

The Young Couple

Cathy was thrilled at going back to India with Naraian, her new husband. They had many ideas about the things Naraian could do for his country once he got back there, and all their English friends envied them because of the challenge, the life of purpose, that awaited them.

On arrival, Naraian wasted no time in looking round for a job in which his skills would be properly harnessed in the service of his country. Early every morning he went out to make his contacts, leaving Cathy behind in the new flat they had rented through an uncle's influence. They were very happy with it, even though it was small and up on the roof and very hot because of the sun beating down on it all day.

In the evening Cathy usually met Naraian in town somewhere. They visited a lot of restaurants, patronising one for its South Indian food, another for its over backed chickens, a third for the band and the dance-floor. Everywhere they met friends, Naraian's friends, with whom he had gone to school and college and had sat about with restaurants before he had left for England. All of them were restless and discontented, like Naraian himself, and they swore at the Government, at the social set-up, at their families, at the poverty and background of the country.

Although in England Cathy enjoyed parties and company, here she always preferred to be alone with Naraian. She didn't care for these friends of his, she thought they were silly and

spoiled, and what galled her most of all was their attitude to herself. It was true, they were polite to her, but the trouble was they were too polite, in a very formal and courtly way, so that she felt all the time that her presence was a strain on them and they would have been happier without her. Moreover, they treated her-as the wife of a friend – with such due respect, always looking shyly away from her, never raising their eyes to her face, that she, who was young, blonde and pretty, felt slighted; especially as she knew how fervidly interested they were in women and saw how they nudged each other and their eyes became moist and dreamy whenever a passable young woman came into sight.

Naraian, on the other hand, loved being with his friends and quite often seemed to forget that Cathy was there with him. She was rather a demonstrative girl and liked kissing and holding hands with Naraian when other people were looking. And indeed in England he had enjoyed that too, and they had sat in coffee bars and on park benches with their arms slung closely round each other. But here, when they were in public space, Naraian took care to see that there was a decent few inches of space always between them, and that their hands never for a moment, not even by an accident, as much as touched. Nor did he talk to her much when they were out together to let his eyes stray in her direction, yet he was always, she noticed, very much aware of what she was up to: if, for instance, her dress had crept up over her knee or button had come undone, he was quickly to notice and by indirectly at her – managed to draw her attention to such accidental immodesties.

Unfortunately – or so it seemed to Cathy – there were not only his friends but his family too. It

was not that his family were not happy with Cathy: they were, they enjoyed having an English daughter – in – law, they were proud of her. When Naraian had first brought her, they had made a splendid wedding for them, with hundreds of guests, revolving neon lights, fireworks, two bands, and several days of overeating. Nor had they raised any objection to the young couple living separately, although the family house was quite large enough to absorb a number of married sons with their young families: on the contrary, they had even helped them find this flat and pay a year's advance rent on it. The father liked to wink in a tolerant, expansive way at business friends while remarking that young people, well one had to understand, they liked to be alone, none of the old fogies around them; and the mother, too, explained that this was the way it was in modern times, young to young and old to old, that was the trend nowadays, large joint family were really quite out of fashion, still, of course, they expected to see quite a bit of the young couple, and the original idea had been that they should come to the two main meals at the family. As the mother said, where were the sense in running two kitchens, and besides, what did poor Cathy know about Indian preparation of which his mother knew Narian to be so fond? But two large heavy Indian meals a day proved too much for Cathy – and, after his years in England, for Naraian too – and very soon they missed out on one of them and after a while on both of them, so that in the end they found themselves going only on Sundays and on special festive occasions.

Cathy did not enjoy these obligatory Sunday lunches. First of all they always had to parry some resentment, especially from the mother for the first half hour and thereafter when she remembered, and remarked that she was glad the food at home was still good enough at least

once a week. There were also comments from her on Naraian's appearance which, she liked to hint, indicated severe under-feeding, and these merged, like the chimes of a clock, into whatever else was said during the afternoon. But it wasn't only what was said to hint which disturbed Cathy and made her wish they could spend their Sundays in some other way: there was also a certain heaviness about the house that weighted on her and made her feel oppressed and sleepy. The heaviness was physical – it was in the too rich, too abundant food, in the solid ornate pieces of furniture, in the silver, the waist high vases, the brocade curtains, the carpets, the giant plumped-out cushions; and in the people themselves – the mother, large, handsome, with a proud bosom draped in shimmering silk, adorned with a great deal of jewellery and the father also large, comfortable, good humoured, very fond of his food and proud of his house and all his possessions, among whom he liked to number Naraian and blonde English Cathy.

She could not complain that they did not care for her. The trouble was they cared too much, so that she felt herself lapped around and drowning more than she had never before, among her cool English family and friends, encountered. Everything that she and Naraian said or did, the way they looked, everything was the subject of scrupulous family concern, to be pointed out, discussed, wondered at and advised over.

What the family discussed more vigorously was Naraian's refusal to enter any of the family business concerns or to accept any of the jobs which they kept arranging for him. They took this up with him over and over again, every Sunday, and often – in fact, usually – they

discussions turned into a quarrel, with voice raised, table thumped, and once or twice it had ended with Naraian, and Cathy in tow, storming angrily out of the house.

Of course, it is not easy to do anything decisive and independent while they were living the way they were, with Naraian's family supporting them completely; and the most important step now was for Narian to get himself a job to support the two of them. But, as they both fully agreed, it was no just rushing anything; he had to have time to look around and weight possibilities, so that the end would have something beautiful and useful where he would be fully engaged. In the meantime, Cathy would have been glad to help out and get a job herself. She had done quite lot things in England. She had been a receptionist to a Harley Street socialist, a sales assistant in an airlines office and one for a brief while a waitress on a coffee bar, but of course she realised that it was impossible to do anything like that here because of her, or rather the family's background and social standing.

She continued to spend her days as she had done before she felt time lapping deliciously round her in endless honeyed hours, now her feeling were once of boredom. The endless hours were harsh not honeyed one, when she sand down on her bed, it was not in enjoyment, soft languid, stretching herself, but a dry boredom with nothing to do, nothing to think, and many hours yet still it was time to meet Nararian. And even when she did meet him – she was bored with the restaurants now, she new all the bearers down to the stains on each one's uniform, had eaten all the dishes on the menu and found them all tasting the same.

Cathy and Nararian began to bicker. Naraian complained about the way she kept the flat– he said everything was dirty untidy, he stumbled over pieces of discarded underwear, and where once he would have tenderly picked them up, now he kicked them aside impatiently, at the same time shouting at her to point out her neglect.

Always somewhat confused about the datas, it took Cathy longer than it should done to find out she was pregnant. From then on a big fuss was made for her. The family priest performed various ceremonies, and her mother – in – low and sisters – in – low took her to the best doctor. Many special dished were cooked for her, she was exhorted to take great quantities of milk, food, and rest, and generally to pamper herself in every possible way. This she did. She spent most of her time sitting at the window of their flat looking out. Sometimes she looked out at the left side, into all the neighbouring courtyards; but what she liked best was to look out at the right side, at the mausoleum, to see the birds wheeling round its dome, and the top of trees with the leaves looking very green, young and tender against the weathered stone, and the sky a brilliant blue the whole day long until it faded away at dusk.

One Sunday there was a surprise for her. It was a more than usually crowded Sunday, with a lot of uncles present, and there was evidently much to discuss. Naraian too was part of discussion, in fact, he seemed to be the centre of it, and she glanced over at him wondering what was going on, and once or twice he glanced back at her with hint, she thought, of uneasiness. But everyone else seemed to be pleased. The father smoked a fat cigar and smiled complacently round it, and the mother too was smiling; she was very tender with Cathy,

patted and fondled her hands, saying, 'now everything will be nice for you.' And an aunt said, 'such a fine salary too, it is a great chance for him,' whereupon the mother retorted, with a trace of sharpness in her voice, 'naturally, a clever boy like that, five years on England, it is due.' Cathy caught Naraian's eye again; he looked away quickly. She was very miserable; she shut her eyes but she couldn't shut out the sense of this large, well-fed family with Naraian and herself trapped in the middle of them.

But she should have been glad, not miserable. What was she complaining about? He asked her, as soon as they were home again. At last he had a job, and moreover a well-paid one, and now they could be as independent as she had always wanted them to be. She shook her head: she couldn't or wouldn't put her feeling about his job into words. 'It has a lot of scope,' he urged and looked at her anxiously, and when she refused to respond, he took on a defiant little swagger: 'you don't get a salary like that every day.' Cathy began to cry; very quietly tears rolled down her cheeks. Seeing these, he lost his temper. He shouted, 'you're mad!' but there was pain in his voice for him too was disappointed that finally, after all the tall talk, he should have up with a job in his uncle's firm.

At it happened, however, he enjoyed his job. He sat in an air-conditioned office all day, had an office messenger to himself and a share in secretary, attended board meetings, and entertained at business lunches. He came home on the evenings, tired but satisfied, and took pleasure in telling her his day's doings. They rarely went out in the evenings now. It was no longer necessary to visit any restaurants, for his mother had put a cook on the kitchen who

prepared meals almost as rich as those in the family house. This cook took all his orders from the mother – in – law, who came at least once every day, took a great interest in everything that happened in the flat and poked around in the cupboards and even under the bed to see what went on there. She found a lot of discussion of things amiss, in fact, almost everything. The flat and its shortcoming now became the chief topic of discussion at the Sunday meals.

Cathy shut her ears to it, as much as she could. She would not be drawn. She heard how the flat was uncomfortable, unsanitary, an unnecessary expense – and those stairs! For a woman in her condition! She kept quiet: she knew that, among these adepts she would always be outwitted in argument – or rather, shouted down, which counted as the same thing. But it irked her that Naraian did not come to the defence of their nest as vigorously as she felt he might have done. Now, Cathy felt, it was as if they had joined forces.

And indeed, Cathy was beginning to notice more and more that Naraian was himself dissatisfied with their home. Apart from complaining about the way it was kept, he complained about the place itself too: it was hot, the construction was cheap, the whitewash flaked off the walls, the stairs were dark, narrow, and dangerous, the water did not rise properly into the taps. All this was true but it hadn't mattered to them before, they had been so proud to have a place of their own.

At the time a large bedroom and dressing – room were being got ready for them in the family – house. Everything tried to keep it secret from Cathy, but it was all done with such glee, a great

deal of whispering always went on, and Naraian was beckoned into the room, and there were winks and veiled allusions – that her suspicions were only if they wanted to stay over weekends or take naps on Sunday afternoons. Soon, however, he was speaking out more clearly and he said, did she think he was going to put up with a place like this for ever? And he kicked a door so that its poor cheap wood splintered a bit further. And the only thing Cathy could think of in defence was, but look at the view! And pointed towards the dome of the mausoleum darkening against a tender flush of sunset and a formation of birds, wing a – tilt, going round it swift as bats in a last flight before plunging down into the trees to settle themselves to sleep.

In reply, Nararian pulled a contemptuous face with made it clear what sort of importance he attached to the view. But this expression – though an honest, spontaneous one – he held for only a moment the next he had corrected it, looked in fact sympathetic. Probably he had recollected the way they had once used to talk, the art galleries they had visited in England, the plays they had witnessed, the opinions they had so seriously held on life and how to live it.

‘What does it matter, Cathy,’ he said, putting his arm round her, and his voice was tender, and so was the way he looked at her, ‘what does it matter where we are as long as we are together?’ he kissed. The kiss was delicious but, even while it was going on, set within it as in a heartshaped frame, she had a vision of the room that was being got ready for them: the same heavy, shiny furniture as the rest of the house, a carpet, ample satin bedspreads matching the curtains...

