

Wedding Day Bliss

From Tales of Grandpa Eli



Eli and Joe roared into the village of Pipri in a cloud of dust. Children dropped whatever they were doing and chased the bike down the unpaved dusty road. Chickens and ducks scattered before them and dogs joined the children, mingling their barks with the excited childish voices. Eli and Joe had dressed in khaki clothes since they expected to be covered with dust. The village elders however mistook them for policemen and ran into their houses and shut the doors. The houses had no numbers and the streets bore no names. The two boys rode around the entire village twice before they decided to ask for directions. Joe remained with the bike while Eli knocked on one of the doors. He had to knock for some time and shout at the top of his voice before a middle aged man opened the door a crack and said, "We don't know anything. Go make your enquiries somewhere else."

"You don't know where the Kandlekar house is?" he asked. "We have come from Jwalanagar for the wedding this evening."

"Why are you wearing khaki and riding a motorcycle?" he man asked. The door opened a tiny bit wider.

"What colour is better than khaki in dusty streets?" Eli asked.

This rhetorical question needed no answer. The man stepped out of his house and gave the needed directions. He pointed in the general direction of the house and asked them to hurry. "You have only half an hour to get ready. We will see you at the synagogue."

Eli and Joe had to bathe in the village square at what they were informed was the only well in the area of two square miles. They had to draw water in buckets and then wrap cotton towels around their waists and squat on a flat stone

before they could wash the dust and dirt of the journey off their bodies. The village people passed without a glance in their direction. This was a comedown for the two show-offs who considered themselves handsome examples of male beauty. They did not realize that a bather at a well was a common sight that no considerate person would stare at. For the girls it was a question of modesty too. Eli and Joe took their indifference as a personal affront.

"We must teach these ignorant villagers a lesson," Joe said. "Just imagine! They cannot appreciate fine city lads like us."

"Boors," Eli agreed. "They are absolute *jungles* (a word used in Hindi to describe a person with no manners, or respect). We will have to educate them a little, show them a bit of culture before we leave."

Joe nodded.

The wedding ceremony was exactly like the weddings in Jwalanagar. The bride was dressed in white and her head was covered with a white veil. She held a bouquet of white Easter Lilies. Two young bridesmaids dressed in pink frocks followed her. They held the end of the veil to prevent it from dragging on the floor. The entire village attended the wedding. The women's section upstairs held women from different faiths along with the Jewish ones. One traditional Hindu woman had covered her face with the pallo of her sari in the form of a *ghoonghat* out of respect for her father-in-law and elder brother-in-law who sat below with bright orange pugrees on their heads. A couple of Muslim women were in burkhas with the veils thrown back since they were among women and the men were not supposed to turn around to stare at the women's section. Eli saw all this and muttered "Boors," once again. According to Bene Israel tradition, weddings are the time when

families sit together in the synagogue. Segregation of the sexes is for other times devoted to prayer. Eli decided that the villagers were living in the Stone Age. There were women and children in the men's section too but Eli noticed them only after a young girl behind him said, "Proud city peacocks. They want to dance and swagger without realizing that they have the ugliest legs among all the birds. The tail they are so proud of is the source of their ruin. It hangs low from the branch they think they are safe on and the tiger jumps and catches them by it."

Eli was stung. He turned around in anger and saw a girl dressed in a mauve salwar and kameez. The muslin dupatta was drawn over her head out of respect for the holy place they were in. She was not beautiful but her face showed character and determination. She turned to another girl beside her and whispered something into her ear. Eli was sure she was making fun of him. He turned around and met his mother's eyes. He realized that she had heard and was laughing at him too. "Met somebody who will not stand your nonsense?" she asked. She whispered but joy at his discomfort was palpable in her soft words.

After a simple dinner of rice, mutton curry, potatoes and a vegetable salad, that was served to the entire village, the bride and groom were placed in a small horse-drawn cart and taken around the village streets. Many people carried lanterns so the procession was a spot of light and noise in the dark village streets. A man with a drum preceded them and women followed singing wedding songs. "Can't they have a decent band and prevent this screeching?" Eli said to Joe in a loud voice. He really did not care who heard. He wanted the villagers to know what he thought about them. "Let's hear the sheheri babu, the man from the city sing," a girl's voice announced. Eli did not see the face of the girl who said this but he was sure that it was the girl who

had worn a mauve salwar and kameez in the synagogue. The women's shapes around him were all sari clad. It was too dark to make out the features of people who stood at some distance.

"Come on. Sing us a song from the city," a few voices cried out.

Eli beat a hasty retreat. He knew that he had a terrible voice and could not carry a tune. Singing was the surest way of getting people to ridicule him. He grabbed Joe's hand. "Let's go to bed. I've had enough," he said.

At the house, the boys discovered that they had to sleep on the floor in a large room that had been divided by a wooden partition. The women would sleep on one side and the men on the other. It was hot and mosquitoes kept whining around their ears. Eli could not sleep. The village had no electricity so there were no fans hanging from the ceiling like the ones he had grown accustomed to in Jwalanagar. Joe found a palm-leaf fan and used it to fan himself. Eli tore a piece of cardboard from a box in which some sweetmeats had been kept before the reception. A smell of ghee mixed with *rose water* wafted past his nostrils with every wave of this primitive fan. "Let's tell a few jokes," Joe suggested.

"Speak in English," Eli suggested. "I know what kind of jokes you tell and the villagers do not understand English."

They started with rather innocent jokes before they graduated to ones of the rowdier kind. As time passed, the things they said became filthier and filthier. Around three o'clock in the morning a sweet, feminine voice floated over the wooden partition. "Will you gentlemen please go to sleep and allow us to sleep too," it requested in perfect English. Eli was shocked and ashamed. "Good night boys," he said and covered his head with a sheet in spite of the heat.

He made up his mind to leave early next morning before he saw anybody else. He could not bear to think that the women had understood every word of what he had said. He had fallen to a particularly low level and said horrible things about women. He could not bear to face them again.

Eli left a note for his parents. He said that he had to report for work on the second shift that day. If he left early he would reach the factory in time. This was a lie but comforted himself that they would never know. Joe asked about the hurry and Eli waited till they were a few miles down the road before he told Joe that he would never be able to face the girl in the mauve salwar kameez again. "I wonder what she thinks about me?" he said.

"You don't have to worry about that. She is used to it. She will understand it as 'the way men are' and not give it a thought."

"How do you know?" Eli asked.

"She is my cousin."

"You bastard!" Eli shouted as he hit Joe across the shoulder. Joe lost control of the motor bike. It careened and they fell into a ditch beside the road. "You did not tell me that she understood English and let me make a complete ass of myself."

"I forgot about her," Joe said. "Her name is Malka. She is an English teacher in a girls' school in Nagpur so we see very little of her. You cannot blame me for not remembering someone I hardly ever see. Now help me to pick this motor bike up and get it on to the road."

This should have been the end of the story but it was not. Three and a half years later the girl came to visit her relatives in Jwalanagar. By this time the motor bike had been sold. Joe had joined a shipping company at Calcutta and gone to sea. He was now considered a 'steady boy.'



Eli was less wild but still as unthinking as before. This came out clearly in the 'Puri Competition' he held. Nobody had given him permission to do so and he had not asked. The competitors did not have to agree to compete. There were no prizes and he had appointed himself the sole judge. In his conceit he considered himself an expert in the puris that Bene Israel women make around Yom Kippur time. This involves a lot of work. The pastry has to be flaky. In the absence of food processors and mixers this means hours of hard work. Some puris are stuffed with choi, which is a mixture of coconut, almonds, raisins and pistachios. Poorer Jews use semolina and raisins for the stuffing. Eli had never made puris but was convinced that the women would love to compete with each other. He was sure of it. It would be a pride and joy for them to be considered the best makers of this Jewish delicacy. Their husbands would praise them because they would be the envy of the entire community.

It is also the custom among the Bene Israel to visit each other before Yom Kippur to ask for forgiveness. After the fast, they visit each other once again. First the families in mourning are visited and then the older people of the community. Puris feature large at this time. The mourners do not make sweets so everybody takes them a few pieces. In the rest of the homes, guests are always offered this delicacy. Eli strutted around from house to house tasting the puris while the women watched him anxiously. He flattered himself that they were waiting for his judgment.

This particular year he arrived at the Penkar house hoping to eat something good. The door was opened by a girl whose face seemed vaguely familiar although he could not remember where he had seen her before.

"How was the fast?" Eli asked Mrs. Penkar and a few of her many children who were around.

"Fine, fine," Mrs. Penkar said. "Meet my cousin's daughter. This is Malka David. This is Eli Jacob Bhonker."

Malka held out a tray with a cup of tea and some fried bhajiya on it. Eli looked surprised.

"No puri this year?" he asked.

"No," Malka said before Mrs. Penkar could say a word.

"That's not true. Little Abie there is eating a puri and a choi one at that."

"Not for you," Malka said. "Have you any idea what your insensitivity and conceit does to people? You go around telling the whole jamaat, the entire community, whose puris you think are the best and then everybody descends on the family like a horde of locusts. We do not want to be a part of whatever competition you have set up in your mind. The Penkars are a poor family. They have saved for



many months in order to give their children special kinds of food during the festivals. Being the best puri maker is a dubious honour. You men do not do any of the work involved and then think you are praising us by giving us more work and more expense. Eat your bhajiya and go home parde likhe, phatphati walle, shehari babu."

Eli flushed scarlet. She had called him the educated city man who owned a motor bike. He realized that she had not only said the truth but that she had seen him at his worst. He drank his tea and ate his bhajiya in an attempt to keep up the appearance of normality. Malka disappeared somewhere inside the house. After a few minutes of small talk he left feeling thoroughly ashamed of himself.

The next day Mrs. Penkar dragged Malka to Eli's house to apologize. She brought a packet containing a few puris as well. Eli was not at home. His aunt from 'next door' was also with his mother at the time. They sat on the floor in verandah with a pile of rice on a cotton durri in front of them. They were removing stones and bits of dirt from the rice that his mother had bought as part of their 'monthly rations.' Mrs. Penkar and Malka picked up brass thalis and began to help with the work.

"I have brought my niece to apologize to

Eli," Mrs. Penkar said.

"This is something new. I am used to having my son apologize to the whole world. He is the one always in trouble," Eli's mother said.

"What happened?" his aunt asked.

"I don't think I should have to say 'sorry' for telling him that he was wrong but I'll do it to please my aunt," Malka said.

"I like your spirit but tell us what happened," his mother asked.

Slowly the whole story came out. "Don't you dare apologize to him. What you said is true. Come on taste my puris now. They are not as good as yours but I am proud of them. Eli shall not receive a single puri from you. He does not deserve it," his mother said. His aunt agreed.

When Mrs. Penkar and Malka left Eli's aunt made a suggestion. "Ruthie," she said. "Why don't we ask for Malka's hand in marriage for our Eli? He has met his match in her. Whenever I scold him and say that some day he will meet his match he answers that when he does he will marry her. This girl will keep him straight and drum some sense into his head."

"I think you are right," his mother replied. "I'll speak to Eli's father tonight and take

him to see the girl tomorrow or the day after."

The result of all this was that Eli's parents liked Malka. The problem was that Malka did not like Eli. It took a lot of persuasion and convincing on the parts of both families to get her to change her mind. Eli was convinced that she would not have him. She had too poor an opinion of him. He was surprised when she agreed. When he got the opportunity he asked her how she could marry him after seeing the worst side of his nature.

"Your conceit and failure to think before you speak will be something I shall have to put up with. It is bad but it is better than the best part of some men I have met. If that is the worst, I have little to fear," she replied.

And a match was made. The rest is family history. ✧

Sophie Judah was born in 1949 in Jabalpur, in Central India, to Bene Israel parents. In 1972 she moved to Israel where she later studied English Literature at the Bar-Ilan University. In 2007, she published a collection of short stories, *Dropped from Heaven*, that chronicles life in a mythical Indian town, Jwalanagar, which is not unlike the Jabalpur of her youth.