

Pink and white balloons.

By Balvinder Kaur

The heat did nothing to help the situation. Anita looked at herself in the mirror, and saw a stranger looking back at her. A stranger in a red shalwar kameez, bedecked with shining gold sequins. Her thick black hair was pulled back into a tight French roll, with strands left hanging to frame a small round face that was decorated with black kohl and mascara. Her lips looked strange, coloured with a bright red that clearly did not suit her, and cheekbones that were dusted with pink blusher, giving her the impression of a china doll. That was exactly what she felt like. A plaything.

Turning away from her reflection, she anxiously looked around her room, avoiding the door behind which she could hear the mumble of voices and occasional giggle. How many times had she been on the other side of the door, oblivious to the mass of turbulent emotions that must have filled those other poor souls that had followed down the path she was now taking. Outside her window, she could see the clear wide blue of the sky contrast with the green of the trees, a bird swirling through the air. How she envied its freedom. How liberated it must feel. Its very movements seemed to taunt her, and made her heart break just that little bit more.

Walking to her bed, she looked at the presents and flowers that covered the printed wild dolphins on the duvet that had warmed her in her sleep, since her tenth birthday. She had the sudden urge to throw them all to the floor, and curl up in to the warmth of the duvet like she used to as a little girl, blocking out everything and everyone...but she couldn't. Behind the pine door and painted pink walls that had contained her entire life since she could remember, was her family – waiting for her to do the right thing.

“Nita, beta,” her mother called in Punjabi, through the door. “Are you ready? There are people waiting for you.”

Waiting for their dinner now that the samosas and pakorai were finished, most likely, she thought. Waiting so that they could go back to their own homes, and get on with their own lives, and not have to give any thought, thankfully, to anything other than the new victim that they could sacrifice to their gods of tradition and custom. She gave a grim smile that belonged on the face of a world-weary sixty year old, not a seventeen-year-old girl who could have had the whole world at her feet. She told her mother that she was coming, answering her through the door. She didn't feel ready enough to open it yet, but she'd have to eventually. What else could she do? There was no backing out now. There had never been any question of backing out at all.

It had all started five months ago, on the day of her best friend's wedding.

“Nita, beta. Please tell Jai to hurry, or we shall be late for the bharati,” Mum had called out, as Nita passed the kitchen where her mum was washing up. “If we don't leave soon, we will miss everything.”

“Why does it always have to be me that tells her, Mum?” Nita protested as she ran up the stairs. “Why does she always have to be run around?”

She opened her sister's bedroom door, and stopped still. Jai, two years younger than Anita, was sitting on the bed with a mobile phone attached to one ear. Anita felt a

sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, and quickly closed the door behind her, shutting out the sound of clattering cups that her mother was cleaning downstairs.

“What do you think you’re doing? She hissed, running to her sister’s side. “Mum wanted you ready and downstairs ten minutes ago, and here you are, on the phone with *him!*”

“Kam,” Jai rolled her eyes and spoke calmly into the phone. “I have to go now. Mummy number two has just come in to tell me off.”

Anita gave her sister a grimace, and looked pointedly at the clock on her sister’s cluttered bedside cabinet, lifting her eyebrows as her sister kissed the phone and made her farewells.

“You told me that you were going to stop seeing him,” Anita whispered as Jai put the phone into her evening bag. “You know what Mum and Dad are going to say when they find out. He’s not even one of us!”

“Oh, shut up, Nita,” Jai replied. “Do you really believe in this whole stupid caste thing, anyway? *I’m* not about to get married to some strange bloke that Mum and Dad think is suitable for me, like poor Rani, just because it’s the respectable thing to do. Anyway, I’ll be sixteen in two weeks, and then I’ll be able to do anything I like.”

“You’d never do that to Mum and Dad, though, would you,” said Anita incredulously. “You could never *marry* him! His parents would never allow it, and neither would ours.”

“That’s what you think,” Jai replied smugly. “Kam’s told me he’s going to tell his parents on his birthday.”

“Great. He’s only going to let down his family on what is probably to be the most important day on their calendar, seeing that he’s their only child. Jai, doesn’t that give you a clue to what a coward he is?”

“He’s not!” Jai rounded on her sister. “You’re just jealous that I’m seeing someone, and you’re not. Oh yeah, I forgot. Miss Goody-two-shoes is engaged to marry daddy dear’s choice. Well, I’m sorry, but I can’t let my life revolve around them forever, Nita, and you shouldn’t either. They’ll always be telling you what to do, at this rate. No wonder you’re their golden girl.”

“I am not!”

“Of course you are, Nita. They’ve *always* worshiped you. You can do no wrong in their eyes.”

“That’s not true, Jai,” Anita protested. But Jai’s picture of her was spot on. Why had she never noticed before? She had spent her whole life pleasing her parents.

“Whatever you say, big sister,” Jai replied, shaking her head. “Come on, let’s go before Mum decides she’s lost her other daughter up here, too.”

Later, at the wedding, Anita still felt disturbed by her sister’s words. She looked around the big, overcrowded hall. Pink and white balloons floated above each table, proclaiming ‘Rani weds Raj’, in glittering gold lettering. How long before her own name would be up there?

“Nita? What’s up?” A voice interrupted her despondent thoughts.

She turned, and came face to face with her best friend Rani, wearing full traditional Indian wedding dress.

“It’s supposed to be me with the long face,” Rani said, as she sat down.

“I’m sorry, Rani,” Anita replied, smiling slightly at her friend’s joke. “Jai reminded me of that awful day I became engaged. I couldn’t believe that my parents had done that to me – I still can’t. I was so young, Rani. Fourteen years old. All I could think of was what I’d tell my friends when I went back to school.”

“I know,” Rani replied sadly, as she took Anita’s hand in her own. “These are the things we do to keep our parents happy.”

“How do you feel?” Anita asked, guiltily aware that this was her friend’s wedding day.

“Fine, I think. I mean, I had to get married to someone, right?” Rani replied, her voice wavering slightly underneath her fixed smile.

After the bride and groom had left, Anita sat with her mother and aunties. They talked about the success of the ceremony, and eventually, the conversation had turned.

“Harpreet,” said Aunt Kavita. Tell us, now that you have arranged Anita’s marriage, when will you be getting Jai married?” She looked slyly across at the other women present, and Anita’s stomach gave a sudden fearful lurch.

“Jai must finish college first,” her mother replied, unsuspecting of the sudden tension and meaningful looks that passed around the table. “Her Papa and I do not think we should worry her with *that* type of thing yet, at least, not until a suitable boy has been found.”

The women all nodded their heads wisely, thinking of their own daughters, and the dangers of keeping them single longer that was necessary. The modern world was all very well, but so many of the younger ones in today’s world were losing their heritage, and if that was lost, then what respect could their families expect to preserve in the community?

“But surely it is better to arrange something at least,” persisted Aunt Kavita. “That way there can be no misunderstanding later. After all, it is so important to let a child know what is expected of her, before she gets *ideas* of her own.”

Anita’s mother caught the insinuation in her friend’s voice, and gave her an odd look, before getting up from the table. She looked down at her friend with nose tilted high.

“Jai knows her duty to her family,” she replied, snatching her bag from the table. “My daughter’s would never let *me* down.” And pulling Anita from her seat, she marched away.

Later that night, when the family had returned from the wedding, Anita, took one look at her mother’s face, and went to her sister’s room. She went in, and found Jai quickly putting her phone away.

“Doesn’t anyone knock anymore?” Jai said breathlessly.

“Mum knows something’s wrong,” Anita whispered. “Aunt Kavita said something at the wedding. No one’s seen you and Kam together, have they?”

“No,” Jai replied, her face paling. “Someone else must have blabbed.”

“Well, it wasn’t me! God knows why, but I’ve been keeping this secret from them, too, hoping you’d change your mind.” She took Jai’s hand in her own. “What are we going to do?”

There was a tap on the door, and it squeaked opened to reveal their parents grim-looking faces.

“Anita,” said their dad. “Leave us. We need to talk to your sister.”

Anita sat downstairs in the mint coloured lounge, biting her nails and trying to discern what mute voices in her sister’s room were saying. Suddenly, she heard a loud thud, and her mother shouting. She leapt to her feet, and rushed to the stairs, taking them two at a time. Throwing open her sister’s door, she saw her father, towering over her sister, with her throat in his hands, cursing her with words that Anita had never thought to hear, come from his mouth. Jai, kneeling at his feet, was half-crying, half-choking, and clutching at her father’s hands, whilst their mother stood sobbing and wringing her hands, in one corner of the room.

“What do you think you’re doing!” Anita screamed, rushing to her father, clawing the once tender hands that now squeezed her sister’s throat. “You’ll kill her!”

“She has killed me,” her father replied, brokenly. “She’s been seeing someone behind our back. She has ruined us.”

“You have to leave the boy,” her mother looked furiously at Jai, while tears ran down her cheeks. “Look at what you are doing to your father. You will kill him with this.”

“O.k.,” cried Jai. “O.k.”

Anita still remembered her father’s face, that day – ashen and old. She had told her parents then and there that she would fulfill her engagement as soon as her exams were over. Maybe then, everyone would forget about what Jai had done. Her mother had eagerly agreed, while her father only nodded, looking solemnly at his oldest daughter. Jai also was somber, moping around the house, and retreating to her room when their father returned from work. Her boyfriend, like the coward that he was, had emphatically denied all knowledge of a relationship with his daughter, on being confronted with Jai’s furious father.

And now Anita was herself dressed as a bride. Her parents had never questioned her motives – her mother, a whirlwind of action, making arrangements quickly for her daughter’s wedding, whilst her father would occasionally glance at Anita’s face, saying little to anyone.

Anita had just finished putting on her shoes, when there was a knock on the door. It opened and there stood her father, downcast.

“Anita,” he said, coming over to put an arm around her. “I want to ask you a question, and I want your honest reply, beta.”

“Yes, Dad?” Anita looked at him in confusion.

“Why are you doing this, beta?” he asked gently.

“I just want you to be happy, Dad,” came the quiet reply, as her mother, too, slowly entered the room, bewilderingly looking at husband and daughter in turn.

“That is what we are supposed to be wanting for you, beta,” her father looked regretfully at her mother. “This is wrong, Harpreet. We should not do this to our girls.”

“But our guests,” protested her mother, anxiously looking at her husband.

Her father let go his hold on his daughter and squared his shoulders.

“I will not sacrifice my daughter’s happiness for stranger’s, Harpreet,” he replied firmly, turning to look at his daughter. “We only wanted the best for you.”

“I know, Dad,” Anita looked compassionately at her father.

“This is not happening,” her mother cried out.

Anita took hold of her mother’s hand, and sat her down on her bed, just as her mother had done for her when she was small.

“Mum, I’ve always respected you, and despite all the pressure, I’ve tried to do the best by you both. But until today, you’ve never once asked me what I want.”

“And what do you want?”

“Room to live, mum. I want to finish studying without having the constant threat of marriage hanging over me. Do you know what that’s been like for me? To know at fourteen that your whole life has been mapped out for you already – housewife, mother, drudge. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life like that, mum. Do you?”

Her mother looked keenly at her daughter, remembering dreams that she had had to put aside after her marriage.

“No, Anita,” came her shaken reply. “I don’t.”

Commentary of Short Story.

An Interview with Balvinder Kaur, author of ‘Pink and White Balloons’:

“Hello, Balvinder. Having read your short story, would you tell us how you came about the idea for it?”

“‘Pink and White Balloons’” was a story that I had had in mind ever since I myself became engaged at fourteen. I wanted to write about something that was familiar to me, and that I had had an experience of. I was familiar with the expectations that many Indian families have of their children, and I wanted to explore a situation that would be a nightmare for many traditional Indian parents. It was my personal experience of these events and characters that, I think, makes my writing of them so real, for example, the way that some first generation Indians pronounce every word individually, saying “I do not”, instead of “I don’t”. I hoped to add humour to the story by writing Anita’s mum’s speech in this way.

Through my own experiences, I found I was familiar with all of the characters in the story, and even enjoyed putting myself into their shoes – especially Anita’s mother, when she’s confronted with Aunt Kavita’s insinuations! Characters like Jai and Rani, too were helpful, because they acted as a way that I could compare and contrast the protagonist of my story, in relation to their own views and actions.”

“Did you find any difficulties in writing about the events?”

“I did have difficulty in coming up with a suitable end to Jai’s predicament, particularly because there were so many possible outcomes to what could have happened to her. At one stage, I even wrote a scene where she ends up running away from home! However, all the possible outcomes would have distracted from Anita, the main person in my story, so I eventually managed to find a suitable end to Jai, too. Anita’s resolution was easier in a way, because it’s what I would like to have happen in that situation. Disappointingly, however, the reality of this situation would, I think, be far from this particular resolution, in many families, even in this day and age.”

“Did you find any other obstacles in writing the story?”

“I do have to admit that writing about a setting is difficult for me - trying to make it tie into the story, without it sounding boring. Anita’s room setting was especially hard, because I wanted to try to express that whilst she is a young woman, her parents have always seen her as a little girl. I did also wonder at times whether the speech was too long – I’m still not too sure about that, to be honest.”

“But are you pleased overall?”

“Apart from my doubts about setting, (which I’m still working on!) I am pleased with the story. It was something that I’d wanted to do for a long time, and I finally had an opportunity to write it!”

“Thank you, Balvinder.”

“Thank you!”

Word count: 490 words.

The Wheels on the Bus

The bus, the bus chirped merrily along, Waltzing in time to the

bluebird's song.
Passing fields delight in her grace,
Leaving behind a sanguine space.
The trail parts nature's flesh in two,
Showing her guests all that is true

Her journey prolonged, beauty she pursues, A shift in scenery is now
the news, Darker forests arise as she turns, A shaking in the ground is
now her concern, Vast fields have been replaced, Concrete jungles stand
in their place.

Further into the jungle the bus does stray, It is the virginal path
that she does crave.
Tired Churches through clouded windows stare, She staggers on to avoid
their glare.
Among the manic track she speeds,
And longs for the countryside, or so she perceives.

- Sam Greatrex

Commentary on 'The Wheels on the Bus'.

'The Wheels on the Bus' is a poem that consists of three separate stanzas, which narrate the story of a bluebird's journey, whilst also addressing the effects that urbanisation has had on the countryside. The title of the poem is unusual because it is so simple when compared to the subject matter of the poem itself. This is apparent in the very first line of the first stanza, especially when comparing it to the striking imagery of "nature's flesh", parting in two, later on as events unfold. Images such as "Concrete jungles", and "manic tracks" are also very intense, and significant to the mood that the poem aims to establish. The feeling of movement and change is very noticeable throughout the poem, so that the overall effect is that the reader, too, experiences the same emotions of the bird, almost seeing events from its point of view:

"Darker forests arise as she turns, A shaking in the ground is now
her concern"

The timing of events increases the tension, so that what starts off as a simple journey, seems to turn into a nightmare, and this feeling is enhanced by the use of language such as dark forest which "arise". On the whole, the feeling of the poem is very powerful, and well written with regards to the sensations that it creates.

There is no specific form to the poem itself, but the structure is in the unfolding of the story instead. Also, the use of punctuation and sentence structure in the poem is unusual, and therefore took some getting used to in the reading of it, however, this could also be perceived as contributing to the feeling of disorder that the poem communicates to the reader.

Word count: 287 words.

