

Stepping into His Shoes

The following passage is set in India in the 1960s.

It had been after tutoring one day that Ashima's mother had met her at the door, told her to go straight to the bedroom and prepare herself; a man was waiting to see her. He was the third in as many months. The first had been a widower with four children. The second, a newspaper cartoonist who
5 knew her father, had been hit by a bus in Esplanade and lost his left arm. To her great relief they had both rejected her. She was nineteen, in the middle of her studies, in no rush to be a bride. And so, obediently but without expectation, she had untangled and rebraided her hair. The sheer parrot green sari¹ she pleated and tucked into her petticoat² had been laid out for her on the
10 bed by her mother. Before entering the sitting room, Ashima had paused in the corridor. She could hear her mother saying, "She is fond of cooking, and she can knit extremely well. Within a week she finished this cardigan I am wearing."

Ashima smiled, amused by her mother's salesmanship; it had taken her
15 the better part of a year to finish the cardigan, and still her mother had had to do the sleeves. Glancing at the floor where visitors customarily removed their slippers, she noticed, beside two sets of chappals³, a pair of men's shoes that were not like any she'd ever seen on the streets and trams and buses of Calcutta. They were brown shoes with black heels and off-white laces and
20 stitching. There was a band of lentil-sized holes embossed on either side of each shoe, and at the tips was a pretty pattern pricked into the leather as if with a needle. Looking more closely, she saw the shoemaker's name written on the insides, in gold lettering that had all but faded: something and sons, it said. She saw the size, eight and a half, and the initials U.S.A. And as her
25 mother continued to sing her praises, Ashima, unable to resist a sudden and overwhelming urge, stepped into the shoes at her feet. Lingering sweat from the owner's feet mingled with hers, causing her heart to race; it was the closest thing she had ever experienced to the touch of a man. The leather was creased, heavy, and still warm. On the left shoe she had noticed that one of
30 the crisscrossing laces had missed a hole, and this oversight set her at ease.

She extracted her feet, entered the room. The man was sitting in a rattan chair, his parents perched on the edge of the twin bed where her brother slept at night. He was slightly plump, scholarly-looking but still youthful, with black thick-framed glasses and a sharp, prominent nose. A neatly trimmed mustache
35 connected to a beard that covered only his chin lent him an elegant, vaguely

aristocratic air. He wore brown socks and brown trousers and a green-and-white-striped shirt and was staring glumly at his knees.

He did not look up when she appeared. Though she was aware of his gaze as she crossed the room, by the time she managed to steal another look at him he was once again indifferent, focused on his knees. He cleared his throat as if to speak but then said nothing. Instead it was his father who did the talking, saying that the man had gone to St. Xavier's, and then B.E. College, graduating first-class-first from both institutions. Ashima took her seat and smoothed the pleats of her sari. She sensed the mother eyeing her with approval. Ashima was five feet four inches, tall for a Bengali woman, ninety-nine pounds. They inquired after her studies and she was asked to recite a few stanzas from "The Daffodils"⁴. The man's family lived in Alipore. The father was a labor officer for the customs department of a shipping company. "My son has been living abroad for two years," the man's father said, "earning a Ph.D. in Boston, researching in the field of fiber optics." Ashima had never heard of Boston, or of fiber optics. She was asked whether she was willing to fly on a plane and then if she was capable of living in a city characterized by severe, snowy winters, alone.

"Won't he be there?" she'd asked, pointing to the man whose shoes she'd briefly occupied, but who had yet to say a word to her.

It was only after the betrothal⁵ that she'd learned his name. One week later the invitations were printed, and two weeks after that she was adorned and adjusted by countless aunts, countless cousins hovering around her. These were her last moments as Ashima Bhaduri, before becoming Ashima Ganguli.

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Annotations:

¹ sari traditional dress in South Asia

² petticoat here: a thin skirt worn underneath a sari

³ chappals traditional footwear, a kind of flip-flop

⁴ "The Daffodils" famous poem by William Wordsworth (19th century English poet)

⁵ betrothal formal engagement