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## Pandora's Box

Subbulu asked her son. “Ganesh, what are you looking for? You have seen some very beautiful girls, all well-educated. But none of them appealed to you.”

“I don’t know, Mom. The girl should be modern. In America, one should be modern.”

Subbulu was frustrated. She and her husband—Sivaram, with the help of relatives and friends, arranged many ‘bridal showings’. But, Ganesh was unmoved by the bevy of beautiful brides, not even a flicker of interest on his pleasant face adorned with dark curly hair. Subbulu hated for him to go off to America without getting married. She didn’t want him to be all alone in that faraway land without a companion, without a wife to cook and care for him. She didn’t understand her son’s fascination with modern girls. It wasn’t clear to her what modern meant. Did it mean wearing those tight fitting jeans and T-shirts, exposing all you had for the whole wide world to gape at? Did it mean chopping off one’s hair, and get one of those bob cuts, hair falling all over the face? Did it mean drinking and dancing in those sleazy bars on Brigade Road? She was at a complete loss.

She asked Sivaram. “What’s all this modern rubbish?”

Sivaram looked up from *The Hindu*. “It can mean many things, actually.....for instance.....”

Subbulu cut him off tersely. “I didn’t ask for a long lecture. Just tell me in a few words. Ganesh is so...so...so...”

Sivaram, used to his wife’s brashness, was unfazed, “You mean taciturn?”

“Don’t use all those big, big words. I’m not one of your students!”

“Okay, okay. I mean Ganesh doesn’t know how to express his feelings, yeah?”

Subbulu wrung her hands. “I wish that boy....he’s so difficult.....all this America going....”

Sivaram said. “Why don’t we let Ganesh meet a girl by himself? None of that old-fashioned stuff, the girl wearing a heavy silk sari, all that gold jewelry. Let’s avoid the conventional approach of a bride meeting the groom in a traditional setting, amidst parents, a bunch of aunts, uncles, and other well-wishers, watching each and every move of groom and bride. Just the boy and the girl....let them meet at a restaurant, let them talk.....you’ll never know....”

Subbulu was aghast, put her hands to her face. “*Toba, toba*, that’s not done.....never....that’s completely against our customs.....”

Sivaram said. “We need to move with the times. There’s nothing wrong in a harmless meeting. C’mon, think modern....”

So, Subbulu went back to her list of candidates. As she was leafing through the bio data and pictures of prospective brides, one pretty girl in a simple *salwar kameez* with her silky shoulder length hair, caught her attention. Subbulu lost no time in contacting her parents who lived in Cox town, a posh neighborhood in Bangalore. A meeting between the boy and girl was arranged.

Ganesh fell for Manjula, her lustrous hair, her lithe figure, her form-fitting jeans and high-heeled sandals, her posh convent-educated English, so much different from the other girls who didn’t have the good fortune to

attend those expensive, snobbish schools. For her part, Manjula didn't find Ganesh all that hot, but he looked quite benign, and kind of cute. And she went along with her parents who were impressed with Sivaram's name and fame and his vast ancestral property, and agreed to the marriage.

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The couple flew to Cleveland, Ohio, and settled in a one-bedroom apartment. Manjula was bored stiff, sitting in the apartment whole day, watching TV, waiting for Ganesh to come home. She couldn't go out as it was too cold, and a month after their arrival, heavy snow made it all the more miserable. Added to this gloomy weather, Ganesh didn't know how to entertain his bride. He never took her sightseeing, never took her to a park, never took her to an art museum, never took her for a stroll on a Sunday afternoon, never took her to the Rock and Roll Hall of fame, nothing. He used to come home late, rather tired after his classes and laboratory work, have a beer, eat, and watch some dull programs on Civil war or global warming. Before sleeping, he used to make love to her. No romantic music, no candle light dinners, no flowers, no sexy lingerie, all those things Manjula read in the Mills and Boon novels. Ganesh just didn't know anything about such things, his reading was strictly confined to engineering subjects. In the darkness of their bedroom, he kissed her clumsily and did his thing. He didn't know how to approach a woman with finesse, and no one gave him a copy of *Kamasutra*, the quintessential love manual—a must read for every married couple. He didn't know how to arouse her with subtle caresses and kisses, had no idea of her erogenous zones, let alone G-spots or other elusive aspects of the female body. Also, he was remote in his manner, always in his own world of computers and robotics. While she made it easy for him to penetrate her private portal, it was hard for her to penetrate his private thoughts. The marriage failed due to a complete lack of communication. After a few months of enduring the dull life she ran away, back to her parents, back to her familiar and comfortable

world of Cox town, and back to her Brigade Road gang. Manjula claimed that Ganesh neglected her, drank like a fish, and consorted with other women.

When Subbulu came to know of these allegations she said. “That’s what we get with these modern girls. Modern, my foot.....that boy, he hankered after a modern girl, look now what happened. She ditches him and comes back home. What audacity, to spread all those baseless rumors about my son. He is a well-behaved boy. Didn’t even have a girl-friend, like some of his cousins. Always buried in his books. Who’ll believe her?”

When his father called him from Bangalore, Ganesh was surprised as all along he was under the impression that Manjula was visiting her cousin in New York city. He was shocked that she said such horrid things about him. He told his father that he had nothing stronger than beer in his apartment, and he didn’t have the time to meet other women, let alone have affairs.

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When he knew for sure that she wasn’t going to return to Ohio, he cleared out Manjula’s chest of drawers, to pack up her clothes—panties, bras, blouses, T-shirts, and jeans and ship them to Bangalore. At the bottom of one of the drawers was an ornate gold plated wooden jewelry box, containing a pair of ear rings, a gold chain, and a strip of contraceptive pills. To the best of his knowledge she didn’t use those pills. So, what were they doing, tucked at the very bottom, underneath her clothes. They were manufactured in India and expired only recently, suggesting that Manjula must have got those pills while in India, before her marriage. While it didn’t prove anything, a suggestion came to his mind that she was screwing around happily before marriage. Then, as it happened in some Bollywood movies, in a flashback, his mind raced back in time.

He remembered some of the incidents he didn’t attach any significance until this dastardly discovery.

Manjula said, “For God’s sake, Ganesh! I am your wife! Why use it? It feels so yucky.....that rubber.....disgusting.”

“But, Manjula, you can’t get pregnant now, so soon after marriage. Certainly not now, not while I’m still a struggling student. Once I complete my Master’s, I’ll get a job and then we can.....”

“It doesn’t mean that if you don’t use a condom, I’ll get pregnant right away. It doesn’t work like that. And condoms are not foolproof, for your information. The best contraception is abstinence. There, let’s not fuck until you get your degree, okay?”

“But, we need.....need.....you know what I mean.....”

“Why can’t you say you need a fuck? Why can’t you be a real man and come to me without all those preparations? First you get the Vaseline, then the condom, and slobber all over my face. Why can’t you be spontaneous, for a change? Everything’s planning, planning, planning. You won’t even die without planning, I know you.....I know you don’t care about my feelings, whether I.....” She sat on the couch, crying.

When he tried to comfort her she rebuffed him. “Don’t touch me! You are a fool! Don’t know how to treat a woman. Go back to your fucking books and experiments. Get lost!”

At that time he didn’t pay any attention to her rants, but now in view of the damning revelation, what she said made sense. Many questions popped up in his brain, just like flash bulbs. She must have known how it felt without a condom, otherwise, why such vehement opposition to its use? Many times, she used to drive him crazy with her moves, which in retrospect, she must have learnt in her previous liaisons. He never taught her those things, but then again how could he teach her, if he didn’t know them himself? And kissing, she was an expert....oh....those kisses....how he missed them. And her shapely slender hands with long tapering fingers, she knew how to use them. Seeing those pills made him angry, jealous and inadequate. He was a fool not to have had

prior experience, and a bigger fool to think that he married a virgin, while she was anything but. No wonder she despised his naïveté. Obviously he didn't measure up to Manjula's standards. Was that why she left him? In disgust, he threw the pills in trash. Good riddance. But at the back of his mind a nagging doubt lingered; if only he didn't use those condoms, Manjula might not have left him. Oh! What a shame! She was beautiful, smart and sexy. If only, if only.....