

DELTAS

For three hours she'd been sitting by the window looking outside, the small piece of paper clutched tightly in her fist. You might think that she had gone over it several times trying to read between the lines and come up with interpretations that she'd previously missed, but in fact she had only read it once. Once had been quite enough.

Eleven years ago, she had met Pradeep. He had arrived in Houston as a fresh-faced graduate student from India. It had been quite obvious to her as she watched him walk into class that morning that it was his first time in a country other than his own. He dressed a bit funny and one could easily tell he was having great trouble understanding the southern accent most people in the city had either been born into or acquired. It was only 9AM, they had gathered for the first lecture of the term, and he already looked extremely flustered. She could almost smell the relief in him as he noticed her in the crowd of students, seated at the very back of the room, and quickly made his way over. Truth be told, she had been a bit put off by this. He had clearly mistaken her for an Indian. Undeniably, she looked it - both her parents were from Tamil Nadu, but they had migrated ages ago before she had even been conceived and had never really been back since, not for periods longer than a week, only about thrice in the past twenty two years anyway, and certainly not with her in tow, so she was quite sure that she felt more American at heart than many of her American friends.

He introduced himself as he sat down next to her, and she imagined that he was slightly disappointed upon hearing her speak with an accent. If he was, then he showed none of it. He had nodded at her with a smile as she told him her name was Kavita, and did not ask what her last name was as she had half expected him to. Well mannered and courteous, she observed, and good looking - most definitely good looking. In the next hour and a half for which the lecture lasted, she'd learned that he was from a town near Banaras, that he had arrived in the city less than a week ago, that he'd had trouble finding food he liked as he was strictly vegetarian, and that he would be living with his newly-wed second cousin in the suburbs for at least the first month.

She was a little annoyed that he had gotten so comfortable talking to her so quickly - she had always taken some pride in the knowledge that boys normally found her intimidating and unapproachable. She had made certain that she was being so with him anyway, making sure to not share too much and nodding only after intervals long enough to be considered curt, but he did not seem to be getting any clues. Sure enough, he sat with her the next morning, and the next, and the next, and by Friday she was already craning her neck towards the door hoping to catch sight of him as he entered the class.

Soon they were eating lunch together, and deciding class schedules based on each other's opinions on courses. Of the many things she noticed about him, the one that topped her list was his wry sense of humor. He entertained her with detailed descriptions of how his cousin had offered to drop him to university that morning, and then proceeded to call his wife from the speaker phone in the car subjecting him to excruciating details of how much they already missed each other, or of the time they had shown him photographs of when they went snorkeling in Florida in their highly unappetizing bathing suits.

Even as she laughed at these anecdotes, there was a constant nagging voice in her mind prodding her to ask him to move in as her roommate. She rationalized with herself saying she could really use the money, and he could really use a new living arrangement, and thought of ways to say it in a manner that didn't sound too eager. There was no denying that she was, however, extremely eager and she could not shake the feeling that she might be setting herself up for disappointment.

Finally, on one of the following afternoons as he was in the middle of narrating an episode in which he had heard them arguing all night about something or the other that she didn't remember now (she hadn't been listening, her mind was preoccupied), she said suddenly - "I have an extra room available. Do you want to be roommates?" There was an unmistakable pause in which he considered her with a half smile playing on his lips. And just as soon as she was starting to feel that she could no longer hide a blush, he replied - "That would be great."

And that is how they had started to live together. In the first couple of days, she discovered what a stickler he was for keeping things clean, never leaving dishes unwashed in the sink for more than a couple of hours. On the fourth day, he noticed that her voice changed completely when she spoke to her father on the phone. He guessed it was supposed to sound cute, but really it was quite annoying, only he wasn't annoyed. They kissed on the sixth night, and the second bedroom remained largely unused thereafter for the next year and a half that they shared the place. He told her that he had never been with a woman before, but this was not her first time. She'd had exactly three relationships, each of which had lasted for a little more than an year, in each of which she had been in love, and each of which she had been the one to end.

One evening after the first few months had passed, when it had started to appear that they were likely to spend a large portion of their time ahead together, she had decided to get some confessions out of the way. They were seated in front of the television on the carpet they had purchased together from an online shopping site. For dinner, they had decided to order in Indian food from a Nepali restaurant in the neighborhood. Neither of them had classes the following day which made it a particularly lazy evening. They were resting against each other in their usual manner - back to the wall, legs stretched out, her head on his chest, his head on her head, his arms linked around her waist.

She decided to break the silence by informing him that she preferred to not have in-laws who adored her too much. She said that she was just not that type. He had seemed quite amused by this, and had asked her to explain what that type was. "You know how there are people who can be nice to other people for a long time without it starting to weigh on their minds like an obligation? I am not one of them", she had explained. She said that she did not even speak with her own family more frequently than once in a couple of weeks, so the last thing she wanted were cloying relatives. He had pretended to consider that for a moment, looking at her with narrowed eyes and pursed lips, and then responded in his trademark mock-solemn manner that it was a fair request indeed. He had brought up this moment much later in one of their conversations, way long after they had been married, when he told her that even though he hadn't given it away then, he had been extremely excited that she had brought up post-wedding talks. Surely there would have to be a wedding for it all to come to pass.

In any case, after this matter had been settled, she ventured on to the next one. "I know how I am", she told him, "I have not been known to settle down." She said she had realized after her first couple of failed relationships that she was extremely fickle minded, and that she was always "looking for a delta". If she knew him at all, and she knew him well, she knew that he had found her choice of words very interesting. She guessed that there might be several occasions in the future in several different contexts where he would want to use that phrase, but he would invariably refrain, afraid of waking any demons that the sound of the phrase carried with it given how it had been first used by her that first day.

She told him that she had learned better than to make promises and that it was important to her to be honest with him, and following this preamble she had told him that she did not know what would change her at what instant and that she could leave him at any time, so it might serve him well to be prepared. She felt

like a witch saying it, it really was a cruel thing to say to anyone, but she had decided that it had to be done. He had remained silent for at least the next fifteen minutes, after which she laid her head back down on his chest as he relinked his arms around her waist. For an hour they sat that way without making a sound, and she had almost fallen asleep when he whispered in her ears that he loved her. The month after, he proposed and she said yes.

They were married within the year. Her entire family flew to India for the ceremony. The post wedding ceremonies had hardly ended before she fell in love with the country. She insisted that they settle here, to which idea he was not particularly averse. They decided to move to Delhi for the jobs after spending a week or two at Banaras where she could get to know some of his closest relatives. She was an instant and effortless hit with the in-laws, and as Pradeep watched her say all the right things and do all the right things, he understood her need to be careful about being too loved by his family.

As for Kavita, she had never imagined that it could be this perfect to be married. Pradeep was the perfect husband, and his family could have been much worse. The weeks changed quickly into months, and months into years, but her wedded bliss seemed not to have ended. He still surprised her with gifts and spontaneous vacations and sincere compliments as if they were young lovers. They had chosen to not have kids, so all they had was each other, which was really how she liked it. They had both put on a few pounds over the years, their political affiliations had definitely changed, and he had begun to fill his plate up with chicken curry every once in a while, but the important things remained quite the same. She hoped he felt the same way too, and the scrambled eggs he still thought to whip for her on lazy weekend mornings told her that he did.

Given all of this then, the note that she had woken up to that morning had come as quite a shock. She now unfolded the crumpled paper in her hand to read it again a second time.

"Dear Kavita,

I still remember in great detail every bit of that evening you told me that you couldn't promise to be with me all your life. Every morning since then, I have woken up with the fear of losing you, afraid that you had changed your mind about us, afraid that I wasn't interesting to you anymore. Every day since then, I challenged myself to make it not be the day when you'd no longer love me, and everyday so far I have succeeded. One might think that I would have grown tired of this charade long before now, but I did not, and I still have not. I would still be happy to beat that phantom within you once again, for one more day.

However, for the past few months, I have found that fear gone. Something inside me can sense that you no longer need that delta anymore. Surely this is cause for happiness, is it not? It is a happy thing that you are finally happy. Content. I should be proud, shouldn't I, for having tamed you so? But I am not, Kavita, and I have asked myself again and again why it is so, why it makes me so restless and uneasy every minute of the day, and I come up with guilt but no concrete answers. I vacillate between feeling sad at times that perhaps you are no longer the girl I fell in love with, angry at times that perhaps you lied to me and made a fool out of me by claiming you were fickle when you never really were.

I realize that this might seem to you like a bolt from out of the blue, and might not make any sense, even seem like the ramblings of a deranged mind, but trust me when I say that this has been troubling me for a long time now. I try to make sense of what I feel in every way possible, try to go back to feeling the same way as I did just a few months ago, try to rationalize my behavior with theories and explanations - but all of them are flimsy at the end of the day and only intangible ideas and words. I wish I could give you a better

explanation, a better reason for why I deserve empathy and forgiveness but I have none. I had always thought I loved you more than this, but I am sure of nothing any longer. I need time off.

Finally, I am sorry for breaking this to you with a note, like a coward, but I think I know by now that that is what I am and I have no motivation in pretending to be otherwise. Thanks for reading and I am eternally sorry.

Pradeep.”

She wanted to feel a million things as she read it, wanted to have a million questions needing answers, wanted to cry a million tears, but all that floated in her mind at the moment was the thought that he'd used the word "delta", and all she could think was about was how that jinx had finally lifted from their lives.