

Aunty Laxshmi

As the rest of us sat chomping veggie pakoras at the breakfast table, I couldn't resist observing my Aunty's flawless legs: shaved, sleek, stubble-less, and her black cotton pencil skirt ending at the knees. Sitting diagonally from her, I had the perfect view of her slender, long legs elevated on at least four-inch stilettos, the heels getting thinner and pointier as they touched the floor. Her legs glistened as if she had rubbed oil onto them and appeared smooth to the touch. Her upper body was so unlike typical Indian women with a large torso slimming down like an image of the upper half of an hourglass. Even though Aunty Laxshmi's son, Anand alias Andy was now sixteen, she maintained a figure as if she were still quite young. Her breasts curved inside a tightly hugged cut-sleeve knitted blouse. The knitting was so sparse, I swear I could see her skin, which reminded me of female pictures I'd sneaked surreptitiously in *Debonair* magazines hidden under a pile of income tax returns in my father's closet. She looked so like the milky white women with a waist that slimmed beyond my imagination and breasts so heavy they defied their bony wrists and body. It wasn't until she asked me, "Young man, what are your future plans? You're in what, college now?" that my reverie broke and I felt guilty being a pervert. I became aware that my father, uncle Vikas, Anand and Aunty Laxshmi, who sat around the table, could read my face as an open book, peccability evident from my expressions, and so I just picked up two pakoras and crammed my mouth with them, delaying the response. My mother stood in the kitchen across from me deep frying vegetables dipped in a pancake-like graham flour batter.

Aunty Laxshmi and uncle Vikas made America their home twenty years ago. Laxshmi preferred we call her Lily, the identity she had adopted in America. Uncle Vikas was Vicky. Their son Anand alias Andy was born in New Jersey. Laxshmi's teeth were exceptional. They

stayed a jaundiced color, even though one could find her with a white strip on top of her teeth most of the day. She carried her cell phone everywhere she went, even to the bathroom, which made me doubt if she had a secret boy friend who called her. I lived in Jodhpur with my parents in a modest-looking flat roofed three bedroom house with a terrace. We called their present home, America; they preferred to call it The United States, or the US. They came every two years like festivals marking appearances and reappearances at fixed, designated times. I strongly believed that Aunty Laxshmi did things to distinguish herself as a face in the crowd. She dressed different, talked different, acted different than the rest of us.

“I’m already taking tuition classes for the All India Engineering Entrance Test,” I responded after gulping down with a glass of water the bits of vegetables drowned in fried graham-flour batter that had almost choked me.

If there was one thing that always reminded me of reality, it was my preparation for the competitive exam. I was to take the test two years later (I wouldn’t have been eligible for it till I passed out of senior school.) I realized the fact that Laxshmi was my aunty, her body *wasn’t* unblemished like a young girl’s, and noticed her immaculate-looking make-up that concealed her skin like flimsy peel hiding a fruit. Before either of us, Aunty Laxshmi or I, could say anything, my father interrupted.

“He’s studying,” he said glancing at her, “but you need to work harder, day and night,” he said glaring me. I avoided him, stared out of the window. “Getting into the IIT, (Indian Institute of Technology) requires you work like crazy. The way he enjoys life, he cannot reach that goal. You have to forget sleep, movies, entertainment, cricket, everything, if you want to be the selected few. *Now* is your chance to work hard and prove yourself, *you listening*, or else you’ll repent the rest of your life.” I briefly faced him pretending to be listening.

My father had invested most of his savings toward the tuition for my coaching classes. When I said I too wanted to work part time like most of my friends at school, he had denied. Because my father started working at a very early age, he wanted that I get the time and attention to succeed in the competitive test and ensure a prosperous future.

“I’d die before I slog like that,” Andy said, scoffing at my father’s advice. Andy picked up a paper napkin from the middle of the table and wiped the tomato ketchup from his lip.

Today the dining table was arranged differently. Bamboo placements in front of all six chairs were placed at the table. Paper napkins were stacked in the center like the model of a tall winding building. The first batch of steaming hot spicy onion, potato, cauliflower, and spinach pakoras was sitting in a pyramid-like structure in a glass bowl. The savory aroma of peanut oil, mint leaves, tart tamarind chutney, spices spread around the room like the fragrance of water lilies pervading a pond. A gold-rimmed white kettle let out smoke from its snout, the smoke condensing in tiny bubbles around the bone china. Each place mat had a steel plate, a fork, and an empty glass on it.

“Education is different in India,” Laxshmi added and silenced her son.

“Ok, let us be very clear, Mom. Don’t expect me to labor like Sid.”

"OJ? You have *OJ*!" Laxshmi asked, I thought because she wanted to avoid responding to Andy, swiveled around in her dining table chair, and faced my mother who was still frying special cheese pakoras in the kitchen. On usual days, I mean when my uncle’s family is not around, we just eat regular vegetable pakoras.

My mother, who kept adjusting the free rippled end of her sari that cascaded from her left shoulder down to her waist, gave a puzzled look at Laxshmi. She then wiped with a white cloth the stream of sweat that rolled down her temples. She failed to understand Laxshmi’s acronym,

OJ, and so did I. My father didn't bother. He ate while the BBC radio news uttered perfect British pronunciations from the transistor radio in front of him on the table.

"Orange juice? There's *juice*? *Orange*?" Laxshmi explained and looked questioningly at my mother.

"We have chai, but if you want juice I can ask Siddharth to get some. The shop's just a five-minute walk from here. Siddharth, go get the juice your aunty wants", my mother instructed me.

When the sun had the potential to heat up a bucket of water in just a few hours, to go out of the house and buy *OJ* for Aunty Laxshmi was the last thing I wished to do. I made uncomfortable movements swinging back and forth and sideways in my chair.

Laxshmi said, "No, no. We'll also drink chai with you today. Right, Vicky?" She looked at my uncle, who was busy eating the green pepper pakoras, his favorite.

Uncle Vikas had a bald head and wore a baseball cap all the time. He wore khaki-colored shorts reaching up to his knees and a T-shirt that said USA.

To me she said, "Sid, eat your breakfast, see it's getting cold."

Sid is what aunty Lakshmi called me. I hated it and sometimes snubbed at her by not letting her complete her sentence, pretend I had something urgent to take care of and had to leave immediately. She was never felt offended by my insolence; I concluded this behavior was another of her pretentious antics. Sid made me think I was some incurable disease like AIDS or something.

"Right, Andy?" Laxshmi said.

"What, mom? You talkin to me?" Anand seemed confused by his mother's remarks.

"Nothing sweetie, eat you breakfast," Lakshmi said putting a cheese pakora in her mouth and reaching for a glass of water.

Later during the day, Laxshmi handed us our gifts brought form America. I must say I was slightly disappointed by the shirt she gave me— it was made in India. I wanted something that was made in America. My father got a Fuji camera made in China. He looked at the 100 dollar price-tag on the cardboard box, and just kept saying where was the need of spending so much money on him. I knew he coveted the gift. The camera was made in China, and I wasn't ignorant of the bad reputation Chinese goods sold in India had. Aunty Laxshmi disappointed me twice that day. I doubted if the camera was really worth five thousand rupees, the approximate value of 100 dollars.

The thing I'd been eagerly looking for and got was the pair of sky blue Levis jeans. The leather sticker at the back of it said Levis. The jeans smelled different, a smell I associated with the smell of America. Even though it was slightly loose on my waist, I tightened it with a cummerbund, and couldn't wait to brag about it in front of my friends at the coaching center.

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"Andy is going on a trek to the Himalayas with some of his friends. They'll join him in Nepal," uncle Vikas announced an afternoon, the day before Andy's departure.

"He's leaving so soon. Will he come back or,"—my father's curiosity was snubbed.

"He starts college at UCLA, so he'll leave with his friends, and we will join him in the US," Aunty Laxshmi explained.

"But we should do something before Anand leaves. It is all so sudden," my father

suggested, and my mother nodded.

“I’ve been thinking we should all go to the temple in Meharangrath fort before Andy leaves,” Laxshmi opined.

When I asked Andy he said that a group of two girls and three boys his age would join him in Nepal. He said that his parents knew there would be girls but they didn’t care. I felt I was like a caged animal in a zoo. Having girls as friends was as unacceptable an idea to my parents as fish swimming out of water. I was glad that he was leaving early.

While Aunt Laxshmi perched beside my mother in the back seat of the red Maruti 800 car, a small sedan, uncle Vikas sat next to my father who drove. My father’s friend had lent his car to us while Aunt Laxshmi and uncle Vikas were in Jodhpur. Even before Laxshmi pulled the door open, she scowled, puckered her lips, twisted her nose, twitched her inverted crest-shaped eyebrows and remarked: “We’re going in *this*? It is so tiny. My Toyota Camry is almost double the size of this car. I doubt we’ll all fit in it? What happened to your car we rode in during our last visit two years ago? What car was it? This one’s a tiny boat.”

Two years ago when Aunt Laxshmi and uncle Vikas were here, Mr. Verma, my father’s friend, had lent his Lancer to us, and so this time my father asked Mr Gupta, another friend of his, for a car, and he happened to own a smaller car, too tiny for my slim Aunt Laxshmi.

“Anand and Sidharth will ride the moped, four can easily fit in this car,” my father said. Uncle Vikas pulled the front door, which made a screeching sound, and repositioned his seat by pulling the lever at the side. Aunt Laxshmi suddenly realized she hadn’t picked up her mineral water bottle, so she ran back to the house to get one. She gave Andy one bottle too, settled in the back seat, and after applying some sunscreen lotion, wore big, brown goggles. Then they took off.

On the moped, Andy fidgeted, making me uncomfortable. I pulled over at the side of the road, told him that perhaps it wasn't a very good idea to keep moving when I had to share my lane marks-obliterated road with other two, three and four wheelers, not to mention the various pedestrians and an occasional cow or a stray dog. I started to ride again. This time I rode slower, but Andy still kept doing the same annoying things.

Since we were right behind the red Maruti car, we stopped where my father stopped. Vikas and Laxshmi both got out of the car in the middle of a bazaar, and began clicking pictures of a camel reigned to a cart. Bright pink, green, yellow, red tassels and necklaces covered the animal's neck. A red artificial flower was threaded through the reins on top of its snout. While Laxshmi exclaimed, "Wow, this is so cool, awesome," and pointed to the camel, Vikas kept clicking pictures. In the mean while, a group of beggar children surrounded my uncle and aunty, pulling at Laxshmi's scarf, spreading their hands, cupping palms, begging for alms and blessing them. My father shooed away the little kids as if they were inhuman, but as soon as Vikas dug his hand into his pocket, the children leaped toward him like starving fish at the sight of food. Before he could hand them the money he pulled out of his wallet, the kids snatched the bills and ran away. The camel rider, who had been posing along with his beast quietly, saluted Aunty Laxshmi and uncle Vikas, and asked for some money as a tip for being an exhibit, "*baksheesh* madam."

"Where are you from?" he questioned.

"We live in America," Aunty Laxshmi responded proudly.

"Show my picture to your friends in America," he said, pocketed the money my uncle gave him and headed off. As they moved toward the car, my father said to my uncle that he probably gave away too much money.

“It was what only three or four dollars for us. I spend more than that when I go to buy my coffee at Starbucks,” aunty said.

That silenced my father and I decided I was not going to stop now even if they fancied another photo opportunity on the way to the temple.

When we finally reached the Meharangarh fort and started to climb the 10, 000 steps, Laxshmi complained of too much heat, kept sipping mineral water from the plastic bottle, and covered her head. She looked at the high red sandstone walls of the fort, so high as if the fort were the base of a deep dried-up well and expressed that she felt a sense of calm and peace descend over with the 120 feet high walls surrounding her. I felt her description claustrophobic. Occasionally she commented on the cannon ball marks on the fort walls, and drew the attention of the fort guides, like aquatic creatures leaping for food. (Only an outsider made innocent remarks about the cannon ball marks.) Then she would gently say, “we are not tourists; we used to live in Jodhpur, a long time ago.”

The golden dome of the temple was visible from a distance. Walking under colorful orange, white, green, and blue flags, we heard priests chanting mantras in Sanskrit through loudspeakers. The evening prayer had just begun. It was seven pm. Leading to the temple was a courtyard. At the entrance of the courtyard stood four sandstone pillars exquisitely carved with images of Hindu gods and goddesses. Gold engraved double doors, the size of regular windows, opened into the dark, cavernous temple. One by one, we ducked our heads to get inside through the narrow doors. Exotic beats of drums and the knoll of brass bells echoed throughout the temple. It was packed with devotees like sardines in a box. People dressed in bright reds, yellows, greens and pale white made the temple a riot of colors. Sandalwood, rose and chamomile scents from incense sticks made the atmosphere divine. As soon as we had our turn

kowtowing in front of the goddess, we joined the deluge of multitudes bowing their heads, some genuflecting or prostrating, humbled and supplicating, their eyes closed while the idol of Goddess Kali, about three feet tall, stared with wide open eyes, rage pouring out from her face, wide open mouth, red-colored tongue, and innumerable armed hands spread around both sides like ripple effect in water. Laxshmi followed by Vikas and Andy pressed their hands in prayer. Like the other ladies in the temple, Aunty Laxshmi kept her head covered and closed her eyes. She swayed her head like a pendulum, clapped her hands to the rhythm of the mantras. I focused on Aunty Laxshmi and realized that in that moment she was so unlike the American image of Lily she strived to preserve. The temple was getting crammed with people; I was losing sight of Aunty Laxshmi, who initially stood beside my mother. I could no longer see my mother. Within no time, the temple was filled beyond its capacity and yet more people kept thronging in as if the temple had magically expanded to accommodate the crowds. Laxshmi was just the pink scarf that covered her head. While everybody closed their eyes and were drenched in the serene atmosphere among chants and the beats and knolls, I saw Aunty Laxshmi beneath her melting make-up. Warm blood gushed through my entire body. I saw the Indian image of womanhood reflected in her, Aunty Laxshmi: vulnerable, an unadorned presence, a passive tiny fish in an ocean crowded by wild sea turtles and sea weed that didn't allow the sun rays to penetrate. I lost the ability to hear any sound.