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## Ishq and Mushq

### Priya Basil

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'Remember, there are only two things you can't hide – Ishq and Mushq: Love and Smell.' This was the wet whisper Bibiji sprayed into Sarna's ear before the train pulled out of Amritsar. Whether this information was offered as a warning or consolation, Sarna wasn't sure. She wrapped the purple corner of her chiffon sari over one finger and rolled it around the inside of her ear to wipe away the dampness of her mother's farewell. The shrill echo of Bibiji's words was not so easily erased, but it began to fade just as her ample old figure waving from the platform slowly disappeared, and Sarna was filled with relief. She was finally on her way. Away.

Even when she arrived in Bombay, twenty-six hours and one thousand four hundred kilometres later, she still had a way to go. A long, long way. Four thousand, five hundred and twenty-eight kilometres, to be precise. Maybe, Sarna hoped, that would be far enough.

The weather, as if in sympathy with all that Sarna seemed so easily to be leaving behind, was fuming at 45°C. In the heat of the livid June sun, Bombay harbour sweated reluctant activity. At its fringes a collection of life hovered inertly: vendors too weary to tout their wares; idlers too hot to indulge their indolence; and beggars too scorched to advertise their afflictions. The sea looked a sickly grey-green and lolled unsteadily as if it too were suffering a bad case of sunstroke. Between these scenes of heat-beaten resignation was a little hub of action. It was concentrated around the mighty hull of the Amra, the creaking hulk of a ship due to sail for Mombasa, Kenya.

Porters hurried back and forth, bent double under vast loads of improvised baggage. Anything that could be filled, folded or knotted seemed to serve as acceptable apparatus for holding things. A steady stream of metal trunks, wooden crates, woven sacks and multicoloured knotted bundles of old saris was slalomed through scattered groups of passengers and those come to see them off. The restless crowd tried to counter the effects of the heat by drinking the lemon water that was being peddled energetically from makeshift wooden carts by skinny men who alone seemed to have the resilience of camels against the sun. Amongst them the odd pickpocket and petty thief trailed listlessly. Their work had been made easy by this heat:

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people were too preoccupied with fanning it off to be paying the necessary attention to their belongings. But even the small-time crooks were unable to muster the energy to capitalize on the easy targets afforded them.

It was through this bustle that newly weds Karam and Sarna approached the ship. Karam was not in a good mood. The cramped train journey from Amritsar and the unrelenting heat had worn him down. And now having to manage the transfer of their luggage to the deck through this madness was not doing his humour any favours. Several porters were helping to carry their things, but trying to coordinate the progress of these minions made Karam feel like a shepherd trying to get his animals across a busy main road. Except he felt less fortunate than a shepherd, because he had no staff to rein in the errant flock. Instead he had to rely on the dexterity of his eyes to keep all four men within his vision at once; on the strength of his voice to shout the abuse and instructions necessary to keep them all going at an even pace; and on the agility of his body to move quickly through the thick crowd, and the thicker heat, in order to keep up with the nimble porters.

'Idiot!' Karam shouted in the direction of one porter, who'd stopped to dig a finger up his nose. 'Already dreaming of lunch? Pick at yourself in your own time. Right now I'm paying you to pick up my things.'

The impervious man dug away for a bit longer before resuming his duties.

'Slacker! Where are you going?' Karam shrieked at another porter, who seemed to be veering off track to the right when the Amra was clearly straight ahead of them.

'Short cut, Sahib,' the porter said, as if it was perfectly natural that he should bypass the back of the queue and cut in somewhere at the front.

'No short cuts, what-not cuts. We go straight. Like everyone else,' Karam decreed. He glanced around and saw Sarna a few steps behind him, protectively carrying the hoard of mangoes she'd insisted on buying at the last minute. The heat, unable to keep its hands off her, had left the red imprints of caresses on her cheeks. Her sharp nose, damp with perspiration, glistened like an expertly cut jewel in her face. Karam's heart contracted sharply. God, she is beautiful, he thought. It was a revelation that had not ceased to stun him.

Still, that didn't put her beyond reproach. He blamed her for their predicament. It was her stubborn refusal to leave anything behind that had led to this ridiculous situation, with him chasing, like a crazed circus master, through the blistering heat after a bunch of porters. He himself had virtually nothing to take back to Africa – nothing that could be packed into bags, anyway. True, he was taking back more than he'd arrived with – he now had a wife and a stack of unexpected experiences, but these conveniently carried themselves. Sarna, however, had more than made up for his lack of luggage by bundling up everything that had been available for the taking in Amritsar.

‘What? Are you planning to open a shop or something?’ Karam had watched in astonishment as his wife packed up what looked like a lifetime supply of herbs, spices and other dry foodstuffs.

Sarna laughed and shook her head.

‘But why, then?’ Karam protested. ‘You can get everything there.’

She arched her eyebrows at him and quipped, ‘Just in case, S’dharji.’

He noticed the subtle shortening of her address with surprised pleasure. ‘Sardharji’, the typical address of Sikh wives to their husbands, had not remained intact in Sarna’s mouth for long. Karam was aware of the impropriety of the informal address, but he liked it. He took it as a sign of love and he was gratified.

Less pleasing was the ‘just in case’ that became her explanation for everything. Karam watched helplessly as luggage filled with cooking utensils, yards of fabric for sewing, bags of henna, piles of clothes, nameless tinctures and medicines. He could at least see a purpose for these, though he remained dubious about their value. But there were other things she packed away which left him utterly flabbergasted, even a little worried: bundles of mismatched rags and fabric ends, empty little vials and containers, tiny secondhand baby garments.

Karam had tried different lines of argument to stop Sarna’s stockpiling tactics. In his own mind he had a watertight case against her:

‘We don’t have enough bags. Transportation of so many bundles will be cumbersome. We will be stopped at Customs. There is no storage room in the house in Nairobi. Half the goods will probably break or leak on the way.’

Sarna continued to pack stuff up. Karam had come across bags that seemed to be full of rainbows but were actually crammed with parandas of every conceivable colour, elaborate ribbon-like accessories for the hair. Other bags that glittered with the promise of riches revealed stacks of assorted bindis to adorn Sarna’s forehead, and sheets of silver- and gold-leaf paper to decorate the heady Indian sweets, like barfi, that she loved to make.

‘Why?’ Karam stressed. ‘Just in case what?’

‘Just – in – case,’ Sarna enunciated mysteriously. No real explanation for the hoarding existed in her mind. It answered the impulse of her heart and therefore made sense. Any further attempt at rationalization would have exposed the three words for the hollow justification they were.

Those words never ceased to antagonize Karam. They were so deliberately and obstinately dismissive, the equivalent of the cryptic ‘because’ that adults so frequently hand out to children. The words pretended at finality, but were actually, he felt, a precursor to doubt and further questioning. The more he

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thought about them the more infuriated he became. To him, Sarna's 'just in case' was an in-just case: without substance. In any court of law she wouldn't have stood a chance with her unconvincing mantra. 'Case dismissed,' the judge would have said. But Karam and Sarna were playing preliminary matches in the court of love. There, as we know, certainly in the early stages, considerable allowances are made for irrationality.

In truth, Karam was irritated because Sarna's need for plenty of everything clashed with his own impulse for less. He hated clutter. Anything that lay unused grated on him because it suggested inefficiency and waste. He couldn't accept her obstinate optimism about the inherent usefulness of all things. Better to have a few handy and meaningful items than vast stocks of unnecessary rubbish – that was his philosophy. He also worried that her amassing of things was indicative of materialism. He was concerned about what future implications this might have for his pocket.

In the end, though, the leniency of love won out. Karam resigned himself to Sarna's wishes, and case after case was filled to bursting, 'just in case'. And now here they were, struggling to shift the damn loads, just as he'd predicted. Meanwhile, Madam had impulsively bought three crates of mangoes just before they'd left Amritsar. Of course, Karam had objected, but, as ever, to no avail.

'In that case,' he had said, 'you can carry them yourself.'

Small effort it seems to be costing her, Karam thought – until he glimpsed her moving regally through the crowd in her purple sari, elegant even as she lugged several dozen mangoes. He noticed the admiring glances and entranced stares directed her way, and his exasperation was overridden by another feeling: the desire to press his big nose into her skin, breathe in her gorgeousness and forget the trying demands of the day. Suddenly the idea of Sarna holding her mangoes was stirring other parts of Karam to bigness. However much her words and actions might sometimes antagonize him, when he looked at her he became defenceless.

'Sa-hib!' Karam's attention was snapped back to the porters, who had reached the deck of the ship and were waiting for him to catch up and pay them.

Annoyance twinged in him, like a poorly plucked sitar string, as he considered the wastefulness of having to remunerate four men for carrying unnecessary things. He did a quick mental calculation of what he owed them and then handed out half the required sum. The porters objected vociferously.

'That's all I have.' Karam shrugged.

The porters hung around, scowling in silent accusation. Karam glared at them. They stared back. These were men skilled in expressing outrage. Their livelihood depended on their ability to make any payment seem paltry. Karam couldn't remain indifferent to them for much longer, but he was loath

to put his hand back in his pocket. As Sarna stepped up to join them, he leaned over, picked up one of the mango boxes and shoved it towards the porters.

‘Share this,’ he said.

No sooner had he done so than Sarna dumped the other boxes she was holding, swooped in and snatched the mangoes back. ‘No!’ She glared at Karam. ‘These are mine.’

Karam quickly handed out more change. ‘Bloody looters,’ he muttered at the departing porters – as if it was all their fault. Then, not quite ready to look Sarna in the eye, he busied himself with considering how best to get their luggage from the main deck to the third-class section below. It dawned on him that he would now have to enlist the help of a couple of the ship’s porters, who would be twice as expensive as the other ones. He didn’t voice his feelings because Sarna’s beautiful face was still pouting at him incredulously.

The vast third-class deck beneath the main helm of the Amra was heaving with people. In this hollow underbelly of inter-continental travel there was no distinction between man, woman or child. Here baggage was king. The deck operated solely on a baggage bonus basis – the more bags you had, the more territory you could bag for yourself. But the prize for most luggage would have been difficult to award. Karam noticed with some surprise that his and Sarna’s hoard looked quite modest in comparison to others’. He glanced at Sarna and, sure enough, her eyes were sending signals of triumph his way. He shook his head indulgently and smiled in spite of himself.

People were boarding with multitudinous supplies, from the exotic to the basic to the bizarre. Their goods made for a fascinating procession: sewing machines, bicycles, sacks of flour, bags of spices, jumbo jars of pickles, large tins of ghee, bundles of bedding tied together with long strips of cotton, ventilated cartons in which fruits and vegetables nestled snugly against each other. Amongst these easily identifiable items an array of more mysterious packages stood out for their sheer size or impenetrability: wooden crates tightly hammered shut with nails, huge iron trunks resolutely locked with giant padlocks. Stranger still were the oddly shaped bundles, wrapped in layers of colourful cloth held together with copious windings of rope, which were moved across the deck like ominous voodoo dolls.

The parade of goods was a spectacle indeed, but the owners of all this bounty were equally enthralling. Shaken to attention by the demands of the rocking deck, they were all on high alert. Like hunters scanning the vicinity for prey, their eyes scrutinized the deck for the optimal space in which to set down their luggage, spread out and stake their territory for the journey. The more cunning families would close ranks and, as a single unit of momentum – heads down and elbows out, force their way through the crowd towards the desired spot.

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The trick was to lay out a sheet or mat (or in some cases several sheets and mats) on the floor of the deck, arrange your bags around it and sprawl yourself across the space to claim it. A few perverse souls went a step further and proceeded to fart, burp or cough in an effort to dissuade anyone from setting up camp too close, taking their inspiration from lesser mammals who routinely mark out their territory by urinating to designate borders. And certainly people tried to steer clear of the more fetid encampments.

Installing oneself comfortably for a third-class sea journey was no mean feat. It was a supreme test of baggage-handling capacity, shamelessness and guile. It was not a task to which Karam was naturally suited. Sarna, on the other hand, was in her element in this environment. She looked at her husband courteously giving way to the crowds pushing past them and decided to take control. All of a sudden she rushed ahead of him, coughing and wheezing as she tripped and tumbled her way past scores of people before throwing herself on to an empty patch and proceeding to have what looked like a strange fit. Eyes rolling in sockets, limbs convulsing, she manned the area until Karam and the new brigade of porters caught up. People stared before hurriedly passing by and getting on with securing themselves a spot. When the porters arrived, Sarna briskly instructed them on where to lay out what. Meanwhile, Karam looked on, embarrassed but impressed. The description 'chalaako', with which he had sometimes heard Sarna's sisters taunt her, sprang to his mind and he smiled. She certainly was a cunning one.