

Mridula

It was a perfect day, clouds were cloaking the blistering sun; and there was a hint of rain in the air. The scorching summer heat finally showed some sign of letting up, and I had taken the day off to go to my home town of Nagpur.

I travelled for nearly a day by the train, and I reached home exhausted by the journey. My mother informed me that the girl's parents were about to 'drop in' at anytime. It was a rude awakening; gone were the days when a girl brought in a tray filled with tea and snacks, serving the male suitor with a coy smile on her face.

I would be analysed, questioned, after which the girl's parents would allow me to see their daughter. I was a little amused by the whole scenario, and considered serving them tea myself (to show my extreme displeasure at being treated like an inbred idiot, but the irony might have been missed). My father and mother however, were pretty casual about the whole thing (so much for my male chauvinistic ego).

My mother laid out my finest pair of clothes, and a few minutes later I was ready to be paraded in front of my prospective in laws. The door bell rang, my father decided to answer (a break from his usual shout out to my mother to answer the door). I could hear the usual pleasantries being exchanged, the girl's parents were now seated, and on cue my mother entered the room with a tray full of tea and the traditional samosas.

"Viren" my father yelled at the top of his voice

"Yes dad" I said replying in Hindi.

"Come here" my father said, returning to whatever pointless sundry conversation he was having with the girl's parents. I confidently strode into the room, acting as if I hadn't the faintest idea why I had been summoned.

"Yes dad" I said completely ignoring my prospective bride's parents

"These are Mridula's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Dhawan" my father said

"Namaste" I said courteously.

"Sit beta sit" they said, I wanted to point out that it was **my house** and I would parade around naked if I so desired. But the thought of getting married was foremost on my mind. I casually sat down next to my father.

"So you work in Delhi?" it was the podgy wife of my prospective father-in-law who started the rapid fire round.

"Yes" I said (there was no special information to add it was a close ended question)

"It must be really hot in Delhi" Mr. Dhawan said flashing a 1000 watt smile

"Yes" I said. Once again, there was not much scope for a creative answer.

“So which company do you work in?” Mr. Dhawan continued, I was under the impression they had been told what I did by my father.

“I work for Gtran” I said casually

“Really? What do you do there?” I realised then, it was just the beginning of the many questions I was about to be bombarded with

“I am an assistant production manager”

“Really what does your company make?” Mrs. Dhawan said joining the free for all.

“They produce high density copper wires”

“Ooh” Mrs. Dhawan exclaimed, I can bet my last Rupee, Mrs. Dhawan does not know till this day what high density copper wires are.

“So do you work in shifts?” Mr. Dhawan said, finally catching on to what I did for a living

“Yes, there are two shifts one is from 10 to 6, and the other is from 8 to 4 in the morning, since I am an assistant product manager I get alternate shifts every 2 months” I said catching my breath.

“Must be difficult working in the night shift” Mrs. Dhawan said, with a concerned look on her face.

“You get used to it”

“So how much do you earn?” Mr. Dhawan said, it was a blunt and an otherwise rude question but at meetings such as these, it was of pivotal importance.

“20 thousand a month, taxes extra” I replied, noting that my Hindi did not have a Marathi twang as the rest of them.

“I see, so you pay taxes” Mr. Dhawan said, the smile was gone from his face

“Yes” I said, wondering if I should have bought my PAN card along.

“Good, you know it is always better to ask” Mr. Dhawan said looking at my father with a smile; my father was too busy sipping on his tea to take notice (It was the same attitude that prevailed when I discussed my marriage).

“Good, and do you drink or smoke?” Mrs. Dhawan asked

“No” my mother stepped in this time, I wanted to answer the question with a smart retort, but my mother seemed to have been offended by the question. There was a momentary silence after my mothers’ reply. It was now my father’s turn to add a special comment.

“He is a good boy when it comes to stuff like that” my father said patting me on the back, the bottle of Vodka I had stashed away in my cupboard in Delhi must have turned a couple of times. I felt a little guilty, but I had not had the heart to tell my parents I drank occasionally.

“Good. Well, we should be leaving now Mr. Rao” Mr. Dhawan said smiling.

“Have some more tea” my father said, extending the usual courtesy as he shook Mr. Dhawan’s hand

“No we really must go”

I wondered if they had a couple of other similar interviews lined up. I had always opposed going to a girl’s house and the ‘looking’ at her scenario; but this was a little too extreme for my liking.

“Good, then I shall call you and let you know” Mr. Dhawan said as he left, the last sentence was in Marathi for some vague reason. I saw Mr. and Mrs. Dhawan drive away in their Maruti Zen. There was a moment of awkward silence, as the three of us returned to the room. I decided to end the sepulchre silence.

“Well they seemed nice” I said, with a stupid grin on my face

“Yes” my father said motioning to my mother for another cup of tea; I was the one who should have asked for a bottle of glucose after the interrogation I had been subjected to by the Dhawan’s.

I trudged up to my room and switched on the television, god knew when I would get a chance to enjoy myself again (marriage looked around the corner). I felt a little odd; I had just had a taste of what a woman felt like when she was interviewed. I must admit I did not like it, but I had always known how odd it felt.

The next morning, my father received a call on his battered cell phone. Mr. Dhawan said he would be happy to introduce his daughter to me. I felt a little excited, I had already told my parents that I had a week’s leave, and I intended to finalise my wedding during that period (I know; I was new to the game). The meeting was fixed for the same evening (taking into account it was a Sunday evening).

My father was a little disappointed as he was looking forward to his favourite football match on the television, but he did not make a big deal about it. My mother on the other hand, was thrilled and I was wondering if she had a series of questions lined up for the Mridula as well. It was only fair that she grill Mridula as well. The drive to the Dhawan’s was uneventful (it was just 10 minutes away from our house).

I was dressed in smart looking pants, and a magnificent Dockers shirt which was worth one sixth of a month’s salary. I was hoping the shirt would make an instant impression on Mridula. The moment we stepped into the house I had a feeling that Mridula was destined to be someone else’s wife. The electricity decided to make an exit as I entered, I am not a superstitious man but I think god made my decision for me.

“What bad timing” Mr. Dhawan said

“Yes” my father added phlegmatically, it was his nonchalance that was disconcerting, the light turned itself on a moment later (the Dhawan’s had a battery linked inverter).

“Good, that is on” Mr. Dhawan said smiling; my father was momentarily impressed (at least I think he was). I sat down flanked by my patents on either side.

“Mridula” Mr. Dhawan screamed. It was her turn now, Mridula entered the room timidly, and sat down beside her mother.

“This is Mridula” Mr. Dhawan said smiling. I was trying very hard to get a good look at her, but the solitary tube light in the absence of any other lighting was making it a difficult task. My mother was ready, but my father was busy sipping on some tea that was brought in by Mridula’s younger sister. I got a fleeting glance of the younger sister as she placed the tea in front of me, she was average looking, in her mid twenties, and I guessed she was next in line.

“So what do you do beta?” my mother said picking up a tea cup.

“I have done my MA in history” Mridula said confidently.

“Good, Viren is an MBA” my mother said, there was no response from Mridula as we made eye contact for the first time

“So are you working some place?”

“No” Mridula replied.

“Do you plan to work after marriage?” my mother continued, I wondered if there would be anything for me and Mridula to discuss by the time my mother was done.

“No, I feel being a housewife is a full time job” Mridula answered, my mother was impressed and she smiled in consent.

“She is a very good singer also” Mrs. Dhawan added pointing to a framed certificate on the wall, I squeezed my eyes together hoping to read the letters, needless to say the bad lighting did not help.

“Good maybe you will sing for us later” my mother said smiling

“Sure she will” Mrs. Dhawan replied in Marathi

“Why don’t you show Viren the house Mridula” Mr. Dhawan said smiling, there were smiles all around as I nearly leapt out of the sofa, Mridula smiled and motioned for me to follow her. I followed her to the veranda, it was getting dark now.

“So what do you do?” Mridula said starting the conversation.

“I am assistant manager productions in Gtran we make high density copper wires” I said, eliminating the most obvious follow up question.

“Okay. So does that pay well?” Mridula said, I was wondering why Mr. and Mrs. Dhawan had bothered interrogating me the previous day, obviously they had not passed anything on to Mridula.

“I get around 20k in hand” I said casually

“Okay, so is Delhi an expensive city?”

“Depends on your life style, I think you have to balance it out between the occasional shopping spree and the lean periods of abstinence”

“So do you go shopping often?”

“Only when I am a little lonely or I seriously need clothes”

“I thought only girls shop when they are lonely or bored” Mridula said smiling wryly.

“No, all my friends shop when they are lonely” I replied

“So don’t you have a girl friend?”

“No, that is why I want to get married” It was a crafty yet well planned answer.

“Everyone has a girlfriend these days” Mridula said. I guess the words FLIRT have been secretly engraved on my forehead, because Mridula was not the first girl that had a hard time believing I did not have a girl friend

“Do you have a boy friend?” I said turning tables.

“No” Mridula replied

“Why not?” I said, I half expected an answer like ‘I was in love once it did not work out’ or something like ‘Of course I have a boyfriend, I was just kidding’ but the answer that I had least expected was:

“I don’t believe in having a boyfriend, I plan on having only one boyfriend my husband”

I had no idea how to react; it was the most orthodox answer I could have received. I didn’t know if she thought I was stupid, or if she was actually serious.

“There is no harm in having a boyfriend” was the best I could blurt out.

“I just don’t believe in it” Mridula said dismissing my attempt at reason.

“I guess we are all entitled to live our lives the way we like” I said smiling, I was a little bored of the topic.

“So what are you looking for in a life partner?” Mridula said, I had mentally prepared myself for the question. I had spoken to many friends, and they were unanimous in that it was the trickiest question.

“I am looking for someone who can share my time with me, who can understand what I feel and one who can be my friend, girl friend, and mentor depending on the situation” it was a brilliant answer as far as I was concerned, there was a touch of intensity in it. Mridula seemed impressed with the answer.

“What are you looking for in a husband?” I said, striking the iron while it was hot.

“I am looking for someone who can treat me like a princess, I want him to make me feel special everyday, someone who can respect my space, and make me feel like an important part of his life” it was an answer so much in contrast to mine that I was tempted to get up, shake Mridula’s hand and apologise for having wasted everyone’s time.

“I am sure every woman wants that” I said, trying very hard to disguise the sarcasm in my voice. Sure a man wanted to make his wife feel special, but to treat her like a princess? Make her feel special every day? That was pushing it (wasn’t it?).

“I don’t know about every woman, but that is what I want” Mridula said, there was a finality in her voice. From what I gathered, Mridula was looking for a millionaire, who would devote every single moment of his life in pursuit of Mridula’s happiness.

Digressing ever so slightly, I had once played bridge with a group of friends. Once your partner has a strong hand he makes a bid that tells you to stop bidding, it’s called a ‘Shut up call’. Mridula had just given me the shut up call.

The conversation lasted for exactly a minute more; at the end of the conversation Mridula proceeded to show me the house. Once I was downstairs all I could think about was going home, and asking my parents where they had managed to find such a fine specimen of a day dreamer.

Once we were back in the car my mother started the conversation.

“She was nice looking”

“Yes” my father said concentrating on the road

“What do you think?” my mother said leaning across the front seat and touching my shoulder.

“She is looking for a millionaire who will tend to her every whim and fancy, that is what I think” I said, realising that two of my seven days had just been spent in a fruitless pursuit.

It was my first experience. And to be honest, even if I had said yes she would have said no (so it was easier for me to say no anyway). Incidentally, the decision was also up to the Dhawan’s not my parents or me. They were supposed to call us up ‘in a few days’ and let us know. I hoped that the phone call never came and my father was spared the awkward rejection. Although I was pretty confident if Mridula had any brains she too would have fathomed it was a match made in hell.

My parents did not pursue the Mridula line of conversation at all, they understood that I had no interest in seeing her dressed in red with me standing by her side (in a ridiculous looking

Marathi outfit). Mridula was the only girl I spoke to that weekend; my father had lined up another (prospectively agonising) interrogation.

I was rather pissed off with the whole Mridula affair (the fact that the second girl's parents rejected me outright did not help). All in all, it was a pretty disappointing week, and I came back to Delhi slightly more frustrated and a little less hopeful of getting married any time soon.