

Sweet Surprise

LIESE LIKED schedule, law and order. Her recipes were precise. Especially her famous chocolate mousse. Which she made the way she did everything else in her life: with precision. So, she crossed herself each time she made the Indian Special - sodden with sugar.

The only un-precise thing Liese had ever done in her life was to marry Dinesh. Her German family had been aghast. Dinesh was neither Indian royalty nor a scholarship holder with poetry in his veins. He was not tall or short, fat or thin. He was, in everything, something in between. Liese's friends and immediate family members were confident the nonsense would stop. Liese was sure that it was a perfect match. She married Dinesh and moved to Bulund Shahar.

Life in Bulund Shahar turned out to be different. But Bulund Shahar was where Dinesh's family business flourished. Even though the wretched place refused to move on precisely oiled wheels, chugging, sputtering, belching, and stopping in the middle of important things. Air conditioned malls were non-existent, as were departmental stores where she could pick up zucchini and leek, taste slivers of cheese; wine had to be smuggled in after bribing the customs officers. Bulund Shahar left her muddled with its unruly mix of colours and textures; its strong aromas left her nauseated. Liese, however, was made of sterner stuff. She taught herself to live without absolute precision, Bratwurst and Christmas Stollen. She learned to pin her hopes on Dinesh's absolute faith in his country, that India would have all these things and soon.

Over the years Liese learnt to tolerate pollution and tardiness, watch out for cheating milkmen and thieving maids; she learned to dodge cow pats and train her eyes to look beyond the wall-squirting men and open-drain-squatting naked children. By the time cell phones arrived and the first near decent air conditioned shops with over-priced 'foreign' cheeses and biscuits on their shelves blossomed, Liese had become Indianised enough to feel a twinge of nerves at these *modern* developments. Meanwhile there were certain Indian luxuries she'd learnt to enjoy, like a chauffeured car, an entourage of people at your beck and call, and the woman who came in to massage her every afternoon.

Liese learnt Yoga and Batik printing. She hobnobbed with poets, artists, businessmen and politicians in not so distant New Delhi, for Dinesh was a rising entrepreneur. Life got better. Little things like voltage fluctuations in summer, when her oven and toaster turned cranky, bothered her less. The fame of her chocolate mousse spread far and wide. And Poornima entered her life.

Doe-eyed, black haired, husky-voiced Poornima, surrounded by an aura of musk. Who could resist her? If Liese had been India born and bred she would've seen through the re-bonded hair. But Liese believed a bimbo like Poornima was harmless. Besides, she was already married to Shekhar, who was unapologetically rich and madly in love. Shekhar was a good business associate for Dinesh. Poornima was fun to be with. They were bound to become fast friends over velvety rich after dinner helpings of Liese's chocolate mousse.

Poornima and Liese began to go to art exhibitions together; practice henna tattoos on each other and "Happy-Birthday" one another with flowers and cake. Liese got used to Poornima's presence in her house; she felt

comfortable enough to work on her dessert recipes with Poornima around. Dinesh got used to Poornima's long phone calls, precisely at nine in the evening when he most wanted to have sex with Liese. After some time he started enjoying her calls and made Liese put her on speaker phone, while he laughed into her breasts, and shook the bed violently with his thrusts and shaking shoulders.

Liese didn't guess a thing. The nickel didn't drop even after she called Poornima in the mornings, and heard muffled gibberish in the background. But things like this don't stay undercover for long. Liese bubbled with rage. But she managed not to show it. Though deep down she knew where she was headed.

Liese brooded until an idea came to her at last, one she fervently hoped would bring finality into her life. Once the plan blossomed, she felt calmer. Liese strategized as she cooked, plotted as she gossiped, schemed as Dinesh giggled into her breasts sharp at nine o'clock in the evenings.

The blueprint took shape, the finer details began to blossom. Liese's routine continued like before. Everything was fine on the surface, like the thick skin on milk boiled for *kheer*; you would never know how hot it was until you dipped your finger clean into it. Dinesh loved carrot kheer. But Poornima loved chocolate mousse. Dinesh liked it too, though not as much as the many Indian desserts that Liese had so painstakingly learnt to perfect.

Finding the right ingredients was not difficult. Perhaps because Liese had taught herself to lob and catch life in Bulund Shahar pretty deftly by then. Besides, Shrivastav her chauffeur, a quiet dependable hill fellow, was fiercely loyal. Liese knew no one would guess her whereabouts. Bulund Shahar's labyrinths had many strange shops that kept all kinds of ingredients. Shrivastav would do the leg work for her, while Liese sat in the air-conditioned comfort of her car, incognito behind dark glasses. Liese was becoming fond of the young man. Such a dear, so sincere, slogging away so his family could enjoy the money he posted every month.

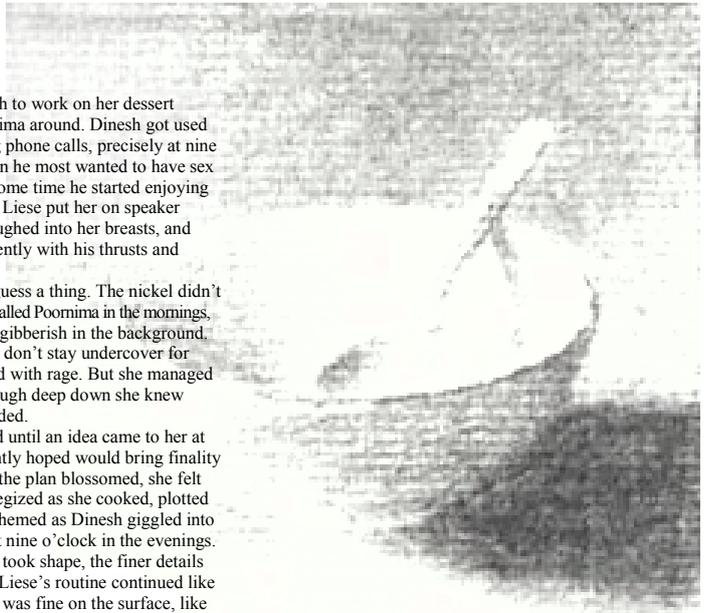
Friday night arrived. A rich velvety purple, jasmine scented September night. A marmalade coloured moon shed soft romantic light on the porch. A perfect time.

Liese surpassed herself. The dinner began with a light consommé. The next dish on the menu was baked escargots, and then the main dish of pepper roast and stir-fried greens on the side. Bottles of perfectly decent (in India it couldn't get better) Bordeaux were poured. But Liese also remembered to keep cans of soda water in the fridge. Dinesh could never comprehend the subtlety of good wine and Johnny Walker Black Label and soda was his preference, despite having lived with Liese for so many years. Liese sighed and smoothed her hair.

The excitement of making that extra special mousse had made Liese tired. Poornima popped in to see if she needed any help, and lovingly massaged her head and neck until Liese fell asleep. She woke up a good two hours later, feeling refreshed, even light headed.

The dinner was a success. Everybody was charming, the food divine. Everything was working the way Liese wanted it. Conversation was light and witty. The end of summer air was fragrant and cool. Liese looked charming in a sapphire silk suit. "It goes so well with your grey eyes," Dinesh said kissing her cheek. The evening slid forward to its logical end, when the dessert was to be served.

"Dessert time." Poornima trilled, as if the whole thing was her own handiwork. "You sit and sip your Tia Maria, dahling!" she said to Liese, "you still look a wee bit tired. Let me serve today."



There was nothing that Poornima could do to Liese's Chocolate Mousse even if she was hell bent on adding her individual touch to it. It would start to melt if you left it out too long, and Poornima wouldn't do anything so obvious. From the corner of her eye she could see Poornima bustling around her pantry with practiced ease. The 'practiced ease' bit irritated Liese, but she sipped the feeling away.

The dessert arrived looking richly delicious in individual crystal bowls with the German silver spoons next to them. Poornima beamed at everyone, as if she was the one who had made it. There was a soft hush of expectation. Dinesh and Poornima began to eat. Shekhar, who had recently been diagnosed with diabetes, declined. Liese had thoughtfully put out a dish of fresh fruits. They both ate that, smiling at each other above their spoons.

"Wasn't that delicious?" said Dinesh to nobody in particular.

"Why thank you!" exclaimed Poornima, before Liese could put in a word. She stood up like she had something important to say. She didn't topple over. And Dinesh beamed at everyone, looking as fit as a fiddle.

"And, now for the surprise, everybody," Poornima sang, almost gleefully.

"What surprise?" said Liese beginning to feel ill.

"Well," said Poornima, with a sexy sway of her hips. "You see, it's my chocolate mousse that you all ate today! I've been watching you Liese... Oh don't look so shocked dahling, I only watch you in the kitchen..."

Dinesh laughed aloud at the joke. Shekhar stared back grim faced. Liese gripped the arm of her chair.

"Everybody simply looooves your chocolate mousse Liese. So I thought why don't I try it out, see? So I switched the two this afternoon. Simple. Did you like it Dinesh?"

Liese felt a shiver down her spine. "What did you do with the one I made?"

"Oh, that," said Poornima airily. "I gave that to your Shrivastav."

"But Shrivastav is a vegetarian! He doesn't eat eggs!" Liese felt her hysteria rising in a solid mass as her brain screamed, "Not Shrivastav! No God! No!" The thick sweet taste of the Tia Maria turned rancid in her throat.

"My dear I told him so. But he said, Liese Memaab made it," Poornima giggled. "Seemed like he'll eat poison from your hands, dahling! Gladly!"

BROADSHEET STORIES

Tales to last a coffee or two

