

Cyril Dabydeen

Wedding Night

Silence, with the marriage ceremony being over. He muttered a few words, shyly, without pretence. She hummed a non-committal reply, without really trying to. The sacred fire, their going around it seven times, like a mirage from ages past: the Vedas, now relived in them, in the ritual. Meena being still veiled, and he could hardly see her face in scarce light. Suneel kept looking at her with an embarrassed glee. The Hindu priest's words, invoking of the deities, in his tried-and-true manner. Yes, prayers for a long and blissful life awaiting them, here, far from India, on this coastal ground close to the Amazon.

Suneel let out an instinctive laugh, like playfulness. Meena kept being nervous. A marriage their parents wanted: her father, mother, and the many relatives heaping praises on "the special boy," Suneel—and the many gifts offered. A dowry, though they were far from Calcutta, Mumbai, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh. The Atlantic waves beating in what was yet like a far shore, heralding their betrothal, maybe. Now what's obligatory, on such a night. "Meena," he whispered her name.

"Suneel," she answered, head lowered.

Her slim waist, bodice, her breasts slightly jutting out. His eyes roving, but shyly. On an impulse he felt like asking, *Do you love me?* Her breathing he listened to; and other sounds coming from the wedding guests outside, more cacophonous: from the men mostly, as some looked up at the high window. Curtains drawn. Let them look up and think, dwell on it; yes, everyone being boisterous, in their banter; bawdy too, in authentic village ways. Now what role must the bride and groom play, or prepare themselves for? Yes, Suneel and Meena now married, becoming man and woman, nothing less.

Meena, over eighteen, still coy: with her own expectation, or anticipation of real or presumed marriage bliss. And the village women a few days earlier had teased her in the ritual *matticore*. Women's role-playing: about how a bride must "perform"; how Meena must obey her husband's commands. What he would compel her to do. *What?* Laughter rose, in the initiation rite. And one or two women exhorted Meena to bear it, like bearing one's chafe; but others conjured up ecstasy, didn't they? Not fantasy? Man's ecstasy, for sure.

Meena shyly covered her face, eyes, as the women rubbed turmeric or yellow dye paste on her skin to give her an extra sheen. Beauty's glow: so her husband—Suneel—would be pleased, like seeing her in her declared innocence for the first time. Curtains drawn: what could you really see?

Now an auspicious time, according to the holy books, astrology, what

the stars held in store for them: really on this far shore. All in Meena's mind now, her eyes still lowered; and the older women had insisted that she needn't be shy with her husband. Laughter, one woman's, rebuke mixed in, you bet.

"Aw, Meena bound to be shy."

"But why?" scorched another.

"She married...now," another intoned.

"Eh?" Meena jolted.

"Married...with a husband, ha."

"But..."

"He will need..."

Meena raised her head. "Need?"

Laughter, all that the women instinctively knew, about being dutiful. Village ways, in this far place still. But purdah would soon be over. Suddenly Meena didn't care for the matticore's reminder; though the women's voices kept coming at her; and she tried to shut them out from her mind. Didn't she?

Suneel only stared at her.

"It's what being married...is all about, child," she heard next. They called her that—a *child*—indeed an eighteen-year-old as she was. But still too young? Not thirteen or fourteen, maybe as in Uttar Pradesh?

Really? What fate determined for them all, far away or close up?

"It's your new life, gal-pickney as you are," another woman chortled.

"To bear children, it's God's gift," sang another.

Gift...really? Meena mused.

The women again pulled her long hair, and pawed her round face, endearingly. Everything Meena now played back in an instant in her mind. And one woman mimicked being a male making advances on her; she did. *Oooh...aaah*. The other women burst out laughing. Meena too laughed; but with anxiety.

Suneel came closer. Kept coming. The women's caresses, in vicarious amorousness. Love-making, is it? It's what the bride must learn, or abide by: how to accept her husband's embrace; and other women had simulated rubbing Meena's neck, face, down to her breasts, fingers moving down lower...with thick dye. Meena closed her eyes, listening to whispers. What must come to pass. Her legs firm, smooth, like bamboo (one said to her), as turmeric she inhaled. Now hennaed Meena appeared. Embroidered too. Let Suneel watch her good now, in scarce light.

But Meena balked, as something stirred in her, and she reddened.

How the women kept laughing giddily, in her ears. Meena was ready to swoon. Suddenly she let out, "Stop...that," if only half-heartedly.

Her skin tingling; muscles, bones also.

He yet came. With tenderness, like learning something new. Darker night yet to come? But he kept waiting for something to be resolved between them, maybe. What perhaps she didn't feel in her, maybe. Suneel raised his hand: a strange instinct only, then glanced at the bed. Meena did too, with a flutter in her heart. Closer he moved towards her.

Meena averted her eyes. Outside the sounds grew louder. A tassa-drum beating.

The ocean's waves; and hearts throbbing. Relatives just wanting to be more than mere wedding guests, ah; and did they now really re-enact their own marriage in the ritual ceremony, with accompanying, or just compelling, echoes...the Vedas? *Imagining...what?*

Suneel smiled. Meena also wanted to smile, but blushed instead.

She quivered; and she didn't want to look at him, as he touched her, steered his way almost, towards the bed. Did he?

The drums kept beating louder; and somewhere in the background came the pundit's nasal drawl, offering blessings from the Ramayana in the seven times walk-around, intoning the sacred vows as the wedding guests encouraged it. Relatives, friends, her mother and father. Suneel's parents too, no? Heads bowed, in the fervent prayer, more devotion in the offering. Puri smells too rose in the air...everyone inhaled. Children in their midst, taking in the ceremony with their own innocent glee. Time yet to come?

Suneel must take command, in a man's—or a husband's—assured way.

Here where the curtain fluttered, closer, in the scarce wind; a scarce lamp light burned, the wick flickering shadows. Maybe they both wanted darkness. Self-consciousness, mixed in with loathing: let it be known. As he took her hand, almost unconsciously; and her fingers twirled. He felt the wedding ring, a hard jewelled crust of it.

Reluctantly, she must obey, no?

Must!

“Come now.”

“Wha'?”

“Now.”

“Why?” she mumbled.

Shyness riveted in their nerve-endings, in the male body's tautness; and her bosom exposed, with a slight shift of her nightgown. What else to come? “We're married now, Meena,” Suneel forced the words out, but also chiding.

“I know, but...”

“You're now my wife.”

She made an instinctive noise.

“As man and woman must be,” he managed next. And Suneel's hand moved across the silken sheet on the bed; he sat down; she sat down, on the opposite side...now like an invisible wall between them.

The clock's hum, an alarm in the making, maybe. The moon outside; the jamun tree rustled its leaves; the mango and guava trees also rustled. It would rain before long; and with the elements everything seemed to commingle. Yes, lightning flashing. Thunder next. What was opportune, or auspicious, as the stars foretold...close to the Atlantic Ocean?

Here, their indeed being man and wife.

“I love you,” Suneel said quietly; and Meena looked really beautiful,

without her veil. Yes, their marriage had been arranged. Oh, recall: the first meeting, with the relatives on both sides of the family around; and when he first set eyes on her he figured she was the right one. Her oval-shaped face...black eyes; skin shiny smooth.

And what did she think of him?

What?

She lowered her gaze, and it was her own surprise at that first meeting: that he was handsome with a thin moustache, on an angular face. His jaw, mouth. But she kept her head lowered. Oh, marriage: the match-making was over: he was the suitable one, nothing less. Came next the invitations, the many relatives invited, and detailed plans...the finances to look after. What...cost? The wedding! Suneel, nineteen going on to twenty, a man, yes.

The moon walked before their eyes, in a chink of light.

The curtain fully drawn, see. Then torn apart, oh?

Those below applauded, as the ocean's waves surged. And kept surging; and when would it stop as the wedding guests began leaving, some hurrying away, moving really quickly because of the strong wind, and the rain to come. Yes, rain: like all the days of their lives, as Meena thought, and hummed to herself; as Suneel, well, laughed.