

Made To Order! By Devika Kumar.

It was their new apartment and the Bhatnagars were settling in happily. There was a lot of work, buying, cleaning, unpacking and getting to know the neighbourhood. But the most important, and undoubtedly the most delicate and tricky, task was to find a Maid. And finding one made-to-order was near impossible!

They came in various designs: the smartly-dressed, the sloppy, the pathetic, the sharp, the watchful and wary, the silent and the garrulous.... "It is essential to have someone honest," said Mrs Bhatnagar. "The rest can be handled."

"Hmm," said Mr Bhatnagar's voice from behind the newspaper. "Just make sure the police verification is done."

"I've asked the security at the gate to send in some of their known maids." Mrs Bhatnagar was intelligent!

Several candidates later came Joya. Mrs Bhatnagar took her on. She was diligent and honest and everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Mrs Bhatnagar had only one little hassle with Joya. She spoke with an accent which often left Mrs Bhatnagar confused about what she said. Besides, she used only the feminine gender for everyone and everything. So Mrs Bhatnagar was never quite sure whether she was talking about her husband, her two daughters, the neighbour's cat whom Joya disliked, the fish she bought or the rickshawala who had charged her three rupees extra! But as the days went by, Mrs Bhatnagar was resigned to her own ignorance of Joya's accent. She became a listener.

Joya gave her a blow-by-blow account of how her family had settled in Guwahati. Her husband came from Ajmer where he had two 'other' mothers and five brothers and three sisters. It dawned on Mrs Bhatnagar that Joya's family were refugees from across the border. Luckily for Mrs Bhatnagar, she was not finicky about caste and religion, among other things. Besides, she was very happy that Joya was dedicated to educating her two daughters. They rejoiced in the names of Bapi and Mumpy, which were sufficiently innocuous to keep them safe from any discrimination, felt Joya.

Joya, however, had her own views about religion and was an avid follower of the news! She knew all about the debate raging around the issue of triple talaq. She had dealt with it in her own way.

"A man must have sons," her husband had announced one day, Mrs Bhatnagar learnt.

"We have two daughters and you don't have a regular job!" replied Joya. Her husband worked as a mason, casting roofs, when there were roofs to be cast. This was specialised work that she was very proud of, but it didn't help run her kitchen or educate her girls. She had taken a room in a better quarter of the area so that her girls would not pick up bad company. They were studious and hard working. Once in a while they had a spat and threw the pressure cooker or a saucepan at each other, but they always made up over a bottle of nail polish or a shampoo!

"But I need a son to carry my name forward to the next generation," insisted her husband. "Besides, I am permitted to have four wives, so having two should not be a problem for you."

"You want a wife so you can have a son?"

"Yes. Though it's you I will always love!"

"That's nice. But what if she has daughters too? And what has been the purpose of having boys in your generation when both your 'other' Ammis have thrown out their sons with their wives?"

"Not everyone is alike," he mumbled.

"Let's make a deal," said Joya. "You marry and you'll be living in my house. If she has a son, I'll let you all stay. If she has a daughter, she, the child and you will leave the house and give me my freedom to bring up my girls. Agreed?"

Her husband went out for a walk. When he returned, all thoughts of marriage had been left behind. It was too risky! Joya meant business and knew how to guard her girls. They had two more years to finish school and she looked forward to putting them through college and make them teachers. Mrs Bhatnagar smiled. There were definitely several ways to skin a cat! And Joya was a treasure.