

## THE BOUGAINVILLEA TREE

Mrs Khan started preparing early that year. Everything had to be perfect. She pulled out the pile of Good Housekeeping issues she'd kept through the years for occasions. Guests always inspired her to great lengths. The numbers of guests for Christmas lunch had dwindled over the years. This year it was just the two of them on the invitation list. Her and Moses.

As she paged through magazines she made notes. In the end she selected beef consommé soup for the starter, succulent roast duckling as the main and tipsy brandy tart with whipped cream for pudding. The English knew how to do Christmas Lunch. Moses took great pleasure in his food and enjoyed a glass of wine.

The previous year she had made the mistake of inviting Pudmilla. Pudmilla had left in a flurry of indignant saffron-yellow, spewing out hurtful unladylike things when she understood Moses was also a guest. They had not let the unpleasantness spoil their meal.

She decided to wear her carmine red sari with the emerald green border in honour of Christmas. She smiled to herself as she wrapped herself in the cocoon of silk, remembering a time when she left her stomach bare. Moses arrived early, wearing dark trousers and a freshly-starched white shirt and carrying a brown paper bag. He climbed the veranda steps slowly, leaning on a walking stick, taking a rest on each wide step, his breathing laboured. She stood on the top step and suffered; she must restrain herself from helping; Moses would not want her to remember him as needing her assistance.

After dinner they exchanged gifts. She insisted he go first. When he lifted the gentleman's hat onto his head with gallant trembling gesture she clapped in delight. Hers was a dark rooted shape Moses had whittled to life with his failing fingers. She held his parting gift in her hands; a carving of the bougainvillea tree. It made her want to cry.

"Thank you, Moses. I shall cherish it forever. Shall we take our sherry on the veranda?"

The bougainvillea tree was in full controlled flower. Moses had pampered the tree like a baby, pruning it into shape every 6 – 8 weeks each summer, encouraging new shoots to make the clusters of deep pink bracts in time for a spectacular annual Christmas display.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" she said. "All those years of looking after it... When did we plant it, Moses?"

"That was 1981, the year I started here."

"Is it that long Moses? It seems like just the other day."

"It will need cutting when I am gone."

"I think I will just let it go wild next Christmas."