



STORY

Devaki

○ Sangeeta Bhargava

She had soon adjusted to life in the village. It had moved happily enough until her son Anurag turned five and started attending the village school. There was just one primary school in the entire village. The children there were unruly and the teachers always looked harassed and weary.

One day, as she watched Anurag idling his time playing *gilli-conda* with Ramu, Devaki's mind was made up. Anurag had no future in Madanpur, she decided. She would send him to a boarding school in Delhi.

Anurag's father had been doubtful. "He might become wayward, staying away from home."

"Well, he's not going to become an officer, playing on the streets all day, that's for sure," Devaki retorted.

Anurag's father had reluctantly agreed.

The first time Anurag came back from the hostel for his holidays, Devaki noticed a change in him. He had stopped making a fuss about his food. On the contrary, he had devoured it all hungrily. She could see that he was still hungry, but felt embarrassed to ask his own mother for more! She had quietly placed a couple of chapattis on his plate and refilled his bowls with curry and *raita*, to which he had whispered a thank you. Devaki had lovingly patted his head. She got a strange satisfaction watching him lick his fingers.

He had not wanted to go back to school after the holidays and had clung to her, making the parting even more painful. With a pang she had wondered if she was doing the right thing in sending him away. But she saw no future for him in Madanpur.

That was the last time that he cried at the time of leaving. His face would sometimes crumple up and she could see that he was making an effort to hold back the tears, but hold them back, he did.

Initially, his letters had arrived every Saturday with clockwork regularity, written in a neat hand on lined paper. They had to copy it from the board during letter-writing period every Monday, she had learned, sitting self-consciously in the meticulously tidy school parlour...

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"Madam, should we go home or to *baba's* school first?" the driver had asked Devaki.

"No no. Let's go to Anu's school first. We'll go to my parents' house later."

Devaki could barely contain her excitement. She was tired and worn out by the long journey, but it vanished as the pointed steeples of Anurag's school came into view. She hastily gathered her hair and tied it into a bun as the car came to a halt.

Devaki and Anurag sat quietly in the school parlour. "I have brought two crates of ripe mangoes from our orchard for you and your friends as well as some pure *ghee* and pickle."

Anurag, for some reason seemed embarrassed. Averting her gaze he said, "Ma, next time ask me before bringing anything to school."

"But you love them," Devaki protested. She had expected him to be pleased. "Every summer you squat on the *chatai* in the courtyard and polish off as many as a dozen of them in one go?"

"Damru!"

"Yes *memsahib*?" Damru rushed over to Devaki, his *gamchha* in his hands.

"Tell the *khaansama* that I will make the *kheer* myself. And tell him not to overcook the rice..."

"Yes *memsahib*," grinned Damru. "I know Anurag *baba* doesn't like his rice to go all soft and squishy."

"Yes, go now."

Devaki now turned to Suman, who was adjusting the cutlery on the dining table. "Suman, get that duster and come with me. I want to make sure Anu's room is spick and span. You know how finicky he is."

"Yes *memsahib*."

Devaki was excited. Her son was coming from the States after five long years. She simply could not wait to see him again. She was sure that he must have lost some weight. She would pull his ears and chide him for not taking good care of himself.

She was brimming with questions. Questions about his life in America, about his friends, his classmates, about America itself. She had not set foot outside her village in the last five years, let alone travel abroad. Her childhood had been spent in a small home in Delhi. Unlike some of her cousins, she had been fortunate enough to go to school up to the tenth grade. Soon after her board exams, she had been married into a progressive Choudhari family that lived in the village of Madanpur.

“But ma, nobody brings such things to school.” Seeing his mother’s sullen face, he fell silent. They said very little after that. Devaki looked at her son and then looked around. He was neatly dressed in a white shirt, grey trousers and the maroon school blazer.

The parlour had wall-to-wall carpets. The settees and armchairs were neatly arranged around a coffee table. There was a cross on the opposite wall and a painting of some angels and cherubs on the adjoining wall. Just below the painting stood a piano. Devaki realised with a sense of horror that her immaculately dressed child fitted in very well with the background.

She, in her rumpled up *sari*, creased from the journey and her untidy bun, looked conspicuously out of place. Besides, the *sindoor* in her hair, the huge *kumkum bindi* on her forehead, the red and green bangles and the shiny toe rings, gave her a decidedly rustic look that set her apart from the other mothers present in the room.

Next time she must remember to get dressed before coming here, she told herself. But then she had been so excited about seeing her child again that she had simply not bothered...

Devaki sighed. Life had become one long wait after she had sent her child to boarding school. She had spent twelve years of her life, waiting for his letters every Saturday and waiting for him every Christmas and summer holiday, when she would prepare all his favourite meals and snacks. Each time he left for school, she felt he was moving further away from her. The house would go empty and quiet without him. She would spend hours in his room, straightening his sheets, talking to his photograph, hugging his pillow and touching all his prized possessions.

Once when he was home for Christmas, Devaki went to his room. He lay on his tummy, feet in the air, reading a book. “Anu, your Sudha aunty was telling me that a lot of bullying goes on in boarding schools?”

“Oh, ma, don’t worry about all that.”

“Nobody has been bullying you, no?”

“Ma, I am in class seven. Don’t you think it’s a little too late for you to be asking these questions?” he replied brusquely, and then went back to his book.

Devaki had spent a sleepless night wondering if Anurag had indeed been bullied when he was little. What if the older boys had made him, Anurag Choudhari, the *zamindar*’s son, polish their shoes and run errands for them? What if they had teased and taunted him and called him names? Maybe that was the reason why he had clung to her and refused to go back to school. But as Anurag himself had pointed out, it was much too late...

Anurag had been a diligent student and had won several gold and silver medals throughout his school years. He had gone on to do his graduation in commerce from a famous college of economics and commerce in New Delhi. And then he had won a scholarship to do a Ph.D. in America. Her heart had swelled with pride when she had gone to the airport to see him off.

At first his letters came regularly, sometimes even twice a week. They were full of news of life abroad. He wrote about the fast food, the fast cars, the tall glass buildings, the huge expressways and the air that was wonderfully clean. He had taken up a studio apartment on the tenth floor, with a breathtaking view. She would read every one of them again and again, till she knew every word, every comma by heart.

Her letters, on the other hand, were boring and repetitive. Life in Madanpur was slow and easy-going, the heat making the people all the more languid and lazy. So apart from how much milk Lalli was giving or how good the crops were that year, and enquiring about his health, there was not much else to write. Madanpur was one of those villages that were the last to feel the winds of change. The last time that something spectacular had happened, was three years back when television had finally arrived at Madanpur. She had proudly informed Anurag that theirs had been the first home to have it installed.

And then Anurag’s father had died suddenly of lung cancer. His passion for *hookah*, or *gur-guri* as Anurag called it, had cost him his life. She, who had been happy within the confines of her home and kitchen, suddenly found herself the caretaker of her husband’s immense wealth. Somehow, she had managed to take care of the farms and orchards and other ancestral property. But enough. Now that Anurag was coming back home for good, he would take over his father’s properties and affairs and she would finally get some respite.

A horn sounded. Devaki hastily straightened the tablecloth and rushed to the door. She remained rooted to the threshold as a young man stepped out of the car, touched her feet and hugged her. Devaki did not react, but merely stared. The young man, who stood before her, wasn’t the lad she had waved goodbye to at the Indira Gandhi Airport, five years back. He was now a man, a total stranger! His haircut, his slick suede jacket and matching suede shoes, his walk, the way he gesticulated as he spoke, his accent – they had all changed. Devaki was speechless. She forgot all that she had intended to ask him.

Devaki gave Anurag a second helping of *bhindi*. "This year, I am thinking of having a big celebration for Diwali. Ever since your father died two years back, we have not celebrated any festival."

"But ma, I am going back to America next month," said Anurag, as he held out the steel tumbler.

Devaki stopped pouring water into the tumbler and looked at her son. "But I thought you had completed your studies?"

"Yes ma, I have completed my thesis, but now I've been offered a lecturer's job at MIT. It is one of the best universities in America and only a fool would turn down such an offer."

"But the village needs you. 'I need you. I am getting too old to take care of your father's affairs. It was easier when he was alive, but now...' Here she paused and wiped her eyes with the edge of her *pallu*. "If it is teaching that you want to do, you can run the village school."

"Yeah, right. Ma, my friends will laugh at me if I tell them that I am chucking my job at the prestigious MIT to become a village school teacher!"

Devaki turned her back to Anurag. "I'll go and see why it's taking Damru so long to serve the *kheer*," she mumbled and left the room.

Devaki switched on the television, took out her knitting needles and started knitting furiously. So all those dreams of her boy returning home for good were for nothing.

Why, she had even gone so far as to decide to get him married by the end of that year. How many days had she spent planning her only child's wedding? It would be a grand affair, she had decided. The entire path would be covered with red carpets from the gate, right up to the main entrance. And the bride and groom would be served their meal on a silver platter, with silver bowl and spoon, all of which would be prepared

especially for the occasion, with the bride and the groom's names engraved on them. And there would be feasting and dancing for one whole week. The doors of the *kothi* would be open to any and everybody in the village to come and join in the festivities...And soon the lonely mansion would echo with laughter and the pattering of little feet...

Maybe she had been wrong in sending Anurag to a boarding school. If she hadn't sent him there, he would not have won the scholarship to study abroad and then none of this would have happened. She should have kept him at home with her like Ramu's mother had.

Just then Anurag walked into the room. Devaki did not turn around. Anurag tugged at her sari, like he used to do when he was little. "Come on ma, say yes. You know I will never do anything without your *ashirvaad*." Devaki reluctantly said "okay," in a low voice, keeping her eyes glued to the TV. Anurag hugged her from behind. "I love you," he whispered.

Devaki absent-mindedly cleaned her ear with the end of her knitting needle. Anurag's father had scolded her on several occasions, saying that it was dangerous, but whenever disturbed or agitated, she would revert to her old habit, just like a smoker who has recently quit smoking. Maybe Anurag was right. What future did he have here? And his job in America at MIE, or was it MIT? She wasn't sure. Well, it did sound prestigious. She remembered how Anurag's eyes had flashed when he spoke about it - like the tantric's, who lived at the edge of Madanpur, near the crematorium.

Devaki was in the courtyard, knitting a wee little *bootee*. She was lost in her thoughts when somebody cleared his throat. She looked up. It was Ramu, Anurag's childhood friend. "Pranam mausi. I've left the

rice in the pantry. *Bauji* said that we'll deliver the *ghee* and *aata* tomorrow."

Devaki smiled at him. He was a simple country bumpkin who had not yet lost his baby fat. A little too awkward and gawky. He came forward and touched her feet.

"Get two kilos of *laddoos* made with pure *ghee* tomorrow. I have to take them to the temple. I just got a letter from Anu. Alice is in the family way," said Devaki.

"Congratulations, *mausi*. Now you too will be a grandmother."

Devaki smiled softly as she looked at the half-knit *bootee*.

"Okay *mausi*, I'd better be going. My tyre got punctured on the way. I had to literally carry the bike to Heera's shop. Took me over an hour to get there. Then Heera didn't have a spare tyre so it took him two hours to sort out my bike. Mother must be going out of her mind. You know how she worries..."

Devaki shook her head. "You are the father of three kids and you are still scared of your mother?"

Ramu gave an embarrassed grin and shuffled to the door, his cheap muddy slippers making a clicking sound as he walked.

Devaki wiped her brow, put away the unfinished *bootee*, the knitting needles and the balls of wool in their plastic bag and then moved towards the *pooja ghar*. It was getting dark, time for her evening prayers. As she lit a *diya* before the gods, she thought about Devaki, Lord Krishna's mother, after whom she had been named. She too had sent her son away from her for his good. Why were there so many songs in praise of Yashoda's love for Krishna and none in praise of Devaki, she wondered?



The author is a freelance writer based in London.