

Ranjani Rao

Second Time Around – From the anthology – *Desi Modern Love* (buy it [here](#))

It is still dark when I wake up in the guest room at my brother's home. "Can't wait to marry you," I had sent the SMS to Aditya at midnight. Trying not to wake up my teenage daughter, I adjust the pleats of the magenta silk sari and fasten the heavy fabric on my shoulder with a safety pin. I wear my favorite pair of gold earrings and slip on a pair of bangles on my hands, dark red from the henna. I can't help but smile at the fact that the same henna also hides the grey in my hair.

I have been a bride before. Half a lifetime ago, to be precise.

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My long black braid was covered in flowers then. The intricate mehndi design had turned from red to maroon to almost black on my warm hands. "It means your husband really loves you," my giggling cousins had chorused. Eager aunts helped drape the silk on my bony shoulders—an unnatural weight, an unfamiliar costume that I had worn only a few times before this momentous day. Numerous relatives watched closely as my mother escorted me to the sacred fire that would be at the center of the wedding rituals.

My groom's and my family environments, food choices, horoscopes, physical characteristics, and other miscellaneous attributes had been matched following a

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detailed checklist. We were products of marriages that had been arranged in a similar fashion, marriages that had thrived over spans of over a quarter century. We were more than okay with the manner in which we had been brought together.

The religious wedding ceremony was blessed by astrologers, approved by relatives, and witnessed by friends. Soon after, we had left for America, to begin our married life on a continent far away from interfering in-laws and curious onlookers. The odds for a long happy married life were in our favor. The odds had not accounted for the items that were not on the checklist—a few prejudices, big helpings of individual attitudes, more than a pinch of unspoken dreams for the “ever after.” There was no checkbox to indicate whether our personal aspirations and expectations would blend well or curdle into a messy muddle.

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“You are taking a bold step,” was my aunt’s response when I told her about my decision to remarry, echoing the sentiments of her generation and the skepticism of a culture where divorce and remarriage are rare events.

Thanks to the eighteen-year-long unhappy saga of my first marriage, I knew my mother’s opinion on the subject. “Everyone does not get every single wish fulfilled in one lifetime,” she had said a few years ago, after yet another discussion about my troubled marriage. While she had come to support my decision to get divorced, she would have tried to dissuade me from marrying again.

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My father, although more traditional, had once responded to my rhetorical question of “what would you say if I wanted to remarry” with a simple “You know what marriage entails. If you are ready for it, it’s your choice.”

Those conversations were purely academic discussions since such an eventuality was a conjecture at best. Perhaps it is as well that both my parents are not alive to witness the second wedding of their only daughter.

I shake off the dreary thoughts and wake up my daughter and help her with her outfit. Two taxis ferry the handful of people who have come to attend the simple Arya Samaj wedding ceremony on my behalf. “Why is she getting married again?” I am sure the guests are asking themselves the same questions.

Hailing from a cultural mindset that put marriage as the centerpiece of a woman’s existence, I had taken a long time to get over the fact that mine had crumbled. After the formal divorce, I had alternated between relief and grief, freedom and fear, exhilaration and exhaustion. There had been anger, sadness, rage, self-pity, and remorse. Instead of wallowing in depression, I had chosen to focus on rebuilding: a safe home, a career that would support my single-mom lifestyle and a respectable reputation.