



By 2040, the year Julia is born, there is only one female birth for every five males. The situation continues to worsen in the second half of the twenty-first century, until by the time Julia is in her teens, the ratio has dropped to one in twenty-five. Scientists around the world scramble to discover what is causing this decline in female births, and to find a remedy. The world is turned upside down by the social changes brought about by the epidemic. This story tells how the surplus men try to adjust to the situation, and how women handle their newfound power, which comes with a high price: severe restrictions on their freedom and safety. After a failed marriage, Julia prospers as a courtesan, a high-status occupation in

the new society. Catherine, Julia's daughter, is abducted as a teenager by religious fundamentalists and her life follows radically different path from that of her mother.

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# JULIA

## Chapter One

*"The worldwide decline in female births is already causing a noticeable decrease in world population," Doctor Simon Livingston of the Social Sciences Department at the University of British Columbia stated at the World Congress on Population in Sidney, Australia last week. Doctor Livingston continued, "Across the world, the average male/female birth ratio is now 5:1", which means that five male babies are born for every female.*

*This trend was first noticed in Vancouver in 2012 when hospitals reported boy babies outnumbered girl babies five to four. It has taken a mere 28 years to reach the current ratio. There is room for guarded optimism, however; the rate of decline has leveled off slightly over the past five years. Scientists in many fields continue to speculate on the reason for this crisis, but no one yet has come up with the cause, or suggested a viable solution. Report in the Vancouver Globe, August, 2040*

Aldina Finisterra stopped playing the piano in the middle of Lennon and McCartney's *Eleanor Rigby*, breaking her husband Raymond's concentration. He looked at her, eyebrows raised.

"Sorry," she said. She put both hands behind her hips and straightened her back.

"What's wrong, love?"

"Nothing. Just a little twinge." She leaned forward and adjusted the score. "Let's try again from beginning of the chorus."

Members of a string quartet, Raymond and Aldina were rehearsing Raymond's new arrangement of the *Revolver Suite* for an impending festival celebrating the centenary of John Lennon's birth. They were rehearsing at home by themselves because of Aldina's advanced pregnancy.

Aldina was a big woman, tall and robust, with warm grey eyes, straw-colored hair, and the complexion of someone who spends a lot of time out of doors. She was wearing a pale blue coatdress of lightweight cotton.

Raymond leaned his cello against the piano and went over to her. “Has she decided to come finally?” The baby was already a week overdue.

“This could be it,” Alda replied. “Trust her to announce her arrival in the middle of a rehearsal.” She put her hands on the keyboard. “Come on, Ray, let’s at least finish Eleanor.”

They continued to play for a few more minutes, but their concentration was off and they finally gave up.

“Maybe that’s what we should call her,” Raymond said as he closed the lid of his cello case. “Eleanor.”

“No, it doesn’t do anything for me.” Aldina put the cover down over the piano keys and stood up. “I’ve got a better idea, how about Julia, after John Lennon’s mother? It’s a nice name.”

“Nice, and appropriate,” Raymond replied. “And she’ll even have a Lennon-McCartney song all her own.” He put his arm around her shoulder and walked her out of the room.

“Are you ready to go to the clinic?”

“Not yet. There’s plenty of time, if the boys are anything to go by. Let’s have some lunch first. I hope you remembered to plug the car in; I’d hate to have the battery die on us halfway there.”

“Of course I did, but I’ll check anyway to ease your mind.”

Their three sons, John, Paul, and David, had gone to stay with their maternal grandmother in Chilliwack until the baby was born and Raymond was on leave from his day job as a landscaper with the city parks board.

About four hours after the first twinge, Raymond unplugged the car and drove Aldina to the Arbutus Park Health Cooperative, a family health clinic in Kitsilano, where the baby would be born.

The clinic was a full city-block of converted townhouses. The site of the Arbutus Park Co-op had been purchased five years earlier. Plummeting housing prices tied to the population decline made such projects much easier to finance. It was jointly owned by the co-op members—mostly healthcare recipients—and the group of gay healthcare practitioners that ran it. The staff included just about every field of healthcare professional from lab technicians to surgeons. Some of

the townhouses had been joined together to form larger units, and the insides of most of them had been gutted and fitted for a variety of purposes. Parts of central courtyard had been glassed over and turned into an atrium, which, with plants in containers and casual seating, provided a pleasant area for convalescents and patients waiting for treatment.

Many low-risk births and surgical procedures took place in small clinics run as co-ops. They had a warmer, homier atmosphere than hospitals, which made their patients more comfortable and less anxious. They had the advantage of being able to provide healthcare at cost.

Raymond parked the car in the parking area under the buildings. He helped Aldina climb out and followed her up the stairs that led to the atrium. They went straight to the cluster of units that housed the maternity unit.

Aldina had chosen to have a water birth. When she reached the third stage of labor, the midwife, Jeff, and his assistant helped her down into the warm pool, which was about three meters in diameter. Both Jeff and Sam, the nurse, climbed into the pool with her, wearing white shorts. Raymond sat on the edge with his legs dangling in the water, supporting Aldina's head.

Julia made her appearance at seven fourteen p.m., although, as Jeff noted, her black hair had been in evidence for several minutes ahead of the rest of her.

"Here she is, Alda," Jeff said, handing her the towel wrapped infant. "A perfect little girl."

As often happened when a girl was born, there was a reporter waiting for them when they left the delivery suite. Raymond groaned.

"Be thankful there's only one," Jeff murmured, patting Aldina's arm. "Let him take a picture, then I'll get rid of him."

"How are you feeling, Ms Finisterra?" the reporter asked.

"Tired," she replied.

"Mind if I get a picture of the baby for the *Vancouver Globe*?"

"If you must, but make it quick. My wife needs to rest."

"What are you going to call her?"

"Julia." Raymond and Aldina replied simultaneously.

As soon as the reporter had snapped a picture, Raymond pushed Aldina's recliner through a door and nudged it shut, leaving Jeff to answer questions."

When her brothers came home from Chilliwack on Julia's third day, they watched their mother's every move as she tended the baby, fascinated by the little girl. At first, they took an inordinate amount of interest in the novelty of their baby sister, but their natural exuberance took over after a few days and they started going out again with their friends, relating all they had learned about this mysterious creature, the girl.

During her toddling years, Julia was both protected by her brothers and exploited when they subjected her to undignified exhibitions of her female attributes for their friends.

However, she took the curiosity of the boys in her stride, soon learning that these events would usually be rewarded by some sort of treat. She seemed to know instinctively it would be inappropriate to tell their parents. It wasn't that she was a pushover; she soon came to realize that she could usually turn the situation to her advantage. In addition, she was quite capable of digging her heels in when things didn't go her way.

It started when she was two. She was playing in the sand box, shoveling sand into one of David's toy trucks, when her second oldest brother John joined her, accompanied by his friend Victor.

"Hey, Julia, Want an ice cream?" John asked. He was a sturdy six-year-old with reddish brown hair and blue eyes.

She looked up from her pile of dirt. "I cweam." She dropped the spade and stood up, looking at her brother expectantly.

"Yeah, but first I want you to do something for me." He took her hand and led her into the shrubbery at the end of the garden, then kneeling down in front of her, undid her diaper.

His friend, Vic crowded behind him, looking over his shoulder. "I can't see anything," he complained. "Make her lie down."

"Why don't you lie down so I can put your diaper back on? Then we can go get some ice cream," John said.

Once the diaper was back in place, John picked her up. "Good girl."

"I cweam," she replied.

Julia was an attractive child with creamy skin, thick dark hair, and soulful brown eyes. She got her coloring from her father, and she had inherited her mother's inner strength.

Julia started school when she was four. There were twenty-two boys in her class and eight girls, which was about average ratio in that particular school. Although she attended public school, Julia was never allowed to go anywhere without an escort for protection. It had been apparent for years that girls and women had to be safeguarded, not only from unwanted attention, but also from the threat of abduction and assault.

## Chapter Two

*First boy: I bet you don't know what's over that wall.*

*Second boy: I do so... What?*

*First boy: It's the girls' school.*

*Second boy: Wow! Have you ever met a girl?*

*First boy: Uh, uh. My brother has, though.*

*Overheard conversation.*

What's wrong, Farida?" Julia asked her friend. Farida had been moody and downcast for several days, sometimes lashing out at Julia for no apparent reason. This time, she responded by bursting into tears. She sobbed for a few moments, her shoulders heaving, while Julia comforted her by patting her back. Finally, she stopped and looked at Julia, her eyes still swimming in tears.

"My father's going sell me," she announced.

"What?" Eleven year-old Julia was horrified. She'd heard of things like that happening in far-away places, but not in Canada. "Are you serious? People can't sell people, not even their fathers."

"Well he is," Farida asserted.

"Who's he selling you to?"

"Some rich guy at the temple. He's some sort of big shot there. My mom says he's got about a zillion sons and he's trying to find wives for them. He wants me to marry the oldest."

"Ugh, yuk! You're not serious. You aren't old enough to get married."

"But it's true," Farida insisted.

"When?"

"I don't know. Soon, though."

Julia was beginning to believe Farida. After she considered it for a moment, the idea began to take on a certain glamour.

"Do you have to go live with him, when you're married?"

"Of course."

“Will you have to ... you know ... like, sleep with him?” Julia squirmed uncomfortably at the idea.

“Not ‘til I’m old enough.”

“When will that be?” Julia didn’t know whether to feel sorry for her friend or envy her. It sounded so grown-up.

“My mom said when my periods start.”

“God, that’s awful. How old is this guy? What’s he like?”

“He’s about nineteen. I haven’t met him. I hope he’s not a fat little man like his father.”

“God, that’s so old.” Julia sat, pensive, for a moment, trying to put herself in Farida’s place. The idea gave her a shivery feeling. She couldn’t imagine marrying someone she had never met, but assumed it was customary in Farida’s culture.

“I’ll run away,” Farida said miserably, but without much conviction.

“You can’t do that,” Julia replied, “Where would you go?”

“I don’t know. I’ll think of something.”

“What are you two whispering about?” Julia’s youngest brother, David, was coming across the lawn from the house.

“Hey, guess what?” Julia jumped excitedly. “Farida’s ...”

“Don’t tell anybody,” Farida interrupted. “It’s a secret.”

Since the public schools had separated boys from girls when she was six, Julia attended an all-girls school in a converted mansion on a quiet street in the Shaughnessy area. The school had about a hundred students. The only thing that distinguished it from its neighbors was the high brick wall that surrounded it, and the armed guard inside the gate. The girls were all delivered to and picked up from school in motor vehicles. No one walked.

“I saw him,” Farida said offhandedly the following Monday at school. She told Julia about the events that had taken place the previous Saturday

“What’s he like?”

“He’s okay, I guess, for somebody so old. At least he’s not fat, and he’s taller than his father.” Farida sighed.

“Did he say anything to you?”

“Are you kidding? All he and his brothers did was stare at me, as if I was some sort of dog they were buying. I was so embarrassed.”

“God,” was all Julia could think of in response. She thought for a moment then asked, “Is he good looking?”

“I guess.”

Her mind didn’t dwell on Farida’s problem for long. When she got home that afternoon, she felt a strange atmosphere in the house. Both her parents were home, which was unusual in itself at that time of day. Their friend and fellow musician, Antoine LaSalle was also there. The three grownups were in the sitting room, her parents side-by-side on the sofa, Antoine sitting on the adjacent love seat.

“Come in, Julia. We’ve got something to tell you.”

Julia walked a little way into the room and looked at the three faces, trying to gauge whether or not it was good news. Her father looked as if he was trying to put on a good face. Her mother looked happy, but a little worried, while Antoine, who was about ten years younger than her father was—which made him eight years younger than Aldina—looked happy and nervous.

“What is it?” Julia asked. She went over to her father and leaned against his knees.

He patted her shoulder. “Your mother’s getting married again,” he said.

“But how can she?” Julia protested, feeling as if the ground had opened up under her. She looked up at his face. “What about you, Daddy?”

“It’s all right, angel. We can both be married to her.” He looked over at Antoine.

Julia turned and followed his gaze. Antoine smiled at her and nodded his head. He had a dimple when he smiled. She had to admit he was handsome with his shaggy, ear-length brown hair and blue eyes.

It was her mother’s turn to comment. “You see, dear, there aren’t enough women for all the men in the world, and Antoine is a good friend of both of us.” She looked at both men in turn. “Oh dear, I’m not saying this very well, am I?”

“It’s all right, Alda,” her father said. “What Mommy means is she still loves me, and she loves Antoine as well, so we’re all going to live together.”

“But where will he sleep?” Julia asked, fearful that she might have to give up her room and move in with David.

“That’s another thing we wanted to tell you,” Aldina replied. “We’re going to move to a bigger house.” She smiled at Antoine.

Julia sat on the couch between her parents and thought about this for a while. Her mind was in turmoil, trying to assess the effect all these changes would have on her. She had too many questions and couldn't decide which had priority. Finally, she sighed and looked up at her mother. "Can I be a bridesmaid?"

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Farida Khalsa stared down at her hands. Earlier that morning, her mother and grandmother had carefully painted the backs of both hands with intricate trceries of kohl. She looked at her hands because they had told her she must not raise her eyes during the ceremony. Gold jewelry weighed heavily on her shoulders and wrists. She was wearing a bright pink *langha*, the traditional long tunic, over matching pants with purple and gold-embroidered bands around the ankles. She had wanted to wear red, the traditional color for weddings, but her mother said it was too strong for a little girl. Still it was a pretty garment. A gossamer-light pink veil, embroidered with gold thread, covered her head and draped over her shoulders. Her gaze, kept low, moved around to where her mother and grandmother were standing with the groom's mother and two grandmothers. Most of the women present were her mother's age or older; there was no one Farida's age at all.

She remembered her grandmother's wedding pictures. There had been many girls her grandmother's age, friends, sisters, cousins.

The men started singing the hymn, "*Kita loria kam so Hari pai akhia*", seeking the blessing of God on the ceremony.

She heard her father's soft voice say, "It's time, child."

Her four brothers stepped into place, two on either side of her. Farida was aware of a group of men approaching the front of the temple where she was standing. One of them, she knew, was her bridegroom, but she didn't dare look at him.

She had been introduced to Sarap Gurdwara Singh briefly a few weeks earlier when the final arrangements had been made for the marriage. She had been awed by the tall, slender young man who seemed impossibly old to be marrying someone as young as she was. He was nineteen; she was eleven. However, perhaps he had no more choice than she had. It was an arrangement agreed upon between their fathers.

Farida's mother had wept when she told her daughter about the impending union. "We have no choice, child; Dada's business will fail if he doesn't get the money. Think about your brothers; what will they do if the business goes under?"

“But what will I do? Will I still be able to study? Where will I live?”

This question brought fresh tears to her mother’s eyes. She hugged the little girl. “You’ll have to go and live with your husband’s family, darling, but Dada has asked them to let you use one of their terminals to keep up with your schoolwork.”

“Will I have to sleep with him, like you and Dada?”

“Not right away. Later, when you get older. For the time being, you’ll be like a daughter in the family.” She sniffed and squeezed Farida very hard. “You’re so precious, little Farida.”

The Priest started to intone a hymn from the *Guru Granth*, the Sikh Holy Scripture. Her father took her hand and placed in it the end of a silk scarf, then he moved away from her towards one of the nearby men—Sarap, she realized. Keeping her head down, she glanced through her lashes and saw her father give the other end of the scarf to him, then back away with his palms pressed together. Sarap held onto the scarf.

She had been through several rehearsals of the ceremony with her brother Raj standing in for the groom, so she knew what to do next. She and the groom made obeisance to the *Guru Granth*, and then he draped the scarf over his shoulder, still holding the end, and turned his back to her. The chanting turned to singing and they started to walk around the canopied *Guru Granth*. Her brothers walked beside her.

She became dazed as the long ceremony proceeded, alternating between chanting and singing of hymns, more circling, and then sitting cross-legged on the floor to listen to admonitions from the priest. At last, everyone stood up for the final *Ardas*.

When it was over, they were served the sanctified pudding, and then everyone moved into another room for the wedding feast.

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Julia stood on the sunny lawn beside her father, holding a spray of flowers. Aldina was between Raymond and Antoine facing the minister. It was the first time Julia could remember seeing her mother in a dress. In truth, she couldn’t remember the last time she had worn one herself. Aldina’s dress was ankle-length crêpe in deep teal decorated with tiny lavender floral sprays. Julia had chosen a cream colored, high-waisted gown trimmed with dark green.

The three brothers stood behind their parents, John and David in dark blue suits with matching high-necked shirts, Paul in a white high-buttoned jacket and

pants, his hair freshly shampooed and sweeping in glossy waves over his shoulders.

The ceremony was being held at the home of Antoine's parents. Most of the guests, not surprisingly, were men and boys. Aside from Antoine's mother, Adele, the only other females were Antoine's cousin Gabrielle, her two-year-old daughter Charm, and Aldina's friend Spencer.

The minister opened a leather-bound bible and began to read from a sheet of paper held on the pages.

"We are gathered together in the company of family and friends to celebrate this day the union of Antoine Louis LaSalle with Aldina Marie Finisterra and Raymond Charles English."

He turned to Antoine. "Do you, Antoine, promise to honor, cherish and respect Aldina and Raymond for as long as the union shall last?"

"I do."

"Do you vow to value and protect the children of Aldina and Raymond as if they were your own?"

"I do."

The minister smiled at John, Paul, David, and Julia in turn. "Although this is not part of the ceremony, I would like to add that I hope you young people will welcome Antoine into your family with kindness and respect, and come to regard him as a second father."

Julia nodded earnestly, although she wasn't sure about the father part.

"Good."

Antoine took the ring Raymond was holding and placed it on Aldina's finger, and then she handed her bouquet to Julia and put a matching ring on his. Antoine kissed Aldina and shook hands with Raymond.

After the exchange of vows, the guests began to socialize. Some— children in the lead—went to the marquee in the garden to help themselves to food and drinks from the buffet.

Julia gloriied in the unaccustomed masculine attention—she rarely had the opportunity to meet boys socially—but she was soon brought down to earth when two older boys cornered her while she was searching for a lavatory.

One boy pulled her into a corner, pinning her arms behind her. "Let's see what you've got," other boy said, grabbing her skirt.

“No!” she shrieked at the top of her voice.

“Let her go, you stinking little creeps.” John barged into the room.

“We were only playing,” the boy whined, letting go of Julia’s arms.

Julia ran to John who took her arm. “That was stupid to go wandering off alone,” he said. “Where’s your beeper?”

“I forgot to bring it.”

John sighed and shook his head. “If your legs weren’t screwed on, Julia, you’d be riding in a wheelchair.”

He was still blocking the boys’ escape. He turned to them. “If I see you even looking at her again—well you know she’s got three big brothers and two fathers—so I’ll leave it to your imagination what will happen.”

## Chapter Three

*Geoffrey's twenty-first birthday gift was an hour with a female prostitute. For Geoffrey, a carpenter, this may be the only time in his life he makes love to a woman. Like many working men, Geoffrey will probably get most of his sexual gratification from girlfriends because the cost of female call girls will be out of his reach.*

*Even though the proportion of women choosing the oldest profession is higher than ever in history, there are still far too few to accommodate the male population. This gives these women a unique opportunity, not only to command high fees for their services, but also to occupy prestigious positions in society.*

*"I can pick my clients," twenty-five-year-old Sharley stated in our interview. "And I can choose when I want to work." Sharley admitted to an average income of twenty thousand dollars per month. Sharley lives in a prestigious townhouse complex on the North Shore and entertains some of the leading members of the government and diplomatic community.*

*Excerpt from article in Trend magazine, July 2051.*

After Aldina's marriage to Antoine, the couple went away for a weekend at Harrison Hot Springs. They tried not to make a big deal of the event, hoping that everything would settle into place with as little stress as possible.

Raymond took the two youngest children, Julia and David, by boat up the Burrard Inlet to the top end of Indian Arm, where they went ashore and camped for the night.

The family moved to a larger house in Point Grey a few months after the wedding. It had five bedrooms upstairs and two in the basement, and a wonderful view of English Bay.

Julia had believed when she was younger that the bay was named after her father. It was a big letdown to discover that it had received its name long before he was born. Another of life's little disappointments.

"It's hard to believe that forty years ago this house would have cost over two million," Raymond commented as he unlocked the front door.

"I know," Aldina replied. "My Gran told me that they paid two hundred thousand in 1980 for their little house on West Tenth, and now they'd be lucky to get twenty-five thousand."

The foyer and adjacent living room were two stories high. A staircase with graceful white banister, curved up around one corner to a gallery that faced the entrance and the stained glass window over the front door.

“You boys can have the basement,” Raymond said. “There’s a staircase at the back, off the kitchen.”

John and David jostled each other racing for the kitchen. Paul, off in his own world, had disappeared around the side of the house.

“Where am I going to sleep?” Julia asked.

“Up here,” her mother replied, starting up the stairs.

A short hallway with two doors on either side led back from the gallery. One of the doors stood open, revealing a bathroom. Aldina pushed open the door next to it.

“This will be your room.” It was a small corner room with windows on two sides. The walls were painted a sickly yellow-green color.

“Ugh, I don’t like that color,” Julia cried. “It looks like pea soup.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll have it fixed up for you,” her father said from the doorway. “What color would you like?”

Julia didn’t have to think for long. “Blue, like Mommy’s necklace.”

“That’s turquoise,” Aldina said. “I think that’s a good choice. We can leave the woodwork white, though. Now, let’s see the rest of the house.”

They left Julia’s room and went across the hall. This is Daddy’s room,” Aldina said pushing the door.

“But I thought... Aren’t you and Daddy going to sleep in the same room?”

Raymond cleared his throat, but remained silent.

“Well you see, love, I have two husbands now and it wouldn’t be fair to sleep with one of them all the time.”

Julia frowned. “Couldn’t they both sleep in your room?” she asked.

“I don’t think that would work too well.”

They walked back down the hall to the front of the house.

“It would get a bit crowded with all of us in the same room.” Aldina went into the bedroom that opened off the gallery at the front of the house. “This is going to be my bedroom.”

It was a big, airy room with two large windows overlooking the front garden and two smaller ones on the side. There was a doorway opening into a large dressing room and bathroom to the right of the door.

Julia looked around judiciously, and then turned to her parents. "It looks big enough to me. You could put one bed over there and another here..." She stopped when she saw them smiling at her and shaking their heads.

"Don't worry, sweetie, we'll work it out." Raymond said, putting his arm around her shoulder and drawing her out onto the gallery. "We can put my album covers along here," he added, nodding at the wall.

He was referring to his prized collection of twentieth century rock and roll record album covers, some of which were not only extremely rare, but also quite beautiful: Fleetwood Mac's *Then Play On*, the Beatles' *Rubber Soul*, and the Small Faces cover decorated with the *Ogden's Nut Gone Flake* label.

It took some adjusting, but Julia got used to her mother's new relationship. Such marriages were not officially legal, but plural partnerships were now a fact. It became a case of the law following a recognized customs.

There were other alternatives for men, such as homosexuality. Boys were even encouraged to follow the gay lifestyle, but it is not something that can be forced; it just didn't appeal to many men. Some young men underwent sex-change operations and became "girlfriends". Hormone therapy for males was now covered by the government medical insurance.

However, many young men, having no outlet for their sex drive and not having the resources to channel their feelings into constructive activities, turned to violence. Assaults on women and the men associated with them became commonplace. Riots and vandalism increased, in spite of government support of sports. Indeed, many sporting events ended in riots. In the spring of 2053, after a demolition derby in Surrey, twelve people were killed, including two of the contestants, and more than twenty were injured badly enough to require hospitalization.

Law enforcement officials were often just as frustrated as the rioters were and frequently chose not to use their pacifying equipment, but waded into the melees with batons flying, gratified by the opportunity to bust some heads.

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"What are you doing, girl?"

Farida jumped. She hadn't heard her mother-in-law enter. "My history assignment," she replied.

“You spend too much time on that computer. From now on, you’ll only use it after you’ve finished your work.”

Tears filled Farida’s eyes. She turned the terminal off and stood up meekly.

“There’s a big pile of laundry to be folded,” Sarap’s mother said, “and when you’ve finished that, you can start preparing the vegetables for dinner. There’s a lot of work with all these men; I can’t do everything myself.”

*How did you manage before you got me to be your slave?* Farida thought.

“Why can’t they help with the work?” she said. Her brothers helped their mother sometimes.

Sarap’s mother glared at her. “They are men. Housework is not for men to do.”

Farida went down to the laundry room in the basement of the house. She was only allowed down there when the male family members were away at school or work. Apart from the laundry facilities and utility room, this was their domain, where they slept and had their recreation. Even Sarap, her husband, slept down here. Farida slept in a small room off the kitchen on the main floor. Her parents-in-law also had their suite on the main floor.

Sometimes, when the boys were at school and her mother-in-law busy, Farida would sneak into Sarap’s room and look at his posters of biological specimens under electron microscopy. His room was always neat, bed made, his microscope and books neatly lined up on the desk beside trays of slides.

With a sigh, she opened the door of the industrial-size dryer and pulled out a pile of garments: men’s shirts, men’s pants, men’s underwear, their socks and turban cloths, and at the bottom, an afterthought, her own nightgown.

Farida wasn’t mistreated by her new family, not enough to complain about, and she could understand her mother-in-law’s need for help with the big household; it just wasn’t such a warm, loving home as her own had been.

She was allowed to go home, to what she thought of as her own house, after temple every week and stay for supper, then her father drove her back to her husband’s house. She treasured those evenings, which somehow helped her get through the rest of the week.

Sarap talked to her sometimes, shyly asking her how things were going, what she was studying, but both were too introverted to talk about anything deeper. Farida always felt like a child when they were together. Sarap was studying bio-genetics at the University of British Columbia. She wanted to ask him to tell her about it, but was too timid.

She didn't like Sarap's second brother, Rajinder. He was smaller than Sarap, with thick eyebrows. Whenever they met, he'd give her a sly look, filled with innuendo, that made her skin crawl, and more than once, when they were forced to pass closely, he'd brushed against her body, keeping the contact longer than necessary. She tried to avoid Rajinder as much as possible.

The other five brothers, ranging in ages from seven to fifteen, varied in their attitude to her. The younger ones were somewhat in awe of her. She was probably one of the few girls they had ever met. The older three, teenagers in high school, teased her in a friendly way when no one was around, but were respectful when their parents or Sarap were present.

The brother with whom she got along best was ten year-old Keval. He was a thoughtful boy—some might call him dreamy—whose face would frequently light up with a bright smile as if he'd just had a wonderful revelation. She helped him with his homework and sometimes they played computer games together. Sarap's mother frowned when she saw them together, enjoying themselves, but she didn't interfere because Sarap seemed to approve.

Farida had been working all day, cleaning, ironing and preparing food for the upcoming festival. She was exhausted. She hadn't been able to get to her schoolwork at all and the year-end exams were starting the following week. Not only did she need to pass, she had to get good marks if she wanted to get into the fast track to university.

She gave her hair a few final, weary strokes and put the brush down, and then she climbed into bed and picked up the book reader. Before she had read more than a couple of lines, the words started to blur and shimmer through tears. She put the reader down and brushed her hand against the lamp to turn it off, then curled up and let herself go. Fearing someone would hear her sobs, she pulled the covers over her head. She was so homesick and anxious, wondering whether she would be able to finish her education.

The floor creaked and the room was illuminated by the door opening. Startled, Farida wiped her eyes and turned to face the light. She saw a tall slender figure silhouetted against the kitchen light.

"What's the matter, little butterfly? I was getting some water and I heard you crying." It was Sarap. He came over to the bed and sat on the edge.

"I-I'm just tired," Farida stammered. Her heart thumped in her chest. It was the first time he'd come to her bedroom.

Sarap put his arms around her and drew her onto his lap. She stiffened with fright, and then tried to relax. He was her husband, but she had hoped to have a few more years before 'that' started.

He must have sensed her reaction because he pressed her against his chest like a baby and began to smooth her hair. "Don't be afraid, little Farida; I'm not going to hurt you." His voice was soothing; the tone one would use to calm a child. "I'm sorry you're not happy. Tell me what's bothering you?"

She relaxed a little more. This was the way her father used to hold her when she was little. "Sarap," she said hesitantly, "Will I be able to go to university when I get older?"

He pulled back and looked at her face. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes. I want to be a scientist like you."

Sarap looked surprised. Perhaps this was the first time he had realized that this girl, his wife, was a person in her own right.

"Let me ask you something. Is there any other reason you'd like to be a scientist, apart from my interest in science?"

Farida moved off her husband's lap back onto the bed while she thought about the question. Dare she admit her secret fantasy of being the person who discovered the solution to the genetic mystery that plagued the world?

"I want to work on genetics to help find a way to make more girls. If ... I mean, the more people working on it, the better ... you know ... the chances of somebody discovering something."

"And you'd like to be that person." He smiled at her.

She nodded. "But I really would like to work with you." She thought for a moment, summoning the courage to ask. "Sarap, do you think I could borrow some of your books?"

"You really do want to study genetics. Of course you can borrow some books, love. I'd advise you to start with the biology, though. You will find it easier to follow. It's no good going onto the more advanced stuff before you learn the basics. I'll leave a few on the clothes dryer for you."

He stood up. "Now try to get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning." He pulled the covers over her and then bent and kissed her on the forehead. "Little wife," he whispered as he turned to leave.

She touched her face where he'd kissed her, aware of an unaccustomed warmth in her groin. He's really nice, she thought. Maybe it won't be so bad.

That night, she dreamed she was riding a horse and got the same feeling of warmth and sexual excitement where her body pressed against the saddle.

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