

ONE

Love is a dish best served naked.

As a child, those oft-quoted words of my father would have me rolling my eyes and pretending to gag at what I'd imagined was my parents' precursor to a certain physical act.

At thirty, I'd long ago realized that getting naked wasn't a euphemism for sex. Neither was love.

It wasn't my father invoking the expression just now, though, but my husband. Nirvaan considered himself a great wit, a New Age philosopher. On the best of days, he was, much like Daddy had been. On the worst days, he was my tormentor.

"What do you think, Dr. Archer? Interesting enough tagline for a vlog? What about Baby in a Petri Dish?" Nirvaan persisted in eliciting a response from the doctor and/or me for his ad hoc comedy, which we'd been ignoring for several minutes now.

I wanted to glare at him, beg him to shut up, or demand that he wait in the doctor's office like he should've done, like a normal husband would have. Khodai knows why he'd insisted on holding my hand through this preliminary checkup. Nothing of import would happen today—if it did at all. But I couldn't perform any such communication, not with my eyes and mouth squeezed shut while I suffered through a series of uncomfortable twinges along my nether regions.

I lay flat on my back on a spongy clinic bed sheeted with paper already wrinkled and half-torn. Legs drawn up and spread apart, my heels dug punishingly into cold iron stirrups to allow the fertility specialist's clever fingers to reach inside my womb and check if everything was A-OK in there. We'd already funneled through the Pap test and stomach and chest checks. Like them, this test, too, was going swell if Dr. Archer's approving happy hums were anything to go by.

"Excellent, Mrs. Desai. All parts are where they should be," he joked only as a doctor could.

I shuddered out the breath I'd been holding, as the feeling of being stretched left my body. Nirvaan squeezed my hand and planted a smacking kiss on my forehead. I opened my eyes and focused on his beaming upside-down ones. His eyelids barely grew lashes anymore—I'd counted twenty-seven in total just last week—the effect of years of chemotherapy. For a second, my gaze blurred, my heart wavered and I almost cried.

What are we doing, Nirvaan? What in Khodai's name were we starting?

Nirvaan stroked my hair, his pitch-black pupils steady and knowing and oh so stubborn. Then his face rose to the stark white ceiling, and all I saw was the green-and-blue mesh of his gingham shirt—the overlapping threads, the crisscross weaves, a pattern without end.

Life is what you make it, child. It was another one of my father's truisms.

Swallowing the questions on my tongue, I refocused my mind on why we were here. I'd promised Nirvaan we'd try for a baby if he agreed to another round of cancer-blasting treatments. I'd bartered for a few more months of my husband's life. He'd bartered for immortality through our child.

Dr. Archer rolled away from between my legs to the computer station. He snapped off and disposed of the latex gloves. Then he began typing notes in near-soundless staccato clicks. Though the examination was finished, I knew better than to sit up until he gave me leave. I'd been here before, done this before—two years ago when Nirvaan had been in remission and the idea of having a baby had wormed its way into his head. We'd tried the most basic procedures then, whatever our medical coverage had allowed. We hadn't been desperate yet to use our own money, which we shouldn't be touching even now. We needed every penny we had for emergencies and alternative treatments, but try budging my husband once he'd made up his mind.

"I'm a businessman, Simi. I only pour money into a sure thing," he rebuked when I argued.

I brought my legs together, manufacturing what poise and modesty I could, and pulled the sea green hospital gown bunched beneath my bottom across my half-naked body. I refused to look at my husband as I wriggled about, positive his expression would be pregnant with irony, if not fully smirking. And kudos to him for not jumping in to help me like I would have.

The tables had turned on us today. For the past five years, it'd been Nirvaan thrashing about on hospital beds, trying in vain to find relief and comfort, modesty or release. Nirvaan had been poked, prodded, sliced and bled as he battled aggressive non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I'd been the stoic spectator, the supportive wife, the incompetent nurse, the ineffectual lover.

And now? What role would I play now?

As always, thinking about our life left me feeling even more naked than I was in the open-fronted robe. I turned my face to the wall, my eyes stinging, as fear and frustration bubbled to the surface. Flesh-toned posters of laughing babies, pregnant mothers and love-struck fathers hung from the bluish walls. Side by side were the more educative ones of human anatomy, vivisectioned and whole. The test-tube-like exam room of Monterey Bay Fertility Clinic was decorated in true California beach colors—sea-foam walls, sandy floors, pearl-pink curtains and furniture—bringing the outdoors in. If the decor was meant to be homey, it wasn't having such an effect on me. This room, like this town and even this country, was not my natural habitat, and I felt out of my element in it.

I'd lived in California for seven years now, ever since my marriage, and I still didn't think of it as home, not like Nirvaan did. Home for me was India. And no matter the dark memories it held, home would always be Surat.

"All done." Dr. Archer pushed the computer trolley away and stood up. "You can get dressed, Mrs. Desai. Take your time. Use whatever supplies you need. We'll wait for you in my office," he said, smiling.

Finally, I can cover myself, I thought. Gooseflesh had erupted across my skin due to the near frigid clinic temperatures doctors tortured their patients with—like a patient didn't have enough to suffer already. Medical facilities maintained cool indoor temperatures to deter inveterate germs from contaminating the premises and so its vast flotilla of equipment didn't fry. I knew that. But knowing it didn't inspire any warm feelings for the "throng of professional sadists with a god complex." I quoted my husband there.

Nirvaan captured my attention with a pat on my head. “See you soon, baby,” he said, following the doctor out of the room.

I scooted off the bed as soon as the door shut behind them. My hair tumbled down my face and shoulders at my jerky movements. I smoothed it back with shaking hands. Long, wavy and a deep chestnut shade, my hair was my crowning glory, my one and only feature that was lush and arresting. Nirvaan loved my hair. I wasn’t to cut it or even braid it in his presence, and so it often got hopelessly knotted.

I shrugged off the clinic gown, balled it up and placed it on the bed. I wiped myself again and again with antiseptic wipes, baby wipes and paper towels until the tissues came away stain-free. I didn’t feel light-headed. I didn’t allow myself to freak. I concentrated on the flow of my breaths and the pounding of my heart until they both slowed to normal.

It was okay. I was not walking out with a gift-wrapped baby in tow. Not today. No reason to freak out.

I reached for my clothes and slipped on my underwear. They were beige with tiny white hearts on them—Victoria’s Secret lingerie Nirvaan had leered and whistled at this morning.

Such a silly man. *Typical Nirvaan*, I corrected, twisting my lips.

Even after dressing in red-wash jeans and a full-sleeved sweater, I shivered. My womb still felt invaded and odd. As I stepped into my red patent leather pumps, an unused petri dish sitting on the workstation countertop caught my eye.

The trigger for Nirvaan’s impromptu comedy, perhaps?

Despite major misgivings about the direction my life had taken, humor got the better of me, and I grinned.

Silly, silly Nirvaan. Baby in a petri dish, indeed.

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One thing I’d come to love and respect about doctors was their ability to remain unruffled in the most bizarre circumstances.

A large mahogany work desk headlined the length of Dr. Archer’s office. I took my seat before it, my stomach twisting like Twizzlers. Nirvaan sat on my right, gregarious and talkative like always, as if all was right in his world, as if he had every right to reweave the very fabric of my existence forever and ever.

But there was an animation in him today that I hadn’t seen for some time now, and I let it wash over my qualms. If I overlooked the thinning hair, the tired curve of his spine and the melting muscles beneath his shirt, he almost looked like the man I’d married.

For better or worse, Simeen. I can’t say no to you.

He’d always been there for me. Always. No matter what I’d asked of him. Did he not deserve the same courtesy in return?

My husband caught me staring at his profile. He winked, grinning wolfishly, and my lips responded to his charm with a helpless smile.

Dr. Archer cleared his throat and began his spiel. He skimmed over our options—from the cost-effective natural fertilization via intrauterine insemination to the more expensive intracytoplasmic sperm injection, or ICSI. That method involved injecting a single sperm—Nirvaan’s—directly into my extracted egg in order to fertilize it. Dr. Archer explained how my eggs would be extracted and the zygote reintroduced into my womb for gestation.

I loved that he spoke directly to me. He addressed Nirvaan only sporadically. Childbearing was a woman’s prerogative, after all. Though, in my case, I’d hardly use the word *prerogative*. *Coerced* would be more apt.

My fingers hurt as I gripped the armrests of my chair. I wasn't ready to be a mother. Not yet. Maybe I'd never be. The thought of being responsible for another person's health and security scared me like nothing else. Nirvaan knew that—or he ought to know it.

I'd thought of children as waves crashing over a distant horizon. I'd discussed—or, no, we'd never discussed having a baby, Nirvaan and I. Not before we'd gotten married. Not after. Not until Nirvaan had been diagnosed with cancer, and the option of freezing his sperm before his first chemo had come up—a treatment that had left him irreversibly sterile.

I didn't want to deny my husband his wish. But I did not want a baby. Not now. Not when our lives were in flux again.

"You have a good chunk of information to sort through." Dr. Archer wound down at last. The walls in his office weren't the calming colors of the Pacific Ocean. They were the no-nonsense white of his doctor's coat. "Meanwhile, we'll start monitoring your cycle. You need to come in for a detailed consult next week, Mrs. Desai. We'll do blood work and a preliminary ultrasound. Narrow down the best route for you. Prescribe medications for maximum ovarian stimulation and so forth." He glanced at his desktop monitor. "I have Monday afternoon and Thursday morning open. Or you can call my assistant for later dates."

"Monday's great," replied Nirvaan while I pretended to scroll through my largely appointmentless phone calendar.

Monday was only three days away. I could be pregnant by the end of the month.

My husband would be dead this time next year.

My breath turned to stone in my lungs. The white walls of the doctor's office shrank. I thought I'd finally scream.

"Call whenever you're ready." Dr. Archer's words were kind. His pale blue eyes were kinder. "Call if you have questions or any doubts. Your youth really is in your favor, and it's not infertility we're dealing with in your situation but extenuating circumstances. Even though we have a limited amount of your husband's sperm to work with, we have an excellent success rate, Mrs. Desai. Rest assured."

Hysteria bubbled up in my throat. He thought I was worried that this wouldn't work. How do I confess to him—to *anyone*—that I was petrified it would?

Excerpt *My Last Love Story* © Falguni Kothari