O.K.

“Everything is fine,” Amina said. “Only it was so expensive.”

“George doesn’t mind,” Jessica said. “Trust me, I could tell. Are you sure there’s nothing else?”

Ordinarily when Amina felt homesickness coming on, she was able to distract herself with some kind of housework. Vacuuming, in particular, was helpful. Now, sitting in the car next to George's cousin, she was unprepared for the sudden stiffness in her chest, or the screen that dropped over everything, making Rochester's clean air and tidy green lawns, and even the inside of Jessica's very large, brand-new car, look dull and shabby. George's cousin was so kind, and still there was no way that she could explain to her what was really wrong. When they stopped at a red light, Jessica turned to Amina and put a hand on her arm.

"Because if something was wrong between you and George, I want you to know that you could tell me. I'm a good listener."

"Oh, no," Amina said, "George is no problem," and Jessica laughed, although Amina wasn't trying to be funny. She could tell that Jessica wasn't going to allow her to be silent, and so she searched for a question.

"What is the meaning of 'dumbstruck'?" she asked, feeling slightly dishonest. She had encountered that word for the first time in an exercise in a conversation primer, a dialogue between a Miss Mulligan and a Mr. Fredericks—" 'Your manners leave me dumbstruck, Mr. Fredericks,' Miss Mulligan exclaimed"—and for some reason that phrase had lodged itself in Amina's head. Often, when someone spat on the street in front of her, when a woman elbowed her out of the way at the market, or when she ran into one of her old classmates at the British Council and the girl inquired sweetly whether her father was still unemployed, she had thought of Miss Mulligan and how dumbstruck she might have been had she ever found herself in Bangladesh.

"Oh, um—surprised. It just means surprised. I bet you wondered what I was talking about!"

But it didn't just mean surprised. It meant so surprised that you could not speak. As Cousin Jessica continued to talk—about her weight and Amina's, about the foods she ate, didn't eat, or intended to eat—Amina concentrated on nodding and making noises to show that she understood. It was possible to be struck dumb by all sorts of emotion, not only surprise, and as they drove back toward Pittsford Amina thought that there ought to be a whole set of words to encompass those different varieties of silence.

At the bridal shower, Aunt Louise had wanted to know Amina's favorite flower, and had listened politely as Amina explained about the *krishnachura* and the romantic origins of its name. She felt silly when Aunt Louise showed up at city hall on the morning of the wedding, carrying a bouquet of lilacs and apologizing because there were no *krishnachura* to be found in Rochester. Then George's mother arrived with her own wedding veil, which she shyly offered to Amina for the ceremony.

"She didn't want a veil," George said, annoyed with his mother, but Amina took her mother-in-law's side, just as a bride would at home. Jessica gathered up a few of the ringlets the hairdresser had created and pinned the veil so that Amina could wear it hanging down her back. Then the small party—Jessica, George's mother, Aunt Louise and Uncle Dan, Ed from George's office and his Filipino wife, Min, and George's college friends Bill and Katie—followed them into the office, where they completed the

paperwork for the marriage certificate. Amina thought that this was the wedding itself, so she was confused when the clerk ushered them into a smaller, carpeted room with a bench and asked them to wait.

“Is there some problem?” she asked George, but he was distracted by his friends, who were snapping pictures and laughing. “Is something wrong?”

“Sit down,” George’s mother said, but Aunt Louise grabbed her arm and jerked her upright.

“Careful!”

“What is it?” Amina said, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. For weeks she had been convinced that something would get in the way of the ceremony; this morning she had prayed—not that nothing would go wrong but that she would be prepared enough to see it coming and resourceful enough to find a way around it.

“If you sit, your dress will crease,” Aunt Louise said.

“Come on,” George’s mother said, putting her hand on Amina’s back. “It’s your turn.” And Amina was relieved to see that a door had opened on the opposite side of the room, and a short, bald man in a suit, a man who looked as if nothing on earth had ever disturbed his composure, was gesturing for them to enter. She understood that the wedding was continuing as planned, and she looked carefully around the room because she knew that her mother would want to hear exactly what it looked like. There were potted trees with braided trunks on either side of the window, and three rows of white plastic folding chairs, half-filled by George’s family and friends. The deputy city clerk stood behind a wooden lectern underneath two certificates framed in gold. With the light from the window shining on his glasses, Amina couldn’t see his eyes.

She had not expected to be nervous. George had told her what her cue would be, and Amina allowed her mind to wander while she waited for it. When she’d left Desh, there had still been the possibility that her parents would be able to come to Rochester for the wedding. Ninety days had seemed like enough time to plan, but when George went online to check the tickets they were almost fifteen hundred dollars each, even if her parents made stops in Dubai and Hamburg, Germany. George had been willing to help pay for the tickets, but she could tell that he wasn’t happy about it, and so she had called her parents and given them her opinion: it would be a waste of money. The whole wedding would take maybe an hour and a half (including driving time), and Amina and her father agreed that to fly twenty hours in order to be there for something that took less than two hours didn’t make a lot of sense.

In the end, as she’d expected, the problem was not her father but her mother. Her mother had agreed at first, and they’d even made another plan: as soon as Amina and George could come back to Dhaka, they would buy wedding clothes and Amina would go to the beauty salon; then they would go to a studio and take wedding photographs. Once they had the photographs, her mother could look at them all the time: it would be no different than if they’d all celebrated the wedding together for real.

Amina thought that her mother was satisfied by this, but a few nights later she got a call. Her mother was crying, and it was hard to understand her. Her father told her not to worry, but when she asked why her

mother was crying he said, “She’s crying because she’s going to miss your wedding. She’s going to miss it because I can’t afford the ticket.”

“No!” Amina said. “We decided—it didn’t make sense. Three thousand dollars for one party!”

“Your wedding party. What kind of terrible parents don’t come to their own daughter’s wedding?”

She started to argue, but her father wasn’t listening. Her mother was saying something in the background.

“What does she say?”

Her father paused so long that she would have thought the call had been dropped, if it weren’t for the sounds in the background. It was morning in Mohammadpur, and Amina thought she could hear the vendors calling outside the window: “Chilis! Eggs! Excellent-quality feather brooms!”

“She says it would have been better if you’d never been born,” her father said finally.

“Do you, Amina Mazid, take this man, George Barker, to be your lawfully wedded husband?” the city clerk asked.

“I do,” Amina said.

The question was asked of George, and then the clerk pronounced them husband and wife. “You may kiss each other,” he said.

George leaned toward her and Amina leaped back. From the folding chairs, Cousin Jessica made a hiccupping sound. George’s face tightened like the mouth of a drawstring bag, and when Amina glanced behind her she saw an identical contraction on the face of her new mother-in-law. She hurriedly stepped toward George, smiling to let him know that it had been a mistake, that of course she wanted to kiss him in front of his family and friends.

Many hours later, after cocktails at Aunt Louise and Uncle Dan’s, the reception dinner at Giorgio’s Trattoria, and then sweets, coffee, and the opening of gifts at the house of George’s mother (who now insisted that Amina call her “Mom”), when they were home in bed together so much later than usual, George asked her why she hadn’t wanted to kiss him.

“You didn’t tell me,” she explained.

“You didn’t know there was kissing at a wedding?”

Amina had to think about that for a minute, because of course she had known. She had known since she was nine years old and her Auntie No. 2 had bought a television. She had seen it on “Dallas” and “L.A. Law” and “The Fall Guy,” and then, more recently, on her own television at home. There was no way to explain her ignorance to George.

“I did know. I guess I just didn’t believe it would happen to me.”

“You’ve kissed me a hundred times,” George said, in a voice that suggested to Amina that they might be about to have their first fight. She wanted to avoid that, especially tonight, because if there was anything she believed about marriage it was that arguing the way her parents did was a waste of time.

“Not only kissing. The marriage in total.”

“You didn’t believe we were getting married? What did you think we were doing?”

“In Desh, you can make your plans, but they usually do not succeed.”

“And in America?”

“In America you make your plans and then they happen.”

To her relief, George finally smiled. “So you planned to kiss me, but you were surprised when it actually happened.”

Amina hesitated, but her husband was patient until she found the right words.

“Not only surprised,” she said. “I was dumbstruck.” ♦