

Bitter Sweets

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Extract

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Nadim Rub's Most Magnificent Deception

HENNA WAS THIRTEEN when she was gleefully married off to the eldest son of one of the best families in Calcutta, and her marriage was achieved by an audacious network of lies as elaborate and brazen as the golden embroidery on her scarlet wedding sari. Henna's paternal family were liars by trade, shopkeepers from the Bengal who had made their money by secretly selling powders and pastes of suspect origin, to alleviate the boredom and fatigue of the British expats serving out their purgatory in local government in pre-Independence India. Those glory days had fled with the British some ten years previously, but Henna's father was still never one to miss a business opportunity – when he heard that the wealthy, landed and unusually fair-skinned Karim family from Calcutta would be visiting their farms around Dhaka, he wasted no time in undertaking an effective reconnaissance.

His initial modest plot had been to nurture a business alliance, but he became more ambitious when he discovered that a rather more lucrative and permanent alliance might be up for grabs. He learned that their son

Rashid, who preferred to be called Ricky, was of marriageable age, but was so bizarre in his preferences that his frustrated family had not yet managed to find him a wife. He had been educated abroad, and insisted that his wife be someone he could 'love', an educated, literate girl with the same interests as him.

Nadim Rub looked at his wilful, precocious daughter, who constantly missed school and cheeked her tutors, who stole her aunts' film magazines to pore over the photographs of the movie stars in thrilled girlish detail. She was athletic enough to avoid him whenever he tried to beat her for these misdeeds, sometimes nimbly running away over the neighbours' rooftops where he couldn't follow. His daughter had inherited his cunning, and her dead mother's looks. She still had an adolescent slimness but had suddenly developed enough of a bosom to pass for a woman, rather than a girl. He formulated his plan.

A shopkeeper is also a salesman, and Nadim knew exactly how to persuade his daughter to go along with him. He caught her hiding at the bottom of their overgrown garden one school day, lying flat on her stomach behind the coconut palms, while she nonchalantly studied magazines instead of her books. When Henna saw her father approach, she leaped up and prepared to run, but he appeased her with an unusually jovial smile, and offered her a paper bag of dusty sweets, which she took warily.

'Henna moni, I know you hate school. And you're too good for this provincial backwater. You should be somewhere better, like Calcutta, the honoured daughter of a wealthy family who could buy you all the sweets and

magazines you could ever desire. It's what your mother would have wanted for you.'

Henna listened with interest – Calcutta was glamorous, the sort of place where the movie stars came from. And for once, her fat, ignorant Baba was right – she did hate school.

Enlisting the help of his sisters, Nadim made sure that Henna learned to carry herself in a sari with rather more elegance than she had hitherto shown, and with careful application of kohl, rouge and powder, managed to make her look older than her years, and almost as pale as the Karims. He had her tutors teach her to play tennis, Ricky-Rashid's favourite sport, which with her natural athleticism she picked up quickly. He found out through bribing the Karims' servants which books were to be found in Ricky-Rashid's room, and bought cheap copies for his daughter to read. He discovered she was still illiterate, and almost beat her again – all his dedicated preparation ruined because his lazy harami of a daughter had wilfully chosen to waste her expensive schooling. He stormed impotently at her while she pranced elegantly on her aunt's makeshift tennis court during one of her lessons, her precise strokes cruelly making her plump teacher race breathlessly from one side to another.

'Baba, you're being silly. Just get one of these monkeys to read out some bits to me, and I'll memorize them. It's easy,' Henna said calmly, swinging her backhand return dangerously close to his ear; 'monkeys' was the disrespectful term which she used for her long-suffering gaggle of tutors. She was enjoying the charade, the pretty new clothes, the make-up, the dissembling; she even looked

forward to the prospect of learning lines from the Shakespearean sonnets her Baba had brought. It was like she was an actress already.

Nadim pulled strings, and used bribes of his suspect poppy powder to insinuate himself into Mr Karim's presence at a club gathering. He made sure he dressed well enough to look like landowning gentry himself, and in better clothes his generous rolls of fat could be mistaken for prosperity rather than greed. He pretended that the shop was his sister-in-law's family business, and that he oversaw it out of loyalty to his dead spouse. He told them about his sorrowful burden – he had a daughter so lovely and gifted that no suitable boy would dare make an appropriate offer for her; he confessed humbly that he had been guilty of over-educating her. He was worried that she would be an old maid, as she was already seventeen years old. Intrigued, Mr Karim arranged for his own reconnaissance, and saw the beautiful Henna as she visited her aunt's house in a rickshaw, demurely holding her tennis racket and appearing to be engrossed by a volume of English poetry. He was satisfied with her paleness and her beauty, although less so by her slim hips. Deciding that the worst that could happen is that she might die in childbirth giving him a beautifully pale grandson, he arranged for a meeting.

'My friends call me Henrietta,' Henna lied charmingly, offering tea to Ricky-Rashid's parents, discreetly not looking at Ricky-Rashid at all.

'And mine call me Ricky,' Ricky-Rashid answered quickly, directly addressing her delicate, painted profile, hoping he might have fallen in love at first sight with this

sonnet-reading, tennis-playing beauty. She was nothing like the moneyed nincompoops he had been introduced to before. Flouting the traditional etiquette of the meeting, he instead displayed the manners of an English gentleman, and got up to relieve Henna of her heavily laden tray. He looked defiantly at his stern parents, and for once saw them beaming back at him with approval.

The Calcutta wedding was a glorious affair, Henna's premature curves barely filling out her gold and scarlet wedding sari; her thin wrists, slender neck and dainty nose weighed down with gold. Due to the generous concession of Nadim Rub in allowing all the celebrations to take place in Calcutta, despite his fervent protested wish that it had been his life's dream to give his daughter a magnificent wedding in Dhaka, the Karims matched his generosity of spirit by offering to pay for all the festivities. Ricky-Rashid had even dismissed the idea of a dowry as barbaric, to Nadim Rub's further joy and Henna's fury – the deal she had previously brokered with her father was that she would get her dowry directly to keep for herself. Sitting graciously by Ricky-Rashid's side, her lovely eyes narrowed imperceptibly as she saw her flabby Baba working the room and accepting congratulations. Casting those eyes down demurely, she vowed to keep all the wedding jewellery that her father had borrowed from his sisters; she wasn't going to let the fat fibber cheat her as well as everyone else.

Following the wedding, Henna lay in Ricky-Rashid's quarters in her new and sprawling home, eating liquorice sweets while she waited for him. Impressed by the four-poster bed, like the ones she had seen in the films, she had dismissed the maid and jumped up and down on it in her

bare feet, still wearing her elaborate sari, before stretching out and trying some poses. When Ricky-Rashid finally entered, looking sheepish and nervous, carrying a book and a flower, she tipped her head up and pouted, expecting a movie-star kiss. She naively did not know that anything further might be expected of her.

Ricky-Rashid, taken by surprise by his new bride's apparent forwardness and feeling even more nervous, kissed her quickly and, reassured by the softness of her mouth, kissed her again. Something was wrong – she tasted of liquorice, like a child. Liquorice was not what he expected his first night of married love to taste of. He felt a wave of panic that he was woefully unqualified to initiate his confident bride, who was now looking at him with a mixture of curiosity and sympathy. Deciding that faint heart never won fair maiden, and deciding further that the only way out of this sea of troubles was to take arms against it and confidently stride in, he aggressively pulled Henna to him with what he hoped was a manly, passionate gesture, crushing her breasts against his chest and circling the bare skin of her waist with his hands.

Henna, disappointed by the kiss, was wondering whether to offer some of her sweets to Ricky-Rashid, and was taken utterly by surprise when he suddenly pounced on her. She jumped as though stung when she felt his clammy hands on her bare skin beneath her sari blouse, and despite her heavy sari, nimbly slipped away from him and off the bed. Ricky-Rashid was acting like one of the villains in the movies that she'd watched, and was doubtless planning to beat her – perhaps this was how husbands behaved from their wedding night onwards. No wonder

her mother was dead and all her aunts such grouchy miseries.

‘I won’t let you,’ she said warningly. She wouldn’t let her big bully of a father beat her, or anyone else who had ever tried, and she certainly wasn’t going to allow this milky-faced academic to succeed where so many others had failed. Her eyes flashed scornfully at him.

Ricky-Rashid’s heart wilted like the drooping rose he was still holding. His attempt at manly domination had gone horribly wrong, and from being surprisingly enthusiastic, Henna now wouldn’t let him near her. And no wonder – he’d acted like a thick-booted oaf. An intelligent, spirited beauty like Henna should be wooed, not tamed. That’s what he’d intended when he came in with his rose and poetry – he was going to proffer her the flower on bended knee and read her the romantic verse that he knew she loved. But her tossed-back head and invitation to a kiss had distracted him, and in the ensuing liquorice-induced confusion he had let his baser instincts take over. Intending to apologize, he walked around the bed towards her, but she simply skipped over to the other side, looking at him warily. Her scorn was dreadfully attractive, and his hand still tingled from the brush with the naked skin of her slim waist.

Defeated, and embarrassed, Ricky-Rashid sat heavily on the bed. ‘I’m so sorry. I wanted this to be a wonderful, romantic night for us. And I’ve already ruined it.’ He turned to face her and held out the flower to her. ‘Look, I brought you a rose.’ He sighed and put it down next to him.

Mollified, Henna sat back on the bed, a little way from

Ricky-Rashid, and continued eating her sweets. ‘You are silly,’ she said. ‘How could trying to beat me possibly be wonderful or romantic?’ She picked up the rose and sniffed it disinterestedly. ‘I think it’s dead,’ she said, dropping it dismissively on the floor. She nudged the pink flower head experimentally with her prettily painted toes, separating out the soft wilted petals.

Ricky-Rashid looked at her in astonishment. ‘Beat you? Why on earth would I try to beat you?’ His surprise was so genuine that Henna realized she may have misunderstood his intentions, and perhaps given away her ignorance in some indefinable way.

Distracting him with a truce, she nodded towards the book. ‘So what’s that? More Shakespeare?’

Ricky-Rashid answered with even more genuine surprise. ‘No, it’s Byron.’ The name was very clearly written on the cover; Henna must be terribly short-sighted. ‘I brought it because there’s a poem I wanted to read to you. It reminds me of you.’ Hoping he might yet be able to salvage the evening, he opened it, and started to read,

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.*

He paused and looked at her expectantly.

‘Hmm, that’s pretty,’ Henna answered, hoping he wasn’t expecting her to comment any further.

‘It loses something in translation,’ admitted Ricky-Rashid. ‘Perhaps I should read it to you in English?’

‘No!’ said Henna shortly. In their brief meetings before the wedding, she had only just about been able to keep up the pretence that she had a working knowledge of English, although it had proved much harder than simply pretending to be literate. Despairing of her, her English tutor had eventually given into expediency, and had given her some set phrases to learn, and developed a subtle sign language that indicated to her which phrase to use when. This had worked fine when they were in the large sitting room, with her tutor sitting at a respectful distance, within her sight, and Henna enunciating, ‘I Think It’s Simply Wonderful’ and ‘Good Gracious, No’ and ‘Would You Like Some More?’ when prompted. However, alone with Ricky she doubted that she’d last two minutes of English conversation undetected. Aware that her response had been unnecessarily vehement, she added sweetly, ‘To be honest, I’m a bit too tired to listen to poetry readings.’

Ricky-Rashid had no more weapons in his amorous armoury – his flower was discharged and in pieces on the floor, and his book of Byron’s romantic poetry, which he was sure Henna had said was Simply Wonderful in a previous meeting, was being summarily dismissed. With nothing else coming to mind, he decided to try his luck by pressing on with the book. ‘So why don’t you read the next two lines yourself? They say everything that I think about you.’

He passed the book to Henna, who took it unwillingly. She looked at the incoherent black jumble of text for a couple of moments and knowledgeably nodded, before saying in her little-used English, ‘Ricky, I Think It’s Simply Wonderful.’

‘I knew you’d like it,’ said Ricky-Rashid triumphantly. Perhaps tonight would work out after all; he edged closer to Henna, to take the book out of her hands. But as he saw how she had been holding it, that nagging feeling came back, the feeling that he had felt on their first uncertain kiss.

‘But how could you read it upside down?’ he asked. Something was very wrong, very wrong indeed. Why was she holding the book the wrong way round? Henna could surely not be as short-sighted as all that.

Aware that instant distraction was necessary, Henna smiled as meltingly as the movie stars she’d learned from and, holding out her slender hand to Ricky-Rashid, she said, ‘You can kiss me again if you like.’ When Ricky-Rashid didn’t move, she moved towards him instead, and he couldn’t stop himself kissing her and pulling her nubile body into his arms, while the urgent physical sensation fought with his racing mind. Liquorice again, the taste of liquorice, the supple too-slender too-girlish body, the comment about the beatings, the thickly accented *Simply Wonderful*, the upside-down book, and again, the unavoidable, intoxicating taste of liquorice sweets . . . childhood sweets.

Controlling himself and pushing her away, Ricky-Rashid held the breathless Henna at arm’s length as he looked at her closely, her lipstick and powder rubbed off by their embrace, her enormous eyes ludicrously over-made up by comparison. ‘How old are you, Henna?’ he asked quietly.



On his wedding night, Ricky-Rashid slept alone, tormented by the discovery, coaxed from Henna with gentle words, bribes, promises and yet more sweets, that his educated seventeen-year-old bride was actually an illiterate shopkeeper's daughter, a thirteen-year-old child who had married him as a way to skip school and fulfil a schoolgirl fantasy of becoming an actress. Disturbed by the memory of her body, Ricky-Rashid was disgusted by himself for having wanted her so much – a child, she was just a child, and he had almost . . . it didn't bear thinking about. He was no English gentleman, he was practically a pervert.

It was the night that every one of Ricky-Rashid's hopes and dreams of a life lived in truth and sincerity, of an idyllic western-style marriage, was ground into a red, muddy sludge like the powder from which Henna took her name. She had stained him and blotted all his future aspirations, and he simply couldn't wash away the marks. He was forced to be complicit in the lie – she would have to remain his wife or everyone would know how he and his family had been tricked and shamed. She would have to be educated privately at his parents' house, and remain out of society until such time when she would no longer give herself away.

Ricky-Rashid had previously hoped to bring his wife with him when he returned to the varsity for his studies, but his vision of living like an English couple in his student halls had also been shattered. He would return alone, and would no longer pretend that he was the Ricky he had tried to fashion himself into, the cosmopolitan intellectual around town; from this time on, he would call himself

Just Rashid. He would not sleep with Henna until she was seventeen and had finished school, but the feelings she had innocently awoken would not go away, and in an attempt to scratch the persistent itch of desire he would spend the next few years having frustrated and unsanitary sex with kind-faced, matronly prostitutes, all the time guiltily thinking about Henna's unripe, forbidden body.