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## All the Necessary Things

HER HUSBAND TOLD SUGU, “Don’t bring all kinds of rubbish. We want these people to like us. We have to fit in.” As if she had no sense to know it herself.

His mother said, “I know you’ve no time, I got you all the necessary things, come, I’ll help you put it in your bag.” One-kilo-plus spice bags were piled neatly on top of the bedspread, big bags of chili powder and coriander, smaller bags of tumeric and sweet cumin and all the other *barang*.

The old lady wouldn’t be stopped. Sugu watched as the pile disappeared into her suitcase. She had packed Adidas and Levis. And plain, tailored clothes, with one token sari for “occasions.” Now she had half of Central Market in her bag.

It was early autumn when they arrived in Vermont. Little bits of deep scarlet on the leaves, but no yellows or gold yet; September 1979.

They prepared carefully for their new adventure. The day before they moved into their house, they washed it together. He said prayers, she boiled milk on the stove, for God and for abundance. Before they left, they turned on all the lights in the house, and placed water, salt and holy things in the living room. A Bible for her, she was Christian, a statue of Lord Ganesha for her Hindu husband.

The next day they brought their few things into the house and arranged the pieces carefully, dreaming dreams. They were brand-new PhDs. A few things was all they had. Later they made love, and then put a different type of blessing on the house by having a fight. Mani wanted their first dinner to be something typically American, she was tired and didn’t see the harm in quick-frying some noodles. No reason not to make use of all the stuff—all the *barang*—his mother, and then her mother, and all

their relatives, had wished on her before they left.

*Barang* was a wonderful word: *barang* was stuff, any stuff, from luggage to the interesting bits and pieces in a mixed dish of food. Poking through her bags, Sugu shook her head. English didn't have words that satisfied her like that, words that had layer upon layer of wonderful, rich meaning.

She found enough *barang* to make up some noodles. Not all the necessary things, but enough: dried mushrooms and prawns, fish sauce, *belacan*—that beautifully fermented, fragrant shrimp paste that could just as well have been labeled “Essence of Malaysia.” She even had chili sauce.

Mani got angry when he saw all the stuff coming out of her suitcase. As if she was unpacking Pandora's box.

They had been Malaysian people. Indian people. As far as he was concerned, they were now supposed to be American people.

In the end they drove to a diner. She would have preferred the noodles. The first few days after leaving Malaysia were the hardest, when her mouth kept asking where the *real* food taste was. It had been that way all the years they'd been in college, then graduate school. The first few days after each trip home she felt confused. Weirdly conscious of all types of silly, small things. The air on her face moved differently than at home. The smells were all bland, and yet they made her feel a bit sick in her stomach. Her mouth felt sticky. But she never let him see. Just said, “Jet lag,” to explain her moods. Invariably, he said, “I don't believe in jet lag.”

She knew she should consider herself lucky. Married. Mostly happy. PhD. Good job. Husband with a good job. And both in the same college. Very lucky.

The trouble was, he was a favorite son. Eldest son's eldest son's eldest son, for God knows how many generations. Whenever his grandmother cooked a chicken, she hid the liver under the rice on his plate so his cousins wouldn't see he was getting the best piece. But the cousins knew. The wonder of it was that they still managed to like him. Maybe because the one time he had tried to sneak a piece off his plate to share with his favorite, nicest, prettiest cousin, his grandmother had yelled at both of them.

It didn't make him an easy husband. There was a hole inside him, like the space under his rice that the liver had made. It made him feel he was somehow supposed to put the liver under everybody's rice. Special things were expected from him. He couldn't just be successful like other people, go to Uni, get a job, buy a house and a car and raise some kids, everything locally, maybe join the Club if he did really well. That wasn't enough. He had to be somebody.

He had to be somebody so bad it had taken them halfway around the world. Trouble was, she couldn't argue with his hunger. It was like being hypnotized.

In the end, she was okay, just as she had been okay as a student—except when people sent things from home.

Every time she had to pick up a parcel, and smell the smells that stunk to high heaven of foreignness in the small, wooden, white-painted Vermont store front with the U.S. flag on the flag-pole outside and the Vermont country people around her who twitched curious or offended noses but were too polite to say anything, she died a little inside. When the home stuff wasn't in front of her, it wasn't so hard to pretend to be American. She didn't have to think what she was doing, and did she want to do it. But when the smells hit her nose and her stomach and the back of the brain, sometimes she was so homesick it was hard to stand up straight.

She hated being the one to tell lies afterwards, particularly to his mother, to say, "Yes, we got the package, he loved the dried *brinjals*," or okra or oysters or whatever the old lady had sent. It could be anything.

Mani's favorite was durian *dhodhol*, a rubbery, Malay confection that looked like a block of black Jell-O, but was not Jell-O, being springy and chewy as rubber, with a long, long shelf life and a sweet, dense flavor. Chinese food, dried melon seeds and medicinal soup herbs and moon cakes in season, and, when the old lady had been to the seaside, even dried oysters. Curry powder, of course. Homemade, or ground at his mother's favorite mill. Competing with the curry powder sent by her mother and sisters.

They hardly used any of it.

And then the parcel with the pickles came.

He was very fond of his mother's pickles, they both were. Pickles with more fenugreek and ginger and chilies and chili powder than anybody else would have dared to use. Plus garlic, something the old lady had picked up from a Straits-Chinese neighbor, whose Nonya-style food was Chinese-Malay-Indian all blended and taken further than anybody else would take it. The pickle aroma was so strong she knew what it was as soon as the post office lady put the box on the counter. Back in her kitchen, as Sugu cut open the box, Mani said, "You can't open that bottle. The pickle bottle." When she looked up in surprise, he said, "Think. It's sure to be packed with scotch tape and inside plastic bags and what not, and it's still smelling. Take it out and all the cows for miles round will give pickle smelling milk for the next month."

She said, "Don't simply exaggerate."

He said, "Please, Susie, I'm begging you, don't open that bottle. Think what people will say."

Their names were Suguna and Manickam. Sugu and Mani, growing up in Malaysia, and as students. He had decided to make it Susie and Manny for this latest venture. Manny like an American would say it, not Mani, rhyming with money, as a decent Indian should.

It was a low trick, calling her Susie like that when they were alone. She'd gone along with him, in public. He was calling her Susie now, when they were private, just the two of them, to remind her about "fitting in."

In the end she just shoved the pickles onto a shelf in the back of the pantry and forgot them.

But she faithfully made the necessary phone call, and lied through her teeth. After she rang off, he said, "Why do you keep telling her we're using all the stuff? She'll keep sending it if you encourage her."

Wonderful. Sugu took a deep, slow breath, said reasonably, "What was I supposed to say? Before we left, she said, 'Just because you're going to live overseas doesn't mean you have to

start behaving as if your skin has turned white overnight.' If I tell her what you're doing, she'll be on the doorstep tomorrow. Then what will you do?"

Mani said, "I don't understand why you're making such a fuss."

Sugu said, "She's your mother. I don't see why I have to be the one to tell her lies."

Mani shook his head. "We agreed," he said. "You also wanted to be finished with all the Indian family drama. No more 'poor things,' no more who's on speaking terms with who this week, no more, 'you won't believe what they did.'"

She said, "You're not careful, that will be us they're talking about."

The spices in the back of their pantry got dustier. The monthly packages kept arriving. The bottle of pickles took on a wonderful luster as the summer heat sweated the flavored oil through the glass, so that presently, without their doing anything, the whole house smelled of curry, like a good Indian house should. Periodically Sugu wondered if she should throw away the pickles, but somehow she never had the heart to do it.

That Fourth of July, they invited all their new friends to a cookout, Mani expertly grilling hot dogs and ground beef patties. He'd not left it to chance. Three days in a row, he'd gone through the ritual: charcoal, lighter fluid, unnaturally perfect flattened disks of raw, greasy meat, singeing odor. Then they'd eaten the stuff. Till it sickened them.

Sugu noticed Mani couldn't bear to eat any meat at the cookout, either. Both made themselves busy serving the guests, so that nobody would notice they weren't eating themselves.

At least they weren't going to be ghetto Indians like some of their old university friends who knew nobody but other Indians. Manny's department was mostly Americans or Europeans, and there he was, dropping easily into German and French, talking about European chocolate—Godiva and Lindt, truffles and sweet white chocolate and the merits of hazelnut versus champagne centers—as if he'd been eating it all his life.

Sometimes, watching him talk like that, ultra-sophisticated academic, and then going out the next day in overalls to paint the fence or the barn or the ducks, she wondered if he had any idea at all what he really wanted.

In private, he was very Indian, insisting on turning the walk-in closet in the spare bedroom into a *puja* room, saying prayers every day, putting flowers in front of the statue of Lord Ganesha, the one who opened pathways and defeated obstacles. “We’re going into a new life,” he told her. “We will face obstacles.” But he wouldn’t have the statue in the entrance hall, where it belonged. She said, “It should be the first thing you see, going in or coming out, otherwise no point.” She wasn’t a Hindu like him, but even she knew that much. But Mani said, “No Hindus here, people will think it’s funny, weird statues in the hall.”

For the cookout, Sugu was wearing jeans. Playing the game. But she didn’t have a jeans-type figure. Big, fat, round bum, spreading out from a tiny waist. Short legs. In a sari, she looked pleasantly curvy. In jeans, she was Humpty Dumpty. Her mother tried to comfort her that she had a typical Ceylonese figure, and she used to pray that she didn’t, because that would mean that she was also destined to have a big, fat, round waist one day, big, fat, round everything, to go with the bum. She had a nice face, big, liquid eyes, a sweet smile and a trick of tilting her head and looking up and sideways through her bangs that she’d used to practice for hours in front of the mirror when she was a school-girl, but he was tall and fair and Hindi-movie star handsome. Like the young Sashi Kapoor she had mooned over when she’d seen *Kabhi Kabhie*—still one of her favorite movies. Walking around the picnic table, dispensing lemonade and iced tea, watching her husband talk to the guests, she was struck again by how strange it was that he’d ever picked her, or stuck to her through years of university where there were more than enough women, Indian and non-Indian, who found the combination of his good looks and his weird ideas dazzling. But then Mani glanced over at her, not for long, just checking, was she there, and she realized that what he needed her for he couldn’t get anywhere else. She was his anchor. Her ordinary looks and her down-to-earth mind

were a guarantee that there would be something to keep him from being completely swept away into the clouds by his dreams. Because he was an idealist, and idealists were dangerous people—to others, but most of all to themselves. And he knew it.

The party was almost over. Sugu thought she was home and dry. And then one of the older faculty wives, coming back from a trip inside the house to “wash her hands,” said to Mani, “Your house smells so interesting! And a little bird in the post office told me, you got another package from home the other day, full of wonderfully exotic smells.” The lady turned to Sugu, included her in a beaming smile, and went on, “You must cook us a real, Malaysian meal some day, dear.”

Sugu was stunned. She couldn't decide whether the woman was trying to be nice, put them at their ease, and make them feel welcome, or being sarcastic and trying to make them feel small. If the lady had been Malaysian, Sugu would have known straight away. She looked at the faces around the table, and then at her husband's face, for a clue, but couldn't get any useful information. Even after all these years, there were times when she couldn't read American faces or understand American manners. And as for her husband, she didn't want to see his face at all, the way it was now. There was going to be a scene later. Inwardly she sighed, while she picked up the bowl of her ambrosia, carefully made from a *Ladies Home Journal* recipe and extra, tiny marshmallows, and started passing it around.

They'd been married long enough not to have any illusions. She knew his finicky ways and the ridiculous meticulousness of his personal grooming. He laughed at her addiction to Hindi movie magazines, Kung Fu movies and Chinese *wayang*, which he claimed was proof of her estate mentality. As if his family was any better than hers; just an ordinary doctor and wife from Kuala Selangor, the same small, sleepy town where her secondary-school teacher parents lived. A town surrounded by rubber estates. He liked to *angkat pangkat*, to put up his status; she found it too amusing to be fully irritated.

And she didn't mind his dreams. It was nice to imagine that it was possible to be completely free. They'd been watching *The Andy Griffith Show* when he'd said, "Americans don't have the first concept. Just look! That's the worst an American family can do. Not up to the standard of our people." She knew *Andy Griffith* wasn't typical of real American life, but she also knew he was correct. She still had bad dreams about the drama surrounding their wedding, she a Christian, he a Hindu.

Now he was wanting to do more than dream, and she didn't know what to do.

Sugu thanked her guests, put the food away, cleaned up, all on automatic. Her mind was elsewhere.

Mani hadn't been so bad when they'd been in university. There'd been other Indians around, other Malaysians, people who knew their parents. He had talked, but they had worn the clothes they were supposed to wear and eaten the foods they were supposed to eat. But here in Vermont she was afraid he was getting a bit out of control.

"There's a pond on the property," he had said to her that first day, describing a place he'd gone and rented while she was sleeping off the long flight, not even giving her a chance to see it. His voice had been excited and far away. That was the voice he used when he was so taken up with his own idea that there was no stopping him, even if she argued he wouldn't be able to hear it.

"Ducks," he said. "Just imagine, ducks right outside the door." She said, "Your grandmother used to keep ducks, you said they were filthy." He said, "It's different here."

He had the idea somehow that renovating their rented farmhouse would lead, in the course of time, to being a wealthy landowner-farmer. In America. He said, "We can slowly buy up this property, and then another, and do them up." She said, "But you don't like getting your hands dirty." It fell on deaf ears.

She had given up. But who ever heard of a professor, even a very, very junior, young, assistant professor, painting fences. She couldn't explain that to her parents or his. She'd never be able to.

She wondered what her mother-in-law would say if the old

lady knew her precious son was painting fences to pay part of his rent. Like a laborer.

Mani explained to her that his grandfather had come from India to Malaysia with nothing, and made a success of himself. He had to match it and better it. When he was too busy to come to the phone, she told his mother that he was “full of activities” and carefully didn’t specify what type of activities.

“Living overseas, people get all sorts of funny ideas,” her mother-in-law said. Sugu thought, if only you knew. She just kept her fingers crossed he would get over his fantasy, so they could someday go home. He would be steadier at home in Malaysia where he belonged, and might not feel as if he had to keep proving something. But then she thought of all the old ladies waiting at home, and how in Malaysia she’d be the one always having to prove herself.

It wouldn’t be enough for them that she had a PhD, or a job. She would also have to keep a perfect house, cook perfect food, and look cool and beautiful by tea time.

Whether it was the Vermont winter, with four-foot snow drifts that swallowed cars, and icy paths on which Sugu slid and slipped every day, or the memory of the faculty wife at the Fourth of July party, or the Christmas season, or even the devil whispering bad advice into her ear, Sugu decided, in a fit of rebellion, that she was tired of Mani trying to make her into something she wasn’t. She decided to take typical Malaysian food to the faculty potluck. She even put on her “occasion” sari, and bullied Mani into wearing a Malaysian batik tie—silk, of course. And export quality. Mani was not the type to buy a batik tie if it wasn’t export quality.

Sugu cursed as the wind swept under her coat and wandered up her nylon-clad legs. But on the whole, she was pleased with herself.

She had made *nasi campur*, which was really, typically Malaysian; basically a pile of rice, with whatever dishes you wanted to add, all served together on one plate. Some meat, some seafood, some greens.

Stir-fried broccoli, with her mum-in-law's dried oysters—why not, they were just sitting in the cupboard—and sesame oil and ginger. A blistering hot, Malay-style shrimp *sambal* with plenty of roasted *belacan* ground into it. Good *belacan* didn't smell fishy, never mind what her husband said. And her own mother's gravy-type chicken curry, with potatoes and cabbage leaves, south-Indian style. Anybody could eat that. A few sliced cucumbers, some rice, a borrowed turkey platter, and she was done. Only the rice wasn't quite right, being Uncle Ben's made in a hurry.

Everybody said how good it all was. Sugu was very pleased with herself, until Mani pointed out to her that people were pushing it around on their plates, or taking tiny, tiny bites and then gulping at their drinks. In the end, only the broccoli-oyster stuff and the rice and cucumbers went.

There was dead silence in the car as they drove home with the still laden platter on her lap.

As they pulled into their driveway, Mani finally spoke. He said, "Enough. We're getting rid of all of that stuff. No more fresh-off-the-boat signs for people to laugh at." His voice was tight and angry. Sugu didn't blame him. She too felt humiliated. She couldn't go through that type of experience again.

They went straight to the pantry to throw away everything their colleagues had rejected; the spices, the pickles, the smells, the Indian-ness. They would have to hide their shameful appetites, their Malaysian stomachs. Their souls.

Mani began lifting things off the shelves. The previous evening, Sugu had simply torn open the tops of the cellophane bags of spices to make the curry for the potluck. Mani said, "What a mess you've let this place get into." He dropped the bags he was holding into the trash and looked at his palms with distaste. "My God!"

The bottoms of the bags were sticky. Greasy.

"Don't put everything on me," Sugu said. "I work just as hard as you do. Where were you when it was getting dirty?" But it was a half-hearted, automatic response. She couldn't understand all the grease either.

As the shelf cleared and the kitchen trashcan filled, they both saw. A puddle of oil, flame-orange from red chilies and turmeric, spreading out from the base of the pickle bottle, covering the whole shelf, streaked with powders of various colors, decorated with stray mustard and fenugreek seed, patterned with a patchwork of shallow spots that had been the bottoms of spice packages and bottles. The puddle sneered at them.

No American home would have had the pickles in the first place, and no Indian home or Malaysian home would have let them sit around long enough for this to happen. They had failed both sides.

It wouldn't wash out. They managed to remove the oil and other substances, but the stain was forever.

Mani sat at the kitchen table, with his head in his hands, and cried. That shocked Sugu into calmness. She had to snap him out of it. She said, cheerful and matter-of-fact, "I'm going to warm up some food for you, no use letting it go to waste."

He lifted his head. "For God's sake, Sugu," he said. "You can't fix this with food." She said, "I don't see why not." She sighed. "You were so busy watching other people," she said, "you didn't eat properly. You're getting things out of proportion." He said, "You want me to keep things in proportion, the way you do? With that sari and that food and all that stuff you kept?" His eyes were still bright and wet, but he was smiling at her, he was seeing her again. Relieved, but also a bit hurt, she said, "I do my best." Didn't he know how hard it was for her?

He said, "It's all coming apart. My whole dream. This house, my colleagues..." She said, slapping a plate down in front of him, suddenly angry, "Stop making drama. You can simply replace the shelf tomorrow."

He looked shocked. "I can't replace it," he said. "It's two hundred years old. That would destroy the integrity of the house."

He really was in another world from her. She said, "Integrity is about character. Not houses."

He was staring at her. What had she done? "You're saying I don't have integrity," he said slowly. She said, "*What?*"

Mani said, "You're completely right." He had been slumped

in his chair. Suddenly he stood up, walked to the trash can, and lifted the spices out. "I love this stuff," he said. "I love Amah's pickles. I love the smell of your home food." He continued pulling things out of the trash. "I don't know what to do," he said quietly.

She felt sorry for him, but also fiercely proud. This was what she loved, not the movie star looks or the glib talk. This honesty, this decency. She said, "We'll find a way." She took the pickle bottle out of his hand, opened it, and put it on the table. "Sit," she said. "Eat. We can wipe all that stuff and put it back in the cupboard."

He said, "Everybody thinks our food is weird. That we are weird." She said, "Your dean isn't hiding inside the fridge. You can eat what you want at home."

He said, "I don't want to always eat alone." She said, "We'll compromise a bit. Get along. There have to be lots of ways." Getting herself a loaded plate, she sat down opposite him. "Not your way," she said. Looking at her food, remembering the faces at the party, she added, "Not mine." Suddenly he looked up at her and laughed. "I just thought," he said, "Even if we can't figure out how we're supposed to mix in here, that shelf has managed to do it. It's here and home all together. Fully mixed."

It took a while, but they learned how to mix in as well. American football, Indian cricket. Ice hockey, field hockey. The next year, Sugu and Mani had another Fourth of July cookout and put a bottle of his mother's pickles on the table, right next to the ketchup and the sweet relish. Mani's mother's pickles didn't smell so strong outdoors. And they went well with hamburgers. Very well.