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Lingering Doubts

By Shobhan Bantwal

With a shaky hand I lift the long blond hair off my husband's recently discarded jacket. The innocuous looking gossamer strand gleams in the sunshine, gently mocking at me. About ten inches long and pale golden in color, it is much shorter than my own dark, long tresses that are tied in a coil at the nape of my neck.

Depositing the blond hair in the trash can, I quietly hang the jacket in Raghu's closet before he emerges from the bathroom. It's not the first time I've found something disturbingly incriminating amongst my husband's personal belongings. I've never summoned the courage to question the strands of hair in different shades and lengths stuck to his clothes, the faint traces of perfume on him. I'm afraid of the answers. Terrified!

Married over twenty years and the father of two beautiful teenaged daughters, Raghu appears to be the model Hindu husband and father. A medical doctor with a successful practice in New Jersey, Raghuram Vedam is the epitome of the successful Indian-American professional. Not good looking, nor very tall, he has an infectious sense of humor that can charm people easily. He is considered brilliant in his field of pediatrics.

But is he faithful to me, his arranged-marriage wife? I'm not sure. I've never been sure.

"What's the matter, Mira?" Raghu's raspy-sexy voice jolts me back to reality. "You look a little peaked, dear."

"I'm fine. I'll have dinner on the table in a few minutes."

Raghu puts a restraining hand on my arm. “Don’t bother with dinner, darling. I’ll take you out.”

Darling? He is glib, too—another asset that serves him well in his career. Raghu is the most suave Indian man I know. Endearments roll off his tongue like teardrops along a baby’s smooth cheek. He’s the quintessential salesman—easy charm combined with a sharp intellect.

“Dinner is already made, Raghu,” I inform him.

“So put it in the fridge and save it for tomorrow. Come on darling, you look exhausted.”

“I’m fine. All I did was cook a little and drive the girls to soccer practice.”

“Maintaining this place and chauffeuring Megha and Mithra around are full-time jobs. Let’s go to that new Greek place that just opened on Broad Street.” He rubs his hands together gleefully like a little boy dying to sample a candy bar. “I hear their stuffed grape leaves are excellent.”

Raghu’s persuasive tone is hard to resist. “All right, I’ll get changed.” I turn and walk back to the elaborate closet filled with clothes and accessories.

As a privileged nineteen year old bride, raised in conservative affluence in Chennai, two decades ago I came to accept this lifestyle with my husband with ease: the large suburban American house, the luxury cars, the landscaped yard with a pool, and the private school for my children. I’ve never had to work outside the home. My job is to make sure Raghu and the girls are cared for.

Changing into a long skirt and matching silk blouse, I go to the mirror. Uncoiling my hair, I brush it out until it shines and cascades in waves down to my waist. Then I apply makeup and spray myself with perfume.

With my fortieth birthday only weeks away, I know I'm still an attractive woman and appear some ten years younger than my age. Raghu appears behind me and puts his hands on my waist then ducks his head to place a soft, sensual kiss on the side of my neck—one of my most sensitive spots. The devil! He knows what exactly what turns me on. “Umm, you smell wonderful. What is it called?”

“Obsession.” My hopelessly aroused pulse leaps even as I try in vain to resist his teasing advances. Speaking of perfume, wasn't it only a week ago that he reeked of some vanilla-scented fragrance, when he came home past midnight, claiming he was tending to a toddler with severe burns? Would any three year old burn victim smell like sweet vanilla?

He gently ushers me out of the bedroom. “Come on, I'm starving.”

In the car, he places another sweetly affectionate kiss on my cheek before starting the engine.

What a charmer my husband is! Raghu is the ideal spouse and father. My sex life is satisfying; he treats me like the sun and the moon; he dotes on our children. I lack for nothing. Or do I? Does Raghu's heart belong to me? Or is he merely playing the role of ideal Hindu gentleman? I have never asked him, and never will. A good Brahmin woman does not question her husband about such matters.

At the restaurant, a perky waitress with large breasts seems to recognize us and approaches with a delighted smile. “Dr. Vedam! What are you doing here?”

“Heard good things about this place, so here I am,” he replies with practiced ease, his brand of masculine charm on full display. “Lindsey, meet my wife, Mira. Darling, this is Lindsey Myers.”

He's on first-name basis with waitresses? Is it the stuffed grape leaves or the busty waitress that beckons him, I wonder?

Lindsey Myers offers me a gracious hand in greeting. "Nice to meet you. You're a lucky woman. That husband of yours is a terrific guy. He worked like a maniac through the night and saved my little girl last week. I thought she'd die from the burns she suffered in the daycare fire."

"Oh, is she all right now?" I feel my stomach plunge with regret. So there really had been a little girl with second degree burns. Raghu hadn't lied after all.

"Recovering nicely, thanks to Dr. Vedam," Lindsey replies to my question and guides us to the best table in the house, one by the window overlooking the river.

As Lindsey smiles meltingly at Raghu and promises to come back with our drinks, I get a distinct whiff of vanilla. A dull ache settles in my brain as I notice Lindsey's hair—pale blond, about ten inches long.