

WHEN I saw Anita at the party waving her bejewelled hands about like an ITC wallah's wife which she isn't, I...

Anita as a girl was bright, bubbly and indiscreet. She said all the things her father didn't want her to. And when he turned his disapproving bald mouth back at her, she made faces at it. This, when she was thirteen. At fifteen she was made headgirl and the German nuns at her convent school pinned a pretty badge upon her sweater, one she herself knitted, *Die luft von weider* it said, "Let the winds of freedom blow." It pleased her father. He was also pleased that she baked fine angel cakes on Saturday mornings before going off for student council meetings. At seventeen she went to the local university, firebranded with nationalism once, now looking tired, worn and weary, disgorging riotous provincial youth walking the knife-edge of the unemployed. Father forbade her to cycle down and she took the rickshaw demurely, making certain the rickshaw hood was on so that none of the young people could see her. Sometimes her father would pose an errand in the direction of her university and follow the trundling rickshaw. After he had done it a few times Anita's mother, inclining her head and wagging her finger, said, "Daddy! must you!" And he knew it wasn't needed. His daughter was on the right track, her excitable edges had been nicely trimmed.

Then at twenty she passed with a first division and her department head said, why not do an MA? They also said the Civil Services would suit her organised and incisive mind. Anita, head bent, eyes downcast, replied, "Father will have to approve first."

Father hastily found her a suitable boy just before university results were out where, expectedly, she was the topper. The boy was from a venerable and rich family, their silver was heavy

SHORT STORY

Five Women

Manju Kak

and the furniture, old Burma teak, carved. He liked the idea of a clever wife who baked excellent cakes and at the same time could hold her own at corporate dinners and would catch the

CEO's attention. Anita was married quickly.

Matron, spouse, proud housewife, mother, yes mother of a daughter... now Anita wears rings, wears low cut blouses that fit snugly about her once exuberant bosom decently gymmed, wears the jaded mask that does a company-wife proud, a face that says, 'ah dahlings, Anita.. isn't...'

Neither is Indu. She shrieks when the cook serves her a fried egg instead of an omelette. She thinks no one guesses about her hysteria because in the midst of a fit when the phone rings and it is handed to her she coos in her carefully controlled rich-lady of leisure drawl, oo it's youu dahling, how lovely to hear yourr vvo-ice, I was just.... not knowing the eavesdropping wire has already carried her hysterical screech into snooping ears...I was just..just what..were you, Indu?

Hers is a fine house done in rather opulent bad taste that Gautam Bhatia calls Punjabi Baroque. At college she always hung out with the business lot which of course she wasn't a part of because her father was in the army. My, wasn't he a smart colonel, fine moustaches and all dancing the tango with plump Mrs. Chawla so beautifully come Saturday night at the Club that you thought they were making love so well their bodies moved together and... and Indu watched with the corner of her eye practising secretly in the college common room only she couldn't get it right, could never hope to partner her



father who... but of course he wasn't rich that is. A business match wasn't such a bad idea it gave you a chauffeur-driven car and diamonds. So what if he was a sloppy dresser that she never liked going out with him in the evenings, she could manage the ladies' kitty round enthusiastically in the day. Going out with him in the evenings!

Five women? Yes Saroj who wears the scarred face of a nose job she'd had done many years ago to catch a spouse and Rupa who claims she still has a continuing affair with her husband of many years...fat both are still walking the regulation six kilometres to ward off the hypertension, diabetes, spondylosis...

(Five?

Paste blow ups of them on the wall and the wounds they've tried to tutor tutor for so long would ooze bitter bile....ah...how long.)

It was when she took the dessert out at the party, chocolate, delicious and creamy. Anita had made it, Saroj said, and Anita blushed false thankful like she's trained her face to all these years. When she did that, quick it flashed in my mind that picture of her when her BA results came out... that look of vindication which immediately and inexplicably turned to one asphyxiated.

Suddenly Indu said to her, Annie dee.ar.. is this cocoa? Adding quickly, it tastes surprisingly as fine as the pure chocolate I buy routinely at Sugar and Spice. Sure, Indu only uses imported chocolate bought at black market prices. Or Indu's businessman husband — the same she's loath to party with — travels frequently abroad with the shopping list she gives him. Recently clinched this deal to supply Jindal pipes to southeast-Asia. When he travels to HK he pops into cheap Indian hotels at Kowloon and looks for porn videos and Chinese tarts. From

within slim flat bodies they gush pleasurably at his seemingly expensive presents, using tones that send him a-tingling. Nah, he's not such a fool to waste foreign exchange, it's Indian stuff he buys, the same he sees Indu shopping for, telling her they're for business colleagues.

Indu informs the party that her new chef does a divine chocolate mousse. The emphasis is on the chef. Annie grinds her teeth. She doesn't have a cook, chef, ayah, maid, and it takes her every talent to produce meals as opulent and fine as Indu serves. Annie has really very little appetite for rich foods. Her thyroid is hyper, hypo...whatever. They discuss their thyroid, spondylosis, sciatica, hypertension. Annie dee-ar, informs Indu, try Duggal's lab Annie, he's so good and the toilets are so 'usable'. She repeats it as Annie has once let on that

she goes to a government clinic where the treatment is good, cheap, the queues long and the corridors stink of stale urine.

Indu suddenly grows confidential, tell me yaar Annie, (afternoon still, but she has had a bloody mary too many) is he still good in bed? There is sudden shocked silence at the party. Then they all let out a stream of giggles. Sure he must be, just look at his eyes...she teases Annie. Annie alone guesses something she cannot quite put her finger to and turns queasy.

True her pedigreed husband is a peacock tonight in cream silk shirt, bow, a style of dinner dressing he picked up as an undergrad in England, one that wears well at parties when matched against paunchy Marwari seths in rusts and reds, opulent embroidery off-setting dark oily skins. Yes Rick dines out well.



Indu's slurring voice continues... tell..tell. The women's eyes gorge Annie's husband and he preens knowing he is the cynosure of all eyes.

Indu complains, tell, tell Annie. No longer can she hide the hunger from her voice, no longer..it has been gnawing at her too long.

Indu wanted to be like Annie at school. Annie was head girl and Annie would frequently tell fat slob Indu to fall straight in line. When she said that the whole row would giggle, because there was no way Indu could fall in line, she was lumpy this way and that and some part of her would poke out. Annie would walk away in disgust. But then Annie so physically fit made everyone else feel overweight. There wasn't a single bone in Annie that was out of shape.

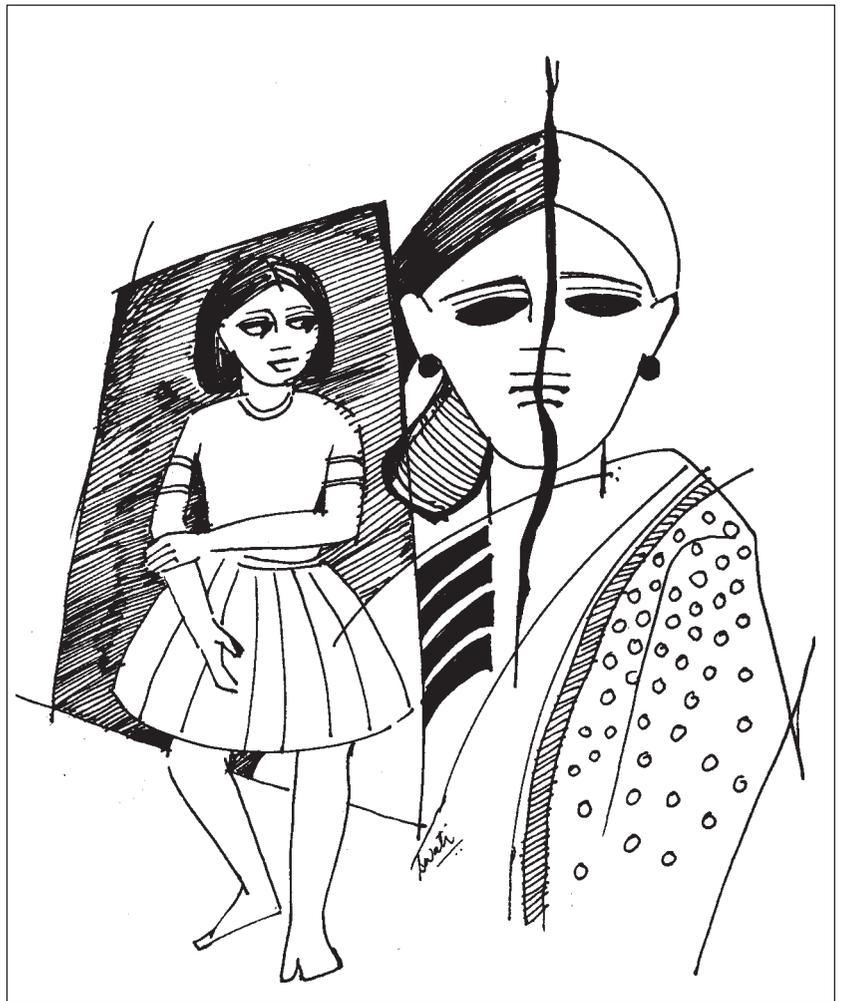
At the party when they leave, Anita waves goodbye like an ITC wallah's wife which of course she isn't...anymore. This is the fourth job Rick's lost, moved out of, turned away from, given notice to. Rick's well into his thirties now and those other colleagues that started out with him are in fine flats in South Delhi, or in farm houses further out. He tells them he hasn't made up his mind as yet, while he lives out of a set of rooms in his in-law's place. Anita doesn't mind the postponed house hunt, she says she's settling in and there's her daughter to take care of that takes so much of her time. Rick doesn't 'actually' complain and when he avoids breakfast it's because morning meals don't suit him he excuses, never once does he mention the Saffola Annie's mum uses because of her husband's heart. Nor does he suggest sunflower oil doesn't go down well with eggs scrambled; in butter that's how they were cooked in his own home, laid upon the rosewood table under a heavy silver cover. Annie knows all that yet, quite unreasonably when she found the bill, the bill from Bokhara, that day in his jacket

pocket, Bokhara, why, everyone knew it was the most expensive tandoori place in town! That he only nibbled at dinner because Ma, on Dad's pension, couldn't really come up with menus he liked and Dad, oldstyle, wouldn't hear of taking a sou from his son-in-law didn't calm her seized heart. Not that Rick had so much to give now that the share market had crashed and the raise he'd been expecting...well that was another matter... but the bill, it did tear at her 'cos just three days ago Shelley, her daughter, their daughter but nowadays 'hers' more, had wanted to go to Wimpy's and Rick had snapped at her, expense accounts weren't there to satisfy his daughter's

whims 'all' the time. Shelley's face had crumpled.



INDU had invited her to dinner again, but Rick was touring Moradabad. He hated dusty UP towns, spoilt his good suits and there would never be a decent restaurant to dine at, but the Marwari for whom he now worked wanted him to do sales. Rick did feel his education and breeding would pay better dividends if he stayed in a metropolis. Bombay was fine, Bangalore would do, even Madras. International sales were up his street, but that s.o.b. Marwari boss...who could never make out a fish fork from...



Come summer the hot loo blowing and the melon vendors lining the highway into town and Rick had been complaining of his job more and more. Nor was he really trying to find a house (said he had no time - did the sight of something so poky depress him?) Anita simply couldn't find something to his taste on the amount the company gave. Now if that raise had come through. Anyway Shelley had settled so well into her new school. But that time, removing his socks, complaining to her about the lack of elbow room she had, in a small voice mentioned it would be better to postpone moving till Shelley finished the year when, quite suddenly he'd snarled - Shelley, Shelley, Shelley! Is there anybody else you think of! She had cringed. Later she'd excused his outburst telling herself cramped quarters could get to anyone. Why, in their ITC flat in Bombay his wardrobe alone had taken up the space of this doublebed! But more and more Anita began feeling guilty, guilty that it fell to him this responsibility to feed her and Shelley...

Rick began to talk of his old job again and again, said living in Bombay had been so much fun, the touring here was wearing him down especially his digestion, and unreasonably so, she began to feel the old guilt gnawing. How could he hold his own at company meetings with his clothes in disarray? How could he entertain in a house where the walls peeled at the edges? Dash it he couldn't even invite Indu who after all would, should, surely understand, they having been at school together....Indu?...suddenly Annie thought of Indu and that put clean out of her mind what he... maybe she should call Indu... six months gone from the time she last invited her over and that world to which she had belonged appeared remote and at once distant.



ANITA didn't like calling Indu, she didn't know why but she didn't. Indu cooed in her cultivated drawl, why dahling where 'have' you been... buried yourself in the suburbs, you really should move to town. Somewhere in Annie resentment spilled over, and a jagged knife in her voice she replied - where in town Indu love? Rick doesn't exactly 'own' Jaipurohit Industries does he? Then, embarrassed at her unseemly outburst, she was silent for this was her first public acknowledgment to Indu that she, Anita, had not done quite as well for herself. Till she heard peeling laughter; you should've thought of that before marrying a pin up model dee-ar, but he makes it up in

bed doesn't he? Well, now what about the flat that Jai owns on Prithviraj Road, his company and lying vacant, it's a guest house and... and that's what you deserve dahling, for forgetting old friends, she pouted. A seething anger, she couldn't trace the source of, welled up in Anita. No! She wasn't asking charity of Indu; don't even think of it, don't even mention it Indu...she blubbered, hot tears stinging her eyes.

Anita didn't know why she mentioned it to Rick in the first place, but rancorous morning mouth bitter after last night's quarrel with him, and she wanting to make amends, wanting to show him that she had been doing



her bit while he was looking over sales reports of Murshidabad, Moradabad whatever, blurted out, the moment they were alone, "Indu offered us her guest house on Prithviraj Road." Her face said, so there! She too could come up with something if they 'had' to. But before she could add the rest a reptilian thought fleeting past his face arrested her. He had stopped eating the sandwich he had been eating, slowly testing pale green cucumber under colgate teeth to see if it was crisp having first lifted its edge to make certain of the mustard. On his face was cunning consideration; and in her panic arose, she half-guessing his mind, astonished at his acquiescence to Indu's offer, spoke out in staccato shots — of course I told her impossible! I mean what must she think to have even made an offer! A violet anger coloured his eyes — that he dare not raise his voice in an in-law house too was a burden she must carry — could you not have consulted me, could you, I mean look at this... and he looked about the plain wood sofa her mother had had made by a CPWD carpenter so many years ago. But, wasn't there Shelley's school to think of? Shelley, again Shelley, infernal kid, surely hers wasn't earth shattering education to carry on living in a shoe box for! But that thunderbolt she had been side-stepping, not daring to use, threw itself in front at her.. Indu was her friend...'her' friend...'had' been... it was 'she' who had known Indu, and 'she' could take no charity from...how dare he....



ANITA did up the Prithviraj Road apartment stylishly, even if it was a guest house. Indu, when she breezed in said she should have her hired as a housekeeper...as in housekeeper, a professional for hotels, personel etc...and somewhere in

Anita's mind surfaced that degree, writ in gold the commendation she had won, as she listened to Indu's prattle...housekeeper! If Jai had seen this he would be ever so great-full to Anita for making his property look so fy-ine...gushed Indu, and oo dee-ar look what I am about...of course you and Rick will come to drinks with us tonight, Jai will be 'so' pleased...but Indu, listen, wait, will you listen... Rick isn't in town. Not in town? Where is he, interrogated Indu. Touring Murshidabad. Again? And Indu let out a giggle, Murshidabad...oo dee-ar... poor Rick, how can you let your bee-you- tiful hubby get so crushed, you really must get him to say no to his boss now and then or let Jai say it for him. And so saying Indu breezed out into her limo.

It was the night he returned Annie thought of it...and joked about Murshidabad to Rick. But he came upon her like he had the other day; jobs, they grow upon trees hunh, don't they? All you women do is complain, want want want, enough is never enough, here we slave to



keep home fires burning and all you do is complain...change my job Indu says, well tell her she can find me one!

Wretched he looked, dust over his suit and that lovely black hair.... covered Annie with guilt again, wretched guilt for making him provide for her, for not being rich enough.... for not being... Indu!



EVEN when the telephone rang Annie wouldn't get up. There was this heaviness that crawled all over her, and killed her sound, cursing that she was here, nowhere could she crawl out of this dependency.



RICK liked the office he said, Air-conditioned and they served nice coffee in bone china cups, he also liked that he only toured Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and was asked, actually told, to host parties. Of course he knew everyone there was to know in town, and he loved the way the liveried chauffeur drove the Contessa. Frequently Anita wasn't well or wanted to look into Shelley's tests or look up her parents when Ma's blood pressure was acting up and quite gently then Rick would say if she couldn't go out it was alright and..oh.. by the way he had to pick up Indu for the party as Jai was in Dubai..and what should he tell Indu...?

When he threw that first party at the guest house it really was quite simple organising it all, and Anita saved him a lot of money by doing the desserts herself and she really had been quite excited having left Shelley at her mother's in the afternoon discussing with her each detail of the menu she had planned... quite certain she was it was like old times when she was an ITC wallah's wife. And when it was done Indu... yes Indu had come and cooed... and

she had seen how Indu intimately slipped her hand across Rick's waist, and how his hand remained draped carelessly upon her bare shoulders, and she waited vainly for his praise, the way he had before... and at the end of the party Indu said, smiling into Rick's eyes.... splendid Annie, splendid, but you really shouldn't have bothered, you could've called the company caterers instead... and smiled so condescendingly... that Annie felt an uncontrollable rage within her... which of course Rick never guessed at, or understood that night when she explained to him why they mustn't, couldn't stay in the flat any longer.

And the next time when a dinner was planned he didn't tell her but called company caterers who in a jiffy prepared what had taken Anita fifteen years to master, mousses and salads, and she gauchely stood expectantly at the door to greet guests, half of whom she had never seen or wanted to know, and found them smiling inanely at her but moving straight to Indu, yes Indu in her pearls and diamonds standing across from Rick, where he had already drunk four pegs of the best whisky and she wondered if she daintily stepped out of the room, would they even notice her departure?



SHELLEY is back at the school next to Annie's mum's house and Annie gets up in the mornings and gets her ready. She stands by the bus stop playing 'I Spy' with Shelley till the driver hoots impatiently and Shelley climbs in. Sometimes Shelley asks why Daddy doesn't come home anymore, sometimes she looks at her mother's strange pale face and asks why she has headaches that god won't take away?

Ah dahlings, but Anita isn't... Anita anymore.

But five women... did I say five? □

Parting

*Our tear-blurred eyes
met for a second
as the doors
of the operation theatre
slammed on me.*

*I was listening to your heart
pounding inside me.
Time seemed to have
closed its wings.
The long corridor was too short
for my restless feet.*

*It's too bad to let
one's imagination run riot
especially when
one is in a hospital.
But as you know, my dear,
I can't help it.*

*My heart, an Orphean lyre,
was besseching the Licensed Killers
for my Eurydice.
Anyone who saw me
must have thought
I was praying.
Anyhow, my dear,
I wouldn't be
as careless as Orpheus.*

— P. Raja