

OVERTURE TO A LOVE MATCH

By

Cheryl Snell

Sara squinted at the mirror, using her forefinger to rub the red dot of the married woman between her brows. “Like a bullet hole,” she said under her breath. Her husband Jal would be home soon. This was their first Christmas together and they were alone. Since they were alone, they decided to combine their family Christmas traditions. “The closest thing we have to Christmas in Kerala is Diwali,” Jal told her. “You have Christmas tree lights, and we have oil lamps—aartis—welcoming the return of the rightful King from exile. We light the lamps in his honor while we sing devotionals to gods like Ganesh, and goddesses like Laxmi. We call the whole thing the Festival of Lights. There are firecrackers and gifts. No baby Jesus.”

No Jesus! That’s the whole point, Sara thought. “Well, what about the birthday of Krishna? He’s a major god! Didn’t you say your mother made cut-outs of baby feet and placed them from the door to the main room, as if Krishna had visited?” Jal nodded, smiling at the memory. “But Krishna’s birthday, his Janmashtami, is usually celebrated in the fall.” He frowned and looked down as if to capture an escaping thought. “But on the island of Réunion, though, Catholics and Hindus merge their celebrations and their gods: they consider your Christmas the birthday of our Lord Krishna. Or is it that Krishna is Jesus and Jesus is Krishna? I forget now.” He lifted his eyes to check whether this detail pleased Sara. It did.

She got to work cutting out the little footprints and decorating them with paint and glitter. She thought of how she and her mother often decorated the Christmas ornaments at their kitchen table spread with newspapers. It was part of the ritual of Christmas, as much so as her mother warbling carols while Sara accompanied her on the piano. What Christmas songs did the people of Réunion Island sing? Jal would know. Sara, for her part, liked fusion of all kinds: cultures borrowing the best bits from one another, Chinese/French food, or Tex-Mex, Indo jazz of Indian elements overlaid with standard jazz tunes. She once heard someone call it “curried jazz” and was surprised by Jal’s irritation with the term. Also, the genre. He played sitar, and always classical music.

He also sang. His voice had a molten tone, smooth with smokiness beneath. Sara loved to hear him. He hummed when he was content, and would burst into fragments of Carnatic pieces, the classical music he loved. No Bollywood movie songs for Jal, but they were a secret guilty pleasure for Sara, viewed when her husband was sleeping, volume turned down low. Perhaps the sound was audible enough to infiltrate his dreams, because for a long time, he dreamed in his first language. She would listen to him mumble the strange words, wondering what they meant. It was a melancholy change for both of them when his sleep-talk turned completely English.

She became aware that she was humming as she dragged the crèche from the storage closet and set it up by the tree Jal had hauled in the day before. Did that signal her contentment as well? The tree and the wreath on the door were the only Christmas-y things she had insisted upon. Marriage is about sacrifice, she reminded herself, and Jal had renounced much more than she. “Tradition is just peer-pressure from the ancestors,” he would scoff after breaking some family taboo or other. He put on a brave face, but she knew he felt like a man without a country sometimes.

By the time her husband came home that night, the tree was decorated with red and green baubles, garlands of greenery swaddled the mantel and wound around the staircase, diyas arranged on the porch on top of the colored chalk rangoli design. She lit them and watched as the light illuminated the door wreath. Sara could see the tiny sandalwood Ganesh that Jal must have nestled in its greenery, and she smiled. “You have one job!” Sara threatened the little god with the big dharma, the remover of obstacles, good-luck god of new beginnings, wagging her finger at him. Then, she hurried inside the house to lay down the cardboard footprints leading to the crèche under the tree. It was getting late.

The door opened at last, and Jal stood there singing “O Come All Ye Faithful” in Tamil:

baktharae vaarum
aasai aavalodum
neer paarum, neer paarum
ippaalanai;
vaanorin raajan
kiristhu piranthaarae!

saashtaangam seyya vaarum,
saashtaangam seyya vaarum,
saashtaangam seyya vaarum,
Yesuvai.

What could Sara do but slide onto the piano bench and accompany him? As he sang, he laid the long red Santa hat he had bought across the lid of the piano like a Christmas stocking. He pulled out traditional Diwali sweets—chum chum, rasgulla, chocolate Sandeshall—wrapped in gold and silver for his Sarala, the woman he had chosen above all others, and who just then was so focused on his voice, his breath, watching him live, that she barely noticed the gleaming parcels. He was her house, and she was his.

Cheryl Snell's books include the novels of *Bombay Trilogy*, and poetry collections from *Finishing Line*, *Pudding House*, and *Moria Books*. Her new series is called *Intricate Things in their Fringed Peripheries* and includes a volume of flash fiction, a collection of poems, and a novelette. Her work has been included in anthologies such as a *Best of the Net* and *Pure Slush's Lifespan* series. Most recently her words have appeared in *Rye Whiskey Review*, *Ellipses Zine*, *World City Lit*, *Gone Lawn*, *Blink-Ink*, and *Necessary Fiction*. A classical pianist, she lives in Maryland with her husband, a mathematical engineer.