

Sugared. Spiced. Salted.

by Jamal H. Iqbal

"Indian girls are gorgeous but generally have really scruffy knees. Honestly." he generalized nonchalantly on their first date, staring at the north sky canopying the desert. "Dude wait, what did you just say?" she darted straight at the pair of lovestruck hearts in his irises. "Erm, I mean, urm, you know like white girls or you Arab girls, you've gorgeous knees 'coz you put cocoa butter and shit and kinda take care of your skin" he parried, sinking into the beanbag like a baby turtle does, each time a curious toddler pokes a carrot into a terrarium. She didn't say anything for a while. The smile was back as she lilted, manicured fingers pointing skywards, "Look, the Big Dipper!" He thought the worst was over.

They continued sitting by the fake oasis, drinking single malt, eating soy crackers and chatting about the quality of escorts in glitzy glamping resorts. Her knife skills (he noticed as she *Shucked* a fresh Oyster expertly squeezing a lemon over the shell, making a ceviche for him) seemed to come so naturally to her he wondered why she'd given up surgery for a consultant physician's post. Little did he know those same skills would come to haunt him, starting at dinner date two all the way to the ninth.

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The next time they met she was modeling a Michael Kors LBD as he invited her to an Argentinean Asado followed by Tango. As she caught his eyes examining her tanned slightly stubbled legs out came the *Tourné* — "I specifically applied macadamia oil to my legs this evening. Don't you think they're hot?" The rest of the evening was a haze of buttery Wagyu and Chilean red with some foxtrot thrown in. Along with the constant abrasion of that swift incision pricking into his soul each time they played footsie on the dance floor.

The *Paring* happened on number three. Just as the gold leafed chocolate fondant oozed decadent Bolivian dark from under her silver spoon, out came the repartee, "The pastry chef overdid the

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fondant by a minute, don't you think? The sides are a tad scraped, almost shabby. He must be Indian." By now he knew she'd neither forgotten nor forgiven.

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As he admired the frescoed roof of the Trattoria, pleasantly sipping Sambuca, happy that a few days and three evenings had passed happily without mention of knees, out came the affected *Devein* — "For a hotel this overpriced, that chandelier needs a little more polish, don't you think? I hate it when the joints aren't to one's liking."

By the time he asked her to Bentoya, with his favorite Salmon Sashimi and Raw Uni Soup in the whole world (and no, the talking toilet seat with a choice of temperature had NOTHING to do with it, gadget freak in him be damned) he wholly expected her to take a jibe that would Fillet him clean. And when it did come — "I'd like my tofu just slightly butter poached, caramelized to the point of slight scruffy, will you please request the chef?" — he couldn't help but break into a sheepish grin with just a hint of amusement.

Halfway through these nightly jousts, he knew she had the power to disarm him at will. So one evening, as they both decided their days had been tiring enough to merit an eat-in-while-catching-Hannibal-reruns on his couch, he decided to wait and ignore the 'En Guard' when it would come. But to his surprise, it never did! Not on episode 5.

Neither on episodes 6 nor 7 (although he could've sworn she had something when they dissected the antelope on screen). And somewhere past midnight, when Season One ended, she simply got up, said she must get going, and had an early start the next morning. "Finally!" he said to himself, finally she felt that he felt that he was wrong and she felt that she had finally made him feel how upsetting his statement had made her feel. "En fin, it had ended!"

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"You're under arrest," she said cuffing him to the bedpost the night they came home from the Great Gatsby Party at the Cirque Du Soir, "for attempting to seduce this gorgeous woman in full public

view." As the centre of his trousers puffed up in sync with each slide of her Louboutin *Stiletto*, she took baby steps away from the bed, and out of his bedroom, giving him teasing glimpses of each article of clothing that shuffled off her body, and each inch of the tantalizingly chubby curves they revealed. When he could see her no more, when he heard the soft click of the living room door closing, and the crunch of her car on the gravel outside, his eyes finally fell on the dressing table mirror, and her scribble, in Mac Burgundy No. 2, "You're hereby sentenced to a kneecap — Boss."

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The next afternoon, while she blew into her tangerine soda and giggled at the ice cream moustache she now sported, he couldn't help but think Fuddruckers for late lunch had been a fantastic idea. They'd chunked coins into the jukebox, had cheated on both their diets AND, he'd sent her an email prior to meeting her. An email building a case, step by crafted step of how he wasn't a Y-Chromosome Douchebag, and how he was sorry he'd made the comment about those knees.

Licking clean one side of her milkstache, knowing it would get him to break into that charming lopsided grin that she loved so much, she drew her *Scimitar* and said, "By the way, I forgot to tell you. I think somebody hacked my email. So I terminated the account last night. Hopefully, no one mailed me anything of importance this morning!"

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At Maria Bonita's the next evening, he looked at her tucking into her gorgonzola and lima salad, waiting for the jibe that would, inevitably come his way any time now. In fact, the sadist in him waited for it. Admiring its delicacy. Afraid of its brutality. In awe of its effortless effectiveness. Portioning a piece of Queso Fresco she pointed the *Cheese- Knife* straight to his lips, expertly feeding him with her right, even as the left hand continued forking the beans rolling about in her plate. Looking at him with soft, slightly bemused eyes, she blinked.

They never discussed the subject of women's knees again. Indian, Arabian or otherwise.

