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ROUND AND ROUND THE DINNING TABLE  
Ovidia Yu

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## **ROUND AND ROUND THE DINING TABLE**

Characters:

SHANMUGANATHAN

ANITA

SHAKUNTALA

SAVATHRI

STEVEN

Scene throughout: The family dining room. There is a kitchen visible stage left, and the living room is off stage right. There are family pictures etc on the walls and some statues and artifacts that seem more cultural than religious.

### **Scene One: Breakfast**

[SHAN ENTERS AS VOICES ARE HEARD FROM THE KITCHEN. HE SITS AT THE TABLE, MAKES A FEW NOISES, BUT IS NOT NOTICED AND CROSSES OVER TO THE KITCHEN DURING THE FOLLOWING DIALOGUE.]

SHAKUNTALA [off]

It's so good to be home. Everything's so wonderfully the same here. The same old kitchen, the same old smells...

ANITA [off]

What smells? I don't smell anything. Has your father been leaving things out of the fridge again? Have a look, girl.

SHAKUNTALA [off]

No, Ama. Not bad smells. Just home smells.

ANITA [off]

That's probably your father again. Air freshener, kitchen odour absorber, toilet perfumers, you name it he has spent his money on it.

SHAKUNTALA [off]

Apa likes things to smell nice.

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[HEARING THIS SHANMUGANATHAN SMILES AND GETS UP TO GO  
TOWARDS THE KITCHEN]

ANITA [off]

And with all that he pulls such a long face if I wear a bit of perfume. That man,  
I tell you!

SHAKUNTALA [off]

I'm sure he doesn't, really.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Ah, but that is because my lovely wife smells better than any perfume!

SHAKUNTALA [off]

Oh, the poetry!

SHANMUGANATHAN

Beautiful women inspire me to poetry.

ANITA [off]

Why are you talking rubbish so early in the morning, old man?

SHANMUGANATHAN

Hunger inspires me to rubbish. Through the ages, hunger has inspired great  
men to rubbish.

ANITA [off]

Take out the coffee for your father. Careful, it's hot.

SHAKUNTALA [off]

Yes, Ma.

[SHANMUGANATHAN STANDS BACK TO ALLOW SHAKUNTALA TO  
ENTER WITH COFFEE POT AND COFFEE PARAPHERNALIA THEN SITS  
AT THE DINING TABLE WAITING TO BE SERVED.]

SHANMUGANATHAN

Hungry men write divine rubbish and practical men with full stomachs write  
mundane sense.

SHAKUNTALA

Sugar, Pa?

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SHANMUGANATHAN

Two spoons.

ANITA [off]

Your father doesn't take sugar.

SHAKUNTALA

No sugar?

SHANMUGANATHAN

You know your mother. Thinks that she can make herself thin by putting me on a diet.

ANITA [off]

No sugar. You know very well why. Diabetes.

SHANMUGANATHAN

All right, all right. No sugar. The way that woman runs my life!

[SHAN GESTURES TO SHAKU TO ADD SUGAR ANYWAY, WHISPERS]

There's nothing wrong with me. Go ahead.

SHAKUNTALA

Apa, are you sure?

SHANMUGANATHAN

Who knows better? Your mother or me?

[ENTER ANITA WITH TOAST, EGGS ETC.]

SHAKUNTALA

Okay, Apa. One or two?

ANITA

What's this? You, I can't trust you for one minute, as though it wasn't all for your own good, I don't know why I bother—

SHANMUGANATHAN

[CALLS OUT] Savi!

SAVATHRI [off]

What is it?

SHANMUGANATHAN

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Bring the paper on your way here!

SAVATHRI [off]

The paper's not on my way there!

ANITA

Savathri, you are late! Your sister's first breakfast at home in nearly a year and you decide to be late!

SAVATHRI [off]

I'm coming, I'm coming...

ANITA

Aiyoh, to get that girl out of bed!

SHAKUNTALA

She's still young. She needs her rest. Toast, Apa?

SHANMUGANATHAN

Thank you, Shaku. You spoil her, that's why. You allow her to stay out until I don't know what time at night...

ANITA

I spoil her? I spoil her? Thank you very much. I'm the one at fault. I'm always the one at fault!

SHAKUNTALA

Butter, Pa?

ANITA

He takes margarine. 98% fat free. Let me just try to say 'no' to her. You are the one who comes up with 'let the girl have some fun' and 'she's only young once'. Who is spoiling her, I ask you?

[ENTER SAVATHRI, SLEEPY, WITH THE NEWSPAPER WHICH SHE HANDS TO SHANMUGANATHAN.]

ANITA

Finally.

SAVATHRI

I'm supposed to be on vacation. People on vacation are supposed to be allowed to sleep in late.

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ANITA

Hello! We are all on vacation. We are all on time for breakfast. You know that.

SHANMUGANATHAN

What vacation? No vacation for me. I still have to go in the office. Only university in the whole wide world where the staff are expected to sit in their offices throughout the vacation.

SHAKUNTALA

Poor Pa. Good morning, Savi.

SAVATHRI

Well, they pay you to sit in your office and you get free air conditioning and free newspapers for doing absolutely nothing. Not bad, is it?

ANITA

Your sister said good morning to you. You want your eggs?

SAVATHRI

Besides, you always go in late. The virtues of the capitalist system. I'll help myself, Ma. Thanks.

SHANMUGANATHAN

If we could have breakfast on time for a change I wouldn't go in late. Besides, I have never been late for a meeting or a class. I've always prided myself on my punctuality.

ANITA

One day you come down in time for breakfast and you forget all the other days breakfast has to sit there waiting for you.

SHANMUGANATHAN

You leave the house at seven. You can't expect me to get up every day at seven to eat with you?

ANITA

Okay, okay. You write to the Ministry of Education. Tell them to start the morning session at nine am so that the school principal, that is, myself, can have breakfast with her husband, that is, you. Or no need all schools. Just Bukit Panjang Government High School.

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SAVATHRI

Go, Ma!

[SAVATHRI GIVES HER MOTHER A CLAP THEN GETS UP TO GO TO THE KITCHEN FOR HER EGGS.]

SAVATHRI

I'm so sleepy. I'm so sleepy.

SHAKUNTALA

I thought you were wearing contact lenses now, Savathri?

SAVATHRI

Only for studying. My glasses give me headaches.

SHAKUNTALA

I think you look a lot better in your lenses, Savi.

SAVATHRI

As long as I can see I don't care how I look. I'm not vain.

Like some people.

[EXIT SAVATHRI INTO KITCHEN]

SHAKUNTALA

She's really glad to see me home, isn't she?

ANITA

Don't worry. Your sister is like that in the morning. You should remember. She can't put in her contact lenses in the morning because her eyes don't open until lunchtime. That girl.

[ENTER SAVATHRI WITH EGGS]

SHANMUGANATHAN

While you're in the kitchen get me a glass of cold water.

SAVATHRI

You always wait until I'm out of the kitchen before you ask me, right Pa?

SHANMUGANATHAN

The exercise will do you good.

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SHAKUNTALA

I'll get your water, Pa.

SAVATHRI

No. It's all right. I'll go.

[SAVATHRI PUTS PLATE DOWN AND RETURNS TO KITCHEN.]

SHANMUGANATHAN

So. Have you told her about Saturday night?

ANITA

No, no. I thought you wanted to tell her yourself? So excited about it, your father.

SHAKUNTALA

What's this? What were you going to tell me, Ama?

ANITA

Look at your father. So happy like a small boy like that.

SHANMUGANATHAN

My daughter, your birthday is this Saturday.

SHAKUNTALA

I know that, Pa.

ANITA

Everything else he forgets. His birthday, my birthday, his own mother's birthday, our anniversary, but he always remembers your birthday.

SHANMUGANATHAN

You will be twenty-six years old.

SHAKUNTALA

Don't remind me. I'm afraid of it.

ANITA

What's this afraid of business? If you are forty years old and done nothing with your life then you can be afraid. You are going to be twenty-six years old with a first class degree from Oxford, you should be proud ah!

SHAKUNTALA

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Oh Ma. It's only a first degree.

ANITA

From Oxford. First class.

SHANMUGANATHAN

The first time in four years we have our daughter at home for her birthday. We must celebrate.

ANITA

Half the night he lies awake thinking who he is going to invite over to come and look at his precious daughter.

SHAKUNTALA

A party for me? How lovely!

[ENTER SAVATHRI WITH A GLASS OF WATER SHE PUTS IN FRONT OF SHANMUGANATHAN.]

SHANMUGANATHAN

Partly a birthday party, partly a welcome home party. Do you like the idea?

SHAKUNTALA

Oh yes, Pa. It's a wonderful idea. Thank you.

SAVATHRI

'Thank you very much Savathri', 'You're welcome Daddy'. It's nice to be appreciated. Or acknowledged. Or just noticed.

ANITA

You know. Half the night he's lying there awake thinking what food to have for his precious party. You should talk to Shakuntala, I told him. Who is this party supposed to be for, anyway?

[TELEPHONE RINGS]

SHANMUGANATHAN

Savi. Get that.

[SAVATHRI ANSWERS PHONE, TAKING TOAST WITH HER.]

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SAVATHRI

[PHONE] Hello? Yes... actually she's having breakfast. What? Oh. Hold on, please.

ANITA

[INTERPOSED WITH ABOVE] Must be the school again. Can't give me one day's peace.

SAVATHRI

Ma.

[ANITA GOES TO TALK ON PHONE. TAKES PHONE WITH HER OUT OF ROOM.]

SAVATHRI

So what's all this about a party? Are we having a party?

[ANITA RETURNS.]

ANITA

Useless. Those people all so useless!

SHANMUGANATHAN

Ask your mother to cook her mutton curry.

SHAKUNTALA

Oh yes, Ma. I used to dream about your mutton curry in Oxford!

ANITA

If you know how much cholesterol there is in mutton curry!

SHANMUGANATHAN

I won't touch it. I promise. It's for Shaku.

ANITA

I thought you said you wanted to get that man to come and do his satay?

SHANMUGANATHAN

Unless you prefer to have satay? Do you still like satay?

SHAKUNTALA

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It's been so long since I had real satay. You know, what I'd really like is to have both curry and satay!

SHANMUGANATHAN

That's my girl!

SAVATHRI

Better watch out, you might end up looking like Pa as well.

ANITA

All right, all right. What else do you want to have?

SHANMUGANATHAN

We'll have a satay party. With some curry on the side. Or we'll have a curry party, with some satay on the side.

SAVATHRI

In today's world, twenty-four thousand people die daily from hunger and hunger related causes. Three quarters of the deaths are children under the age of five. Chronic malnutrition causes bad vision, stunted growth and high susceptibility to disease.

SHANMUGANATHAN

You are going to love the food. Nobody makes mutton curry better than your mother!

SAVATHRI

I always thought people were the important thing at parties. Now I see it's the food. When is this great food festival to be, anyway?

SHAKUNTALA

On my birthday.

SAVATHRI

Oh, you've finally decided to grow up, have you?

SHAKUNTALA

Silly Savi. I grew up a long time ago...

SHANMUGANATHAN

We should have some of that—what's that dish my mother used to make... with that you know—stuff inside... like—like—you know the one I mean?

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SHAKUNTALA

...unlike you.

ANITA

Which one? You mean the one with the—the—those bits on top, the soft, soft stuff with those bits of hard, crunchy things...

SAVATHRI

No, I'm not grown up if it means only being interested in clothes and make-up and contact lenses and money.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Yes, that one. That's the one. The one with the crunchies. Can you make it? You made it before, right? Can you make that?

SHAKUNTALA

You want to change the world. You can't even get up on time in the morning.

ANITA

Of course I can make it. Only I don't know if it's worth the trouble or not. Very troublesome, you know, to make that one.

SAVATHRI

I really don't see what that has to do with it.

ANITA

Shaku, what do you think? You want to eat that on Saturday night then I'll make. Otherwise I'm not going to go through all the time and trouble.

SHAKUNTALA

It sounds yummy, Ama. Whatever you like.

SAVATHRI

Anyway, if the party's for Saturday night I can't be here.

ANITA

What do you mean you can't be here!

SAVATHRI

I won't be in. I'm going out.

SHANMUGANATHAN

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Savathri, don't be difficult.

SAVATHRI

I'm not being difficult. I happen to have something on, that's all.

SHANMUGANATHAN

What do you mean you have something on!

[TO ANITA] What's all this?

SAVATHRI

Ama's got nothing to do with this.

ANITA

When it's a problem it's always Ama this, Ama that. This is the first I've heard of it. Savathri, this Saturday night is to celebrate your sister's return Okay? Can't you go out with your friends some other time? See another show?

SAVATHRI

It so happens that I'm not going to see a show. I'm going to a faculty dinner and dance. And it so happens that I'm not going out with friends. I'm going out with A friend.

SHANMUGANATHAN

What faulty dinner and dance is this?

SAVATHRI

The Medical D&D. At Marina Mandarin.

ANITA

Now, girl. You know we don't try to stop you from going out. We are very broadminded. But you should tell us first.

SAVATHRI

Broadminded, hah! I would have told you if you'd shown any interest, but you've been all so busy with Shakuntala this and Shakuntala that, I didn't want to bother you.

SHANMUGANATHAN

You can go some other time. Not this Saturday. This Saturday we are having a family gathering. The family comes first.

SAVATHRI

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No, Pa. I'm sorry. I've already agreed to go and I have to go. Once I make a commitment I never break it.

SHANMUGANATHAN

You may have agreed to go, but I didn't agree to allow you to go.  
Look, be reasonable. I am not an old-fashioned man. I'm not saying you can't go out with your friends. But not this Saturday, okay? We want you at home with us. Is that so much to ask?

SAVATHRI

Yes. Too much, I'm afraid.

SHAKUNTALA

Who are you going out with Savi? Is it someone special?

SAVATHRI

Why do you want to know?

ANITA

What kind of manners have you got, to talk to your elder sister like that. That mouth of yours gets worse every day.

SAVATHRI

You mean it gets better.

ANITA

You keep talking like that, I tell you, no decent man will marry you.

SAVATHRI

I suppose I'll just have to marry an indecent man, that's all.

SHAKUNTALA

Maybe we could just have the party another night.

SHANMUGANATHAN

You better teach your daughters to have a bit more respect!

SAVATHRI

All bow to the ego of Professor Shanmuganathan!

ANITA

Savathri! This is too much!

SHAKUNTALA

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Like Sunday night. We could have it on Sunday night, couldn't we? Are you free on Sunday night, Savi?

SAVATHRI

I don't want to end up in some traditional marriage, bolstering up the ego of some man.

ANITA

You talk to your father like that, no wonder people think I don't bring you up properly. I don't know where you get that mouth of yours from.

SAVATHRI

Mouth, mouth, you mean my mind! I certainly didn't get it from either of you!

SHAKUNTALA

Or Monday night... or Tuesday...

SHANMUGANATHAN

You better handle her properly!

ANITA

Handle her. Handle her. Every time he has something unpleasant to say, I am his mouth!

SHAKUNTALA

That's only because you are so much better at being firm, Mummy. Isn't that so, Apa?

SHANMUGANATHAN

I can't drink this coffee.

[SAVATHRI TAKES SHANMUGANATHAN'S COFFEE CUP INTO THE KITCHEN]

SHAKUNTALA

You see, Ma?

ANITA

So disgraceful, to quarrel around the dining table. One time, remember? This was the only piece furniture in the house. It was the first thing we bought. You

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know, your father telephoned me in school and said, 'guess what I bought today' and it was a dining table. This dining table.

[SAVATHRI ENTERS FROM THE KITCHEN, PUTS CUP IN FRONT OF SHANMUGANATHAN. SAVATHRI SITS AS ANITA FILLS CUP.]

SAVATHRI

You've told us a hundred times, Ma. Typical. It shows what your priorities are. You buy a table before even a bed.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Of course. It is not enough to love, as you young people seem to think. You must provide for those you love. A dining table is as much a love symbol as a rose or a poem or a whathaveyou.

SHAKUNTALA

Oh, it's so good to be home.

Savi, who are you going to the dance with, anyone I might know?

SAVATHRI

His name is Steven.

ANITA

Who is he? What's his surname? What does his father do?

SHAKUNTALA

'Steven'?

SAVATHRI

Steven Chuang.

SHAKUNTALA

Not the fat little Steven Chuang I used to go for piano lessons with?

ANITA

Not Steven Chuang the son of whosit—Shan your colleague—Dr Chuang Poh's son?

SAVATHRI

He's not fat now. And he's not so little either.

SHAKUNTALA

So he's your special boyfriend, is he?

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ANITA [SIMULTANEOUSLY]

Boyfriends! Savathri has no time!

SHAN [SIMULTANEOUSLY]

Your sister is too young for boyfriends!

SAVATHRI

Yes, he is my special boyfriend.

SHANMUGANATHAN

I suppose you mean to marry this young man.

SAVATHRI

Well, not this Saturday but someday, perhaps, yes.

ANITA

Savathri! It's too early in the morning for your smart talk!

SHAKUNTALA

Fat little Steven! You would marry fat little Steven Chuang!

SHANMUGANATHAN

He's not the man for you. If you're going to have ideas like that I don't think you should see any more of this boy. He's a bad influence on you.

SAVATHRI

People don't influence me. I'm probably a worse influence on him!

ANITA

But his mother is dead.

SAVATHRI

How can you hold it against him that his mother's dead? How could that be at all relevant? And you have no right to say I can't see him. I can see anyone I want to.

SHAKUNTALA

If his mother's dead because his father killed her, it would be relevant. It might be hereditary, this killing of wives. But that's really more Indian than Chinese, isn't it?

[PAUSE]

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SHAKUNTALA

May I have the jam, please?

SAVATHRI

That's it, isn't it? He's Chinese.

What else could you possibly have against him? He's bright. He's going to be a doctor. He's the son of your old friends, what else could you find wrong with him?

SHAKUNTALA

He's fat.

SAVATHRI

Not any more.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Are you suggesting that I, Professor Shanmuganathan, known internationally for my liberal and enlightened views, am racially prejudiced?

ANITA

Your father has nothing against Steven. It's just that you don't know these Chinese boys. Chinese boys are insincere. They play around, they flirt, even if they marry you, they go off and have strings of mistresses. And of all Chinese men, Chinese doctors are the worst.

SAVATHRI

Listen to you—just listen to you, Ma! You're talking absolute nonsense! You're blind and prejudiced and—

SHANMUGANATHAN

Savathri! Don't talk to your mother like that! She speaks for your own good.

SAVATHRI

No. She speaks for her own good. And your good. And everybody's good except for mine. Nobody bothers to think about what would be good for me. You just want me to do what you want. You just want me to be like Shakuntala. Well, I can't. I can't, won't and I don't want to be!

SHANMUGANATHAN

Are you going to let your daughter say such things?

SAVATHRI

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You can't even answer me yourself! You just make Ama do all your dirty work and take the blame.

SHANMUGANATHAN

[RISING] You shut up now!

SHAKUNTALA

Pa!

SHANMUGANATHAN

No respect in this house!

[EXIT SHANMUGANATHAN]

SAVATHRI

No freedom in this house!

[EXIT SAVATHRI]

ANITA

No peace in this house!

[EXIT ANITA]

[ALONE, SHAKUNTALA LOOKS AFTER HER DEPARTED FAMILY THEN REACHES FOR TEA POT, FINDS IT EMPTY.]

SHAKUNTALA

No more coffee.

END OF SCENE ONE

### **Scene Two: Dining Room. Midnight.**

[SHAKUNTALA ENTERS AS SAVATHRI COMES OUT OF THE KITCHEN WITH SOME TIT-BITS.]

SHAKUNTALA

I see you beat me to the fridge.

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SAVATHRI

Don't worry. I didn't touch your chocolates.

[SAVATHRI SEEMS INCLINED TO WALK RIGHT PAST SHAKUNTALA AND OUT OF THE DINING ROOM. SHAKUNTALA SITS AT THE TABLE, AT HER FATHER'S PLACE, AND INDICATES HER SISTER SHOULD JOIN HER. SAVATHRI STANDS HESITANTLY.]

SHAKUNTALA

It's just like the old days isn't it? I remember when we were little and couldn't sleep... we'd always end up in the kitchen—

SAVATHRI

Stuffing our faces.

SHAKUNTALA

People who learnt to eat as unhappy children are supposed to end up with terrible weight problems.

SAVATHRI

That's certainly not you.

SHAKUNTALA

Nor you.

SAVATHRI

That's another theory shot down, then.

SHAKUNTALA

Either that or we must have been eating as happy children.

I think we were. I didn't realise it then, though. I don't think you ever really realise that you're happy until—

[SHAKUNTALA SHRUGS, AS THOUGH GETTING RID OF A BAD MEMORY. PAUSE.]

SAVATHRI

[GENTLY] Until you're not happy any more?

SHAKUNTALA

Is there any more cake in the fridge or did you take it all?

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SAVATHRI

There's some more. But you can have this.

[SAVATHRI SITS.] Shaku, something's wrong isn't it?

SHAKUNTALA

No. Nothing's wrong. [SHAKUNTALA EATS CAKE.] Why are you looking at me like that?

SAVATHRI

No, no. I'm not.

SHAKUNTALA

You want some of this?

SAVATHRI

I was thinking how we used to try to stay awake all night when we were small. All night chat sessions. You kept falling asleep.

SHAKUNTALA

That's not true. I tried to go to sleep. You never let me.

SAVATHRI

I had to keep asking you what you thought, to make sure you were still listening to me.

SHAKUNTALA

I was incredibly tolerant in my youth!

SAVATHRI

You were my first audience. That's when I first learnt that to get a point through to an audience you first have to keep that audience awake.

Remember when I found that Masters & Johnson report?

SHAKUNTALA

Report? Not really—

SAVATHRI

That sex thing—

SHAKUNTALA

Oh yes. Men with plastic penises in sterile laboratories.

SAVATHRI

That's not what you said then.

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SHAKUNTALA

What did I say then?

SAVATHRI

Something like 'You-better-not-let-Ama-catch-you-with-that-let-me-have-a-look'!

SHAKUNTALA

No I didn't!

SAVATHRI

You did. Oh yes you did!

SHAKUNTALA

I've changed since then.

I must lend you Sheila Kitzinger's Woman's Experience of Sex. Women have a point of view too, you know.

SAVATHRI

You're still wicked.

[PAUSE]

I thought you'd changed so much.

[PAUSE]

I didn't know you any more.

SHAKUNTALA

Maybe I did change. But I think I'm changing back now.

SAVATHRI

I've missed you.

SHAKUNTALA

I missed you too. And home and everything. Nothing seems to have changed here.

SAVATHRI

Stagnant.

SHAKUNTALA

Safe.

[LONGER PAUSE]

SAVATHRI

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Shaku, I know it's none of my business, but in Oxford did something happen to—

SHAKUNTALA

So tell me about Steven. What's he like now?

SAVATHRI

I asked you first.

SHAKUNTALA

I'm older. You should listen to me.

SAVATHRI

That's not fair. You'll always be older.

SHAKUNTALA

That isn't always an advantage.

SAVATHRI

Oh come on. This is the age of the strong older woman!

SHAKUNTALA

Oh, I'm not thinking about growing old—not yet, anyway. It's more the responsibilities, the expectations, things like that.

SAVATHRI

You mean being perfect doesn't come naturally to you?

SHAKUNTALA

You kidding? It's just good PR.

[PAUSE]

SAVATHRI

Do you really want to know about Steven?

SHAKUNTALA

[NODDING] What does he look like now?

SAVATHRI

Not bad. Pretty good, actually. Of course that doesn't matter—

SHAKUNTALA

No, no. Of course not.

[PAUSE. THEN THEY BOTH LAUGH.]

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SAVATHRI

Actually he's thought to be very good looking.

SHAKUNTALA

Good body?

SAVATHRI

Shaku! I don't notice such things!

SHAKUNTALA

Yes or no.

[PAUSE]

SAVATHRI

Yes.

[BOTH LAUGH AGAIN]

SHAKUNTALA

Aha!

SAVATHRI

I don't know how you get away with it—the things you say. You're much wickeder than me, really, and yet everybody thinks you're such a good girl.

SHAKUNTALA

But I am.

SAVATHRI

No you aren't. It's just good PR. You said so yourself.

SHAKUNTALA

You don't have to go at everything headfirst, you know. Take it easy. Confrontation isn't always the solution. In fact it very seldom is. Sometimes the best solution is just to let things be. Leave them to fall in place and sort themselves out.

SAVATHRI

Are you saying I should just stop seeing Steven? I'm not going to.

SHAKUNTALA

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Did I say that? No, I did not say that. I'm just saying that important as it may seem now—you don't have to go in for big blow ups with Ama and Apa. Sure, see the guy if you want. But you don't have to go and say things about marrying him until you're sure you're going to.

SAVATHRI

Steven's not like anybody else. He's different.

SHAKUNTALA

Really special?

SAVATHRI

Really special. What should I do?

SHAKUNTALA

Enjoy it while it lasts.

[PAUSE. SAVATHRI STARES AT SHARKUNTALA WHO LOOKS AWAY.]

SAVATHRI

Shaku, there was someone in England, wasn't there?

[AFTER ANOTHER PAUSE, SHAKUNTALA NODS.]

SHAKUNTALA

I'm going to get a drink.

SAVATHRI

Have mine. Was he English?

[SHAKUNTALA NODS]

SAVATHRI

Shaku, why didn't you say anything?

SHAKUNTALA

What would have been the point? It wouldn't have changed anything!

I'm sorry. I'm not snapping at you.

SAVATHRI

Was he nice?

SHAKUNTALA

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Nice? Oh yes. Nice to me, nice to his friends, nice to his parents. Oh yes, Robbie's very Nice.

[SAVATHRI MOTIONS TO HER TO CONTINUE.]

SHAKUNTALA

I don't know. What can I say? It's over.

SAVATHRI

When did—

SHAKUNTALA

All right. We met in our first year. Everything's so different there. You're lonely in ways you never expected to be. And when there's someone you can talk to and feel at home with—I don't know. It just moves so fast. Much faster than it would here, I suppose.

SAVATHRI

Here with everybody keeping an eye on you. You can't go anywhere with someone without at least three aunts calling up to report where you were spotted.

SHAKUNTALA

No. It's all so different there. You don't know anybody and nobody knows you. You don't know what kind of freedom that means. You can do what you think best without having to consider what everyone else thinks. It's like a sort of dream. For a while I was so lonely, then I met him. Suddenly everything was possible. We got along so well. It was so perfect. Everything just clicked. Even when we didn't agree about something it was still perfect. I could respect his point of view and he could respect mine.

And it didn't matter to him that I was Indian. He never seemed to notice that at all.

His parents noticed, though. And poor Robbie sort of sat up and took a look at me and said 'Oh. Really?'

SAVATHRI

So what happened? His parents?

SHAKUNTALA

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We were practically engaged. After graduation we went to see his parents—  
for me to meet them. The idea was that after that we were going to come back  
here for him to meet Ama and Apa.

It's not really something you can call up and announce over the telephone.  
Anyway, his parents were—nice. Very nice, very Reasonable. Nothing that  
you could put your finger on and take offence to. 'You're both so young' they  
said. 'Why tie yourselves down? This is not Oxford. This is the real world,'  
[PAUSE]

They made me feel like I was marrying Robbie just in order to stay on in  
England.

[PAUSE]

In the end they offered to finance his MBA, during which he was supposed to  
stay away from me and think things over. I think that once he accepted that I  
knew things could never be the same again.

SAVATHRI

Why didn't you fight for him? I would have!

SHAKUNTALA

I'm not the sort to fight. You know that.

SAVATHRI

But if you thought he was worth fighting for, you should have!

SHAKUNTALA

I didn't know how.

SAVATHRI

You could have tried!

SHAKUNTALA

I didn't want to fight to keep him.

I wanted a man who would fight to keep me.

[PAUSE]

I guess Robbie wasn't that man.

[SAVATHRI REACHES ACROSS THE TABLE TO SQUEEZE  
SHAKUNTALA'S HAND.]

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SHAKUNTALA

Thanks.

SAVATHRI

But when was all this? Not so long ago, right? You've only just got back. You only graduated last month. You don't know he won't just turn up on the doorstep—or call from Changi Airport—saying that he's seen the light, he can't live without you and you're the one woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with.

SHAKUNTALA

Oh sure.

SAVATHRI

No, really. The trouble is just his parents, isn't it? He wasn't like that when he was with you? It's just like the story of your name!

SHAKUNTALA

I don't know what you're talking about.

SAVATHRI

Your name!

[SHANMUGANATHAN ENTERS AT THIS POINT AND STANDS IN THE DOORWAY, LISTENING.]

SAVATHRI

Remember Ama telling us how she and Apa chose our names because of the stories? Shakuntala's prince had a curse put on her and he forgot her—think of it as Robbie's parents putting a curse on him. You've got to break the curse, that's all. Then he's yours again.

SHAKUNTALA

It doesn't work that way in real life.

Actually it doesn't even work that way in the story, if I remember—Shakuntala has nothing to do with it. There's this fisherman who just happens to turn up in a nick of time who just happens to have caught the fish that just happens to have swallowed the ring that Shakuntala lost, that just happens to be the only thing that would restore the memory of her to the prince.

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Things don't happen like that in real life.

And anyway, it's not very reassuring, is it? To think that your whole future depends on somebody catching a bloody fish.

SAVATHRI

Shaku, you're angry.

[PAUSE]

Shaku, I've never seen you angry before.

SHAKUNTALA

It's not just because of his parents. It's just that once I saw how he was with his parents I knew that he wasn't the man I thought he was. He wasn't the man I wanted to marry. I know that if I tried to I could have changed his mind. I don't want to have that kind of power over someone. I don't want that kind of responsibility.

That's the safe part of an arranged marriage. You can trust your parents to do their best for you. And if things don't turn out right at least it isn't your fault. You don't have to put yourself up on the market for whoever you can attract. Or turn into a manhunter, trying to catch the best man you can get. That's what they do to you when they tell you that you're 'free to choose'.

[HERE SHANMUGANATHAN MAKES AS THOUGH TO SPEAK BUT DOES NOT. HE LOOKS AROUND—FOR ANITA? THEN DISAPPEARS. AFTER HE IS GONE SHAKUNTALA LOOKS AT THE EMPTY DOORWAY AS THOUGH HER EYE WAS CAUGHT BY THE MOVEMENT OF HIS GOING... OR AS THOUGH SHE KNEW HE WAS THERE ALL THROUGH HER SPEECH?]

SAVATHRI

Aka, it's not always like that.

SHAKUNTALA

No. Of course it's not.

Tell me about Steven. How long have you known him? How come you never said anything?

SAVATHRI

What could I say? What did you ever say?

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SHAKUNTALA

Okay. Granted. But what's he like?

SAVATHRI

Special.

SHAKUNTALA

Uh-huh. Special. Aren't they all.

SAVATHRI

He's—well, you know what you said about Robbie not even noticing that you are Indian? Steven's not like that. I mean, he notices. He never lets me forget that I'm Indian.

SHAKUNTALA

What do you mean?

SAVATHRI

I don't know. It's like—well—he says things, all of a sudden, like 'you've got such beautiful brown skin' and he says I should always wear gold and not silver because it goes better with my complexion... and he wants to see me in a saree...

When I'm with him I feel good about being a woman and being Indian. I never really did before. They were always things I had to overcome.

SHAKUNTALA

I remember you came home crying in Primary One once. Your class was doing a Snow White play and you wanted to be Snow White and someone said to you, 'you can't be Snow White because you're black in colour'.

[DURING THE FOLLOWING, ANITA AND SHANMUGANATHAN ENTER. ANITA'S ATTITUDE IS 'WHAT'S ALL THIS' BUT SHANMUGANATHAN INDICATES FOR HER TO BE SILENT. THEN HE EXITS. ANITA SHRUGS AND STANDS QUIETLY IN THE DOORWAY LISTENING TO HER DAUGHTERS.]

SAVATHRI

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I remember. Apa was still in England then, we were living in the old house with all those relatives and I hid in that huge cupboard behind the house and refused to come out till Ama came home from school and dragged me out. And Ama told me, it doesn't matter what colour you are, just do your best to be a good person.

SHAKUNTALA

But it does matter what colour you are, doesn't it?

SAVATHRI

It does matter. It's an insult to anybody with skin to pretend that it doesn't matter, because it's a part of you and to ignore it would be to ignore part of what you are.

But it's up to you whether it matters in a way that makes you different and disadvantaged, or in a way that makes you special.

SHAKUNTALA

More militant talk?

SAVATHRI

More Steven talk, actually.

SHAKUNTALA

He does sound special.

SAVATHRI

He is. Very special.

ANITA

How long have you known this boy?

SAVATHRI

Ama!

[ANITA JOINS THEM AT THE TABLE.]

ANITA

I knew this Steven's mother, you know. Long before either of you were born. She was in TTC with me. Very quiet girl. But so beautiful. She had long hair for a Chinese girl. So long that she could sit on it, but for classes she tied it in plaits and coiled it around her head.

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SAVATHRI

Steven can hardly remember her.

ANITA

He must have been about five years old when she died.

SAVATHRI

What was she like?

ANITA

I hardly knew her. What is this Steven like?

SHAKUNTALA

He wants Savi to wear a golden saree to the D & D!

ANITA

Try getting this one into a saree!

SAVATHRI

Anyway I don't have a saree.

SHAKUNTALA

That's not a problem.

ANITA

Actually I have a gold saree you can wear, if you're really serious.

SAVATHRI

But I don't know how to wear a saree—

SHAKUNTALA

You're supposed to be clever. It's not so difficult.

ANITA

Besides, isn't it about time?

SHAKUNTALA

I'll go and get something you can try with—

[EXIT SHAKUNTALA INTO KITCHEN]

SAVATHRI

Everybody will laugh at me.

ANITA

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Why should anyone laugh at you?

SHAKUNTALA [OFF]

Ama, where have you put the—oh wait, it's all right...

ANITA

What?

SHAKUNTALA [OFF]

It's all right. I've found something...

SAVATHRI

I'm the sort of person everybody expects to see in jeans and T-shirts.

ANITA

So? You'll surprise them.

[ENTER SHAKUNTALA CARRYING A SAREE (PREFERABLY WHITE)  
WHICH SHE AND ANITA PROCEED TO DRESS SAVATHRI IN.]

SAVATHRI

Will I be able to dance?

SHAKUNTALA

Silly, of course you will. And you will look so lovely!

ANITA

One thing. This girl has a good figure. I used to look like that once.

SAVATHRI

Really Ama?

SHAKUNTALA

Haven't you seen the pictures? I've got some eye shadow with gold flakes in it. You're going to look so beautiful.

SAVATHRI

I can't wear eye shadow.

SHAKUNTALA

Of course you can. The beautiful feminist. Who says only ugly women are concerned with women's rights.

ANITA

Turn around.

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I never thought I would see this one in a saree.

SAVATHRI

Do you think it's stupid of me to try to look beautiful for Steven?

ANITA

Of course it's stupid.

SHAKUNTALA

Ama...

ANITA

The only person you should try to look beautiful for is—your mother!

SHAKUNTALA

Ama!

ANITA

So. You want my gold saree or not?

SAVATHRI

But how, the D&D and Apa?

ANITA

I'll talk to your father. Maybe we can talk something out.

SHAKUNTALA

Thank you, Ama.

SAVATHRI

[RAISES HER ARMS ABOVE HER HEAD AND TURNS.] Would you believe it? I actually feel as though I could be beautiful!

[LIGHTS DOWN.]

## **END OF SCENE TWO**

### SCENE THREE: DINING ROOM. AFTER DINNER

SHANMUGANATHAN AT DINING TABLE. ANITA WALKING IN AND OUT OF KITCHEN, CLEARING THE TABLE.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Civilisation is dead.

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Do you hear me? Civilisation is dead.

ANITA

What are you talking about? Pass me that...

SHANMUGANATHAN

Take one social unit; say a family. Take the most basic communal rite; say a family. In a civilised manner, the family sits down to share a meal. This is not just eating for survival—a meal together is a symbol of sharing and intimacy and trust and mutual dependency. A time to come together after a day spent away from each other. The foundation of civilised and harmonious living...

ANITA

[WIPING TABLE] Move your elbows.

SHANMUGANATHAN

But what happens? The meal is hardly over, suddenly everybody is gone off in different directions. No time for peaceful digestion even.

ANITA

You can sit there and peacefully digest. I have to go and do the washing up.

SHANMUGANATHAN

What are daughters for, if they can't even help with the washing up? Just because there's some boy coming. Rushing off and leaving everything to their aged parents.

ANITA

Speak for yourself. I am not an aged parent yet.

You know this is Savi's special night. She's getting ready.

SHANMUGANATHAN

What's there to get ready? One shirt. One jeans. That's all that girl ever wears!

SHAKUNTALA [OFF]

Ama! Ama!

ANITA

What is it? I'm busy!

SHAKUNTALA [OFF]

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Ama, come and see how Savi looks. Come on!

ANITA

I'll come up later. When I've finished clearing.

SHAKUNTALA [OFF]

No Ma. Come now, please. He'll be here soon!

SHANMUGANATHAN

[RISING] I'll go—

ANITA

No, no. You stay here. I'll bring her down later.

SHANMUGANATHAN

I've finished my dinner.

ANITA

Digest it peacefully!

SHAKUNTALA [OFF]

Ama!

ANITA

I'm coming! What's the hurry?

[EXIT ANITA.]

[SHAN, LEFT ALONE, SITS.]

[THE DOORBELL RINGS BRIEFLY AND UNCERTAINLY.

SHANMUGANATHAN GETS UP AND GOES OUT QUICKLY THROUGH  
THE LIVING ROOM.]

ANITA [OFF]

Shan, was that the door?

SHANMUGANATHAN [OFF]

No!

[ENTER SHANMUGANATHAN, HIGHLY PLEASED, USHERING STEVEN IN  
AHEAD OF HIM.]

SHANMUGANATHAN

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And this is our dining room. Sit down, please sit down. I myself will get you a drink. Savathri will be ready soon. Very soon. In the meantime we can get to know each other better.

STEVEN

Thank you, Professor Shan—Shamugam—Professor Shanmuganathan—

SHANMUGANATHAN

What would you like to drink?

STEVEN

Oh, anything, thank you.

I'm really not very—

SHANMUGANATHAN

How old are you, Steven?

STEVEN

I'm twenty-five.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Twenty-five. A soft drink, perhaps. Or would you prefer something stronger?

STEVEN

Just water would be fine, actually.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Water. You drink water, do you?

STEVEN

No. Yes. Only sometimes.

SHANMUGANATHAN

But here, tonight, right now, you want to drink water.

STEVEN

Well no, as I said, I'm not really—

SHANMUGANATHAN

So tell me, how did you and Savathri meet?

STEVEN

Well, we were in the Students' Union together and we sort of just met—

SHANMUGANATHAN

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Students' Union. I was in the Students' Union in my day. What do you do in the Students' Union?

STEVEN

Actually a bit of everything.  
I'm the president.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Oh. The President. The President of the Students' Union. That's something. That's quite something. Savathri never told us that.

STEVEN

She would have made a good President herself. She was up for election, you know. She's very intelligent, very committed, very practical and very quick.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Yes I know.

But you won't get them voting a woman in, not that advanced yet, eh?

STEVEN

Well, there are some who might not have voted for her because she is a woman. And there are some who didn't vote for her because she is Indian.

SHANMUGANATHAN

How can you say that.

STEVEN

It's true. Indian and a woman.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Is that why you're taking my daughter to this D & D?

Standing up for the underprivileged?

STEVEN

Well, I probably wouldn't be going with her if she was Indian and a man, but...

SHANMUGANATHAN

These days there's no guarantee...

STEVEN

I suppose not.

No, I'm not being political or patronising. I wouldn't dare to patronise Savathri.

I like her too much. I respect her too much.

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Besides, she would never let me get away with it.

SHANMUGANATHAN

No. She's a strong headed girl, that one.

STEVEN

She knows who she is and what she wants.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Do you know what you want?

STEVEN

What do you mean?

SHANMUGANATHAN

To the two of you, this is just an outing of one night. But to all the people who see you together tonight—

STEVEN

I know. We've talked about it.

Thank you, Professor.

ANITA [OFF]

Shan are you still there?

Come, come and show your father how you look.

[ENTER ANITA FOLLOWED BY SAVATHRI WITH EYES DEMURELY CAST DOWN AND SHAKUNTALA BEHIND HER.]

[STEVEN STANDS UP QUICKLY, SHAN MORE SLOWLY.]

ANITA

Isn't she beautiful?

Oh. You must be Steven? Here already!

SAVATHRI

Steven! Hi! How long have you been here? Sorry to have kept you waiting!  
How long were you waiting? I didn't know you were here yet or I would have hurried. My, you look good.

STEVEN

You look good.

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You look—wonderful.

SAVATHRI

My mother did my hair. And Shaku did my make-up. Oh, you remember my sister Shakuntala? She says a long time ago—

STEVEN

Yes, of course. Hi.

SHAKUNTALA

Hello.

STEVEN

You just got back?

SHAKUNTALA

Yes.

SAVATHRI

And my mother,

STEVEN

Mrs. Shan.

ANITA

Hello, Steven.

SAVATHRI

And you've already met my father. Has he been intimidating you?

SHANMUGANATHAN

I never intimidate anybody. I'm as timid as a mouse!

ANITA

Just listen to him!

STEVEN

Not really. [LAUGHS] Well, a little maybe...

SAVATHRI

He makes his students cry. Just by looking at them. He just fixes them with his piercing eye and they all burst into tears.

SHAKUNTALA

I'll get a drink for Steven.

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[SHAKUNTALA EXITS TO KITCHEN.]

SHANMUGANATHAN

That's not true.

Steven and I got along very well, didn't we? We had a nice chat while we were waiting for someone to get all dressed up.

SAVATHRI

Well, what do you think? You wanted to see me in a saree? What do you think?

STEVEN

You look—[SHRUGS]

SAVATHRI

Words fail him. I've always wanted to have that effect on a man.

STEVEN

I'll tell you later.

SAVATHRI

Oh.

Well, we have to be going. Bye Ma. Bye Apa.

STEVEN

Goodbye Professor Shanmuganathan. Good night, Mrs. Shan.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Next time come earlier so we can talk more. All right, Steven?

STEVEN

Yes Sir. Good bye.

ANITA

What time do we expect you back, young lady?

SAVATHRI

I don't know. Late.

ANITA

Late, late, how late?

SAVATHRI

Ama, it all depends on—

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SHANMUGANATHAN

Don't nag her. Let them enjoy themselves. They're only young once.

ANITA

Listen to him. You know who will be waiting up for you? Not me.

STEVEN

She'll be back by midnight.

SAVATHRI

Steven! Midnight?

SHANMUGANATHAN

I like this young man.

SAVATHRI

All right, all right. Let's go.

ANITA

Have a good time. Drive carefully. Don't get into any fights.

[EXIT STEVEN AND SAVATHRI.]

[ENTER SHAKUNTALA WHO SITS DOWN QUIETLY.]

ANITA

Back by midnight, he says. Well, we'll see.

SHANMUGANATHAN

I think that young man is quite capable of managing our Savi, you know.

Chuang Poh's son.

ANITA

Our Savi going out in a saree.

You know what, we should have had a camera ready.

SHANMUGANATHAN

He seems like a sharp fellow. Knows what he's doing.

ANITA

He's a nice boy. I like him. The only thing is—Chinese.

SHANMUGANATHAN

You should expect something like that from Savi.

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ANITA

She's just going through a difficult phase. Anyway she's just going out for one date with this boy. For young people these days it doesn't count as anything.

SHANMUGANATHAN

I don't know. I wouldn't be so sure.

Shaku never went through a difficult phase, eh, Shaku?

Why so quiet, girl?

Next thing we know, we'll have our Shaku also bringing home a Chinese boyfriend. Or worse.

SHAKUNTALA

[SOFTLY. SHAN CATCHES THE SENSE BUT NOT THE WORDS. ANITA CATCHES NEITHER.]

What could be worse?

ANITA

It's funny how some things turn out. We hardly saw Chuang Poh again after his wife died how many years ago...

SHANMUGANATHAN

I used to see him quite often. Meetings on campus, things like that.

ANITA

I wasn't talking about things like that. We should have them over for dinner some time. Him and Steven.

SHANMUGANATHAN

He's been here before. I think they were the first people we had over here for dinner. Chuang Poh and his wife. Right after we got this table, remember?

ANITA

Chicken curry. I cooked chicken curry. I was carrying this one at the time.

If we have them over to dinner, with those two going out together, people will think we're trying to arrange something between them.

I wonder what Chuang Poh thinks of all this.

I wonder if he knows.

SHANMUGANATHAN

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I wouldn't like to be the one to have to go about arranging a marriage for our Savi.

SHAKUNTALA

Some fathers would just consider it their duty and do it.

[PAUSE]

SHANMUGANATHAN

Shaku, do you want us to arrange a marriage for you?

ANITA

What are you talking about? Arrange what marriage? Shan what are you talking about?

SHANMUGANATHAN

Shaku?

[SHAKUNTALA IS GIVEN TIME TO REPLY BUT SHE DOES NOT. SHE DOES NOT LOOK AT HER PARENTS.]

SHANMUGANATHAN

If you want us to arrange a marriage for you, we will.

If that is what you want.

Is it?

SHAKUNTALA

How can you? Everybody knows how modern and liberal you are. You tell everybody that your daughters are free to choose for themselves, that you leave it up to them to make their own mistakes.

[ANITA SITS DOWN NEXT TO SHANMUGANATHAN]

SHANMUGANATHAN

What everybody knows doesn't matter. What I tell everybody doesn't matter.

It's what you want—

Your mother and I—[PAUSE. FORMULATES THOUGHTS.]

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If we say we leave the choice of your husband to you, it's not because we want to see you make mistakes. It's because—[TRAILS OFF. PAUSES AGAIN.]

ANITA

It's because we believe it's your life and you have a right to make the decision of who you're going to spend it with.

SHAKUNTALA

Then when we choose someone you say it's the wrong person.

ANITA

I don't think it's fair of you to say that. Who did you choose that we ever said was the wrong person? When have we ever said that?

SHAKUNTALA

I'm not saying you have. But I know you would.

ANITA

Who do you have in mind?

[PAUSE]

SHAKUNTALA

Well, look at Savi and Steven. You make such a fuss just because he's Chinese.

ANITA

No, we didn't make such a fuss. And did we stop her from going out with—

SHANMUGANATHAN

Shaku, be fair.

To be honest, don't you think that if there was any fuss, the same fuss would have been made whether the boy was Indian or Chinese or anything else?

ANITA

Look, Savi is out with the boy now, yes or no?

Right now. Yes or no?

[SHANMUGANATHAN PUTS A HAND ON ANITA'S ARM TO STILL HER.]

SHANMUGANATHAN

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To your mother and myself, I believe that the fact that the boy is Chinese is not so important as the fact that your sister is out officially for the first time on her own with a boy—

ANITA

Who is not a relative—

SHANMUGANATHAN

Who is not a relative. Of course we are apprehensive. Of course we try to take all the precautions we can. But we did not stop her. You bring home who you want, we will look him over, but if that is what you want, we will not stop you. Even against our better judgement we will not stop you.

ANITA

Of course we try first to make you see the truth for yourself, but you still want to be stubborn, what can we do?

SHAKUNTALA

But you wouldn't approve. I know you wouldn't approve.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Sometimes parents disapprove not because they are certain that you are wrong, but because they want you to be certain that you are right.

ANITA

Shaku, who do you have in mind?

[PAUSE]

SHAKUNTALA

Nobody.

[PAUSE. ANITA AND SHANMUGANATHAN LOOK AT SHAKUNTALA.]

SHAKUNTALA

It doesn't matter now, anyway.

SHANMUGANATHAN

If you feel that you want us to arrange a match for you, of course we will do the best we can...

ANITA

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Yes, of course. If that's what you want. Of course.

SHAKUNTALA

No. I don't want that.

SHANMUGANATHAN

It's not that your mother and I don't care who you marry.

ANITA

Of course we care!

SHANMUGANATHAN

Consider it a matter of quality control. We hope we've brought you up in such a way that we don't have to impose quality control from the outside because it is something that has already become a part of your character.

It is the way we tried to bring you up.

We trust you.

SHAKUNTALA

But in spite of everything you say, you do want me to have a traditional marriage, don't you? And become a traditional wife. I mean, you would be disappointed if I never got married, wouldn't you?

ANITA

We would like to know that you have someone who is able to take care of you. We will always be here for you, as long as we are here, but of course we won't always be here...

SHANMUGANATHAN

But if you find that the best person to look after you is yourself, well... convince us.

ANITA

We only want what is best for you.

SHAKUNTALA

Yes. I know.

ANITA

Is there something you want to tell us, Shaku?

SHAKUNTALA

[QUICKLY] No.

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[PAUSE]

SHAKUNTALA

Remember when we were small, Savi and I used to play under the table? You let us have an old bedsheet to put over it to become a cave.

ANITA

You two monkeys under the table. Remember, Shan? You took a picture?

SHAKUNTALA

Oh no. Not monkeys/. We were playing out stories. Even then I thought it was a bit stupid. The Shakuntala story, I mean. There should be more of a moral to it than if you're lucky you get your prince because of a ring that's been found in a fish just in the nick of time. Shakuntala herself doesn't do anything .

SHANMUGANATHAN

There is a moral to it.

When something is fated to be, like the marriage of ideal minds, which is what that story is all about, you don't have to do anything. Things you see as chance or coincidence or luck all conspire to bring it about. That is what the ring in the fish stands for. A truth cannot remain lost. If something is fated to be, it will be.

SHAKUNTALA

Not always.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Maybe he just wasn't the right person for you, Shaku.

[SHAKUNTALA LOOKS AT SHANMUGANATHAN. ANITA LOOKS BETWEEN THEM, LOST. THEN SHAKUNTALA NODS.]

SHANMUGANATHAN

That doesn't mean there will never be a right person. It only means that the right person has not yet come.

When he does, you will know.

SHAKUNTALA

[WATERY LAUGH] How? There'll be a ring in a fish.

SHANMUGANATHAN

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Yes.

I promise you, girl.

[SHAKUNTALA GIVES SHANMUGANATHAN A QUICK EMBRACE AND  
RUNS OUT OF THE ROOM.]

SHANMUGANATHAN

[TO HIMSELF] Even if I have to put it there myself.

ANITA

That is real poetry.

SHANMUGANATHAN

I wonder who the boy was.

ANITA

If she wants to tell us, she will.

SHANMUGANATHAN

I'd like to wring his neck!

ANITA

So, it looks like we won't be seeing grandchildren for some time.

It doesn't seem like so long ago that those two were just babies.

SHANMUGANATHAN

Hmmm.

ANITA

They're not babies any more.

[ANITA PUTS HAND ON SHANMUGANATHAN.]

ANITA

You can only look after them so far.

SHANMUGANATHAN

I know.

[PAUSE. ANITA STANDS.]

ANITA

It's not easy to let them go. You want coffee? I'll get you some coffee.

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SHANMUGANATHAN

Girls are like flowers. Wherever they go, they make the world beautiful.

ANITA

[STARTING TOWARDS KITCHEN] Just tonight you can have sugar in your coffee.

SHANMUGANATHAN

For me it's not so bad.

ANITA

Once in a while a bit of sugar can't do so much damage.

SHANMUGANATHAN

After all, I am keeping the most beautiful flower of all for myself.

ANITA

What's that?

[SHANMUGANATHAN JUST LOOKS AT ANITA. THEY SMILE. THEN LAUGH SHYLY.]

ANITA

Two spoons.

THE END