

Winner of the World Wide Writer's short story competition and published in Writer's Forum, (UK) July/August 2002

*Excerpts from judge's report at the end of story.*

Gitanjali Prasad from India has written children's books and scripts for children's comics. A Press Fellow at Wolfson College Cambridge, Gitanjali is currently researching work and family life. She lives in Calcutta with her husband and two sons.

### The Deflowering of a Virgin

In a few minutes I shall step into the flower bedecked limousine that will take me to the home of the girl I shall marry tonight. I catch a glimpse of myself in the shining surface of the car. It's hard to believe that that's me. The raw silk sherwani reaching to just below my knees gives me a dignity and an air of formality that is unfamiliar. My feet feel uncomfortable in the almost soleless nagras, the traditional pointed leather footwear Indians males wear for such occasions. I can feel the leather stitching under my toes, and under my heels. And I've got headgear! White bela blossoms trail across my face tickling every time they brush against my nose. The heady fragrance is making me light headed. "I am looking like a maharaja, aren't I?" my six year old nephew Veer asks me tugging at my sleeve with a chubby hand. "Oh yes," I agree hastily, and I realise I have been thoughtless. Veer, my shahbala, a kind of male bridesmaid really, is similarly togged out and must be as uncomfortable as I am. He clearly expects lavish compliments to make up for the discomfort, and I've obviously slipped up. But then you're probably far more at home with all this, pal, I think as I give his head a reassuring pat. I am a jeans and T-shirt kind of chap myself, England- educated, and returning home after six years abroad to "settle down ". I have a job with a British company and to the delight of my parents, I shall be based in my hometown, Patna for the next year. The girl I am to marry also "hails" from Patna as they say in India, so everyone is well pleased with the turn of events. In 1965, Patna is still a gracious town, and I feel it may be helpful my new wife to begin our new life in a place where family support can be counted upon. Indian girls lead such a sheltered existence and I have been away so long, I'm afraid I may not always be aware of what she may expect of me. There is so much that is still a little strange, so much I have to get adjusted to, being in familiar surroundings will make it easier for my bride.

Our large ancestral home is aglitter with row upon row of lights, as will be the brides' home, which is just three miles away. My family mills around, my grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, grand nieces and grand nephews. They have come from every corner of the country, planning their absence from work, and from their many other obligations, well in

advance to be present here for my wedding. The women dazzling in vibrant silk saris in a clash of vivid colours, magenta, mustard, green, purple, all heavily worked in gold while the men are sombre in off white and black, with vibrant red headgear adding a touch of colour. The younger girls wear lahengas or long silk skirts with the delicate tissue of their dupattas, which cover their heads, making each one look like a little princess. The servants are there too, wearing the clothes my mother has purchased for each, cheap copies of the real thing for the newer servants and more expensive clothes for the older servants. They are looking stiff and self conscious in their unaccustomed finery. My father and brothers are shouting instructions, trying to get the right mix of age and seniority into each car. People are sensitive about status, and I try to switch off from the tension my brothers must be experiencing trying to get it right. My mother is conferring with my aunts and sister-in-law, trying to ensure that everything that we need to carry for the wedding ceremony is there, packed, and placed into the right car. "Why don't we start?" my grandfather asks looking at his watch. The barat should leave now, it's in very poor taste to make the bride's people wait for the bridegroom's party." "We are just waiting for the battiwallahs, the light boys," my father explains. "Ah, here they come!" my brother says with some relief, watching the motley group trailing wires and lamps arrive. The band, wearing garish red uniforms with much too much gold braid, immediately breaks into a just recognisable version of the theme song from the movie, "Come September". For reasons, I have never been able to fathom, this was the mandatory song every band in Patna played for the barat party's departure from the bridegroom's home. The custom was evident, at the last wedding I attended in 1963, and now, two years later it is clearly still in vogue.

As the convoy of 30 cars takes off, my bridal limousine gets a little ahead of the others. My escort for the evening, my young nephew, Veer, looks at me," It must feel grand," he says with just a tinge of envy in his six-year-old voice. Actually I feel like a bloody fool. I'm decked up like some kind of medieval prince off to rescue my princess. From what ? My cynical Cambridge educated brain wonders. I am about to marry an aristocratic heiress, Nayantara, "star of my eyes"; her name captures her privileged status. She's been protected and pampered as only an upper middle class Indian girl can be. As a post graduate student at Cambridge, I had cooked my own meals, and survived on sandwiches. I had taken care of the laundry, and made my own bed, and polished my own shoes. I doubt if the lovely Nayantara had ever done more than pass a dish or cup of tea to senior family members or important guests. What did a girl brought up like this think about, I wondered, what were her fears and anxieties? How much did we have in common when you put aside all that made this such a 'good match ', the similarity of caste, class and of course the well matched horoscope.

Then I remembered her eyes, those intelligent eyes that held mine defiantly for a fraction longer than was socially acceptable. It's what drew me to her. It was the little extra I sought in my marriage partner. Since education was highly prized by our Kayastha community, she had obtained a degree in Sociology from the prestigious Patna University. It was something her father was careful to explain, "Though we have encouraged her to participate in debates, and other extra curricular activities, we have of course seen that she is steeped in traditional culture." This meant that she was not the new type of "fast" girl who actually went to parties where the obscene "twist" was sometimes danced. She was modern, only to the extent that she had been educated in a co-educational institution. "I went to Thailand on a study tour", Nayantara told me. "We are broad-minded, not 'modern'," I was reassured by her father. Indeed, I already knew from another boy from Patna, who was studying at Oxford, that not very discreet enquiries had already been about my social life at university. Nayantara's family was top draw, and the girl was considered a catch, I was a suitable groom, no more than that and the family was not going to take chances with a young man who had picked up degenerate Western ways, who partied too much, or horror of horrors already had a White girlfriend tucked away in England even as he chose to fulfil his filial duty by marrying a suitable Indian girl.

"We've reached, Chacha, can't you see that we've reached?" Well, I can certainly hear it! There is a crash of cymbals, and a welcoming recital on the shehnai, the plaintive strains of the flute heralding our arrival, as the brides' family bustled out, garlanding the men, and making me feel just a little uncomfortable with the welcome ceremony. The elaborately decorated silver salver, with its lit diya, was gravely taken round my face, by first the mother of the bride, than the other women. Songs were sung in my praise, I came "like a thundering cloud, but I shone like a luminous pearl!" Songs were also sung on behalf of my bride, she gathered the flowers as they fell from my sehra , she was aware of the great respect my mother and grandmother were to be given and would defer to them. My younger sister whose loyalty was obviously to her gender rather than to her brother, changed the words to say that the bride intended to be one up on these revered members of the family and there were a few giggles till an observant aunt put an end to such subversive activity!

A hush fell over the crowd as the star of the show entered. The bride in a shimmering, intricately worked silk sari was brought in by her older brother, a transparent veil with a fine tassel of gold, all but obscured her face. So they were having the jaimala ceremony, I thought to myself. Hindu weddings which normally took place at around midnight or even later were witnessed by none but the close family, but half the town was invited for the festivities preceding the actual

marriage. The jaimala ceremony, a throwback to the ancient Indian custom of swayambar, where the bride's father invited all the eligible young men of the kingdom to various tests of valour, and rewarded the victor with his daughter's hand, had recently been re-introduced into contemporary Indian weddings. No tests of any kind, for me, thank God. In the modern jaimala ceremony, just a few hours before the wedding, the bride garlanded the man she was to marry, and he returned the compliment. It added a touch of razzmatazz for the vast majority of guests. I was frankly, a little impatient with all this pomp and show, but in India, I had realised a long time ago, it was far easier to go along with what the family wanted. So, after, one brief meeting, with much of her family and mine present, when I had approved my choice of bride, I had taken very little interest in the planning of the wedding. I would go along, I thought to myself, There were few surprises about life here. It was comforting certainly. I hoped it wasn't too dull.

But coming back to the here and now. If I did look like a medieval potentate, it was only for an evening. No harm in role playing if it made the family happy. My Westernised detachment fell away only when I saw her. This bride looked just like any other bride, and yet she was unique. She was my bride. I saw her hands, fragile hands with an intricate henna design, and her wrists, completely encircled with tinkling glass bangles, pick up that garland, and place it around my neck, and I was unexpectedly, strangely moved. Suddenly some subliminal cultural identity sprang to life in my chest and I was glad that in these many years abroad I had been ...how should I put it, Indian? The decision to marry Nayantara was a decision taken with my head, not my heart, she was acceptable to my family, and I felt we were compatible. But now, one look at those traditionally decorated hands, the wrists so slender, even the burden of the garland of marigolds looked too heavy for them, and I wanted to reach out and touch them, to hold them in my own...to have and to hold, my brain chanted, no that was from the Christian marriage service, I just wanted to love, and perhaps to protect, this girl, so innocent, and so vulnerable.

Being over 21, male, and a virgin was unacceptable in the sexually charged atmosphere of the sixties in the UK, but now, I was glad that I hadn't gone to bed with any of the girls I had liked and not loved. I was glad I was a virgin, and that this girl I was to marry and I could begin, both the first for each other. I wanted to hold this lovely, untouched princess to my heart, and to know her. This was from the Bible too, I realised, but what the hell, it was what I felt right in the middle of my very Hindu nuptials! After the wedding was over, we retired to the kohbar, our bridal chamber. The ancient Hindus knew a trick or two, I acknowledge grudgingly. What a build up there is to every single step to this place. The wedding ceremony itself, full of promises, noble, beautiful as marriage vows always are, but the sacredness of the final act of marriage is what I'm struck by. I have to put sindur or

vermillion powder, in the parting of Nayantara's hair. I've never witnessed this before, indeed, no man is allowed to witness this part of the wedding ceremony. The women hold a cloth around us as I finally claim this woman as my wife, with God as witness.

Finally it is over, the ceremony is over, and after we touch the feet of the elders to get their blessings, we walk barefoot towards the kohbar or bridal chamber. The door to the kohbar is barred by a giggling throng of Nayantara's younger sisters who demand exorbitant sums to allow me to enter, someone shoves, a large bag of jingling coins to me, I distribute these to my young tormentors, and finally, we enter our bridal chamber. We are alone. My bride and I, ready to begin our life as man and wife.

The bed is covered with a canopy of white bela blossoms, woven into a lattice design with red roses. The tassels of flowers are held together at the sides, by a string of gota, beautifully worked gold ribbon. My bride sits on the bed, her face covered in a veil of gold tissue, her beautiful eyes downcast. I lift her veil gently to see her face. Tear stained, the kohl slightly smudged making her expressive eyes look much larger than I know they are. Dots of ivory sandalwood paste and red kum kum paste make a pattern over her eyebrows. She is adorned like a bride. She looks almost impossibly virginal. No, didn't I just say she looks like a bride. So she does, and there's no contradiction, I realise. Brides are supposed to look virginal. Hell, they're supposed to be virgins. And Indian brides almost always are. My brain, which has been over active with random phrases all evening, now throws up a new one, 'the Deflowering of a Virgin'. So how does one deal with the situation? I mean what do I do next. The years in England vanish as if they had never been. Not that anything I did there has prepared me for deflowering virgins. Actually, I'm not sure one should go about deflowering one's bride, on the very first night when one is not very well acquainted. But then, how long does one wait? Most brides in India become mothers quite fast, sometimes in nine months, but is that what they want? What does Nayantara want? I realise I don't even know what I want! Uhh, I clear my throat, in the time-honoured tradition of so many Hindi movies, "Would you like to change into something more comfortable?" I find myself asking. That's a terribly banal way to begin one's married life, I agree. I probably should have lifted her veil gently and said something romantic and memorable, but then I'm not a very romantic kind of guy. "I don't have a nightie here", she tells me, without lifting her face. She's probably even more nervous than I am. So I do lift her veil gently. But I can't push it back. It's stuck tight to the back of her head. "It's pinned", she explains softly, pulling out the pins, one after another, till she lays about 26 hair pins on the bed, and her hair, a sheet of soft silk falls to her waist. It's unbelievable, how erotic, this is. And suddenly without warning, the suppressed desire for my beautiful bride,

for all the women I never touched, breaks free. I kiss her softly first, very, very gently, and then with real passion. I lay her on the bed, and all the complicated bridal finery comes off without too much effort. There we are, man and wife naked, and in bed. As I caress her face, her lips part gently. I stroke her beautiful hair, her shoulders, the satin smooth skin tempting my hands downward to her beautiful breasts and below. I am hesitant, tentative, and then suddenly without warning, I feel her legs trembling in the ancient language that every male understands instinctively. My heat feels so full of tenderness for my virginal bride, I feel my heart will burst with love, with pride and joy. But as I try to make my bride, my wife, as I attempt to consummate my marriage, I discover to my chagrin that there's a mechanical angle to this that I simply haven't mastered. Time and again, I attempt to enter, but my 'manhood' simply doesn't know how to go about things. Reluctantly, I raise myself on my elbows and move backward to attempt to see what that part of a woman's anatomy really looks like. God, that opening is small! I can see that the deflowering of a virgin is not as simple as it may appear. I am suitably deflated at this discovery. Suddenly, I hear a giggle, I can't believe this but my well-bred bride lets out a giggle, and swiftly puts a finger to my lips, as she wriggles out from under me, and places me on my back. With practiced fingers she strokes me, and then guides me in, there's one minute of pure ecstasy, and then I hear her say, "I had an affair, it was on my trip to Thailand, with my research guide. It was bold, brief, brilliant. If you don't let this make you sad, I can make you very happy". My mind blanks out. I don't know if I'm disappointed or just plain shocked. It's so unexpected, the whole thing. I smile ruefully thinking what an idiot I've been, I've just been so goddamned smug, I probably asked for it, I decide finally. I kiss my lovely bride as I accept her unique wedding present, and give her as a return gift, my virginity.

It's just a few hours to morning, and as Nayantara sleeps, I reflect that my bride switched the sequence, my test lay after and not before the wedding! The future lies before me pregnant with the promise of the unexpected. The silence of dawn is broken by birdsong as in the distance we hear the sound of a shehnai. We are barely dressed when. there is a sharp knock on the door, then a more vigorous battering, "Chacha, it's me!" says my shahbala, barging in, "aren't you coming home now?" I take my wife's hand, ready for the journey homeward.

**Judge's Report:" Virgins in Britain are unfashionable and hard to find to find at the altar these days. But there was one at the nuptials in India of the beautiful Nayantara. And it wasn't the bride. ...**

**The description of the first night is unforgettable. It is told with innocent humour...**

**A story told with exquisite taste, another unfashionable word."**

**E.D.**

