

An excerpt from

Dear Prudence

A novel by Mark Pritchard

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Stella had no idea how she was going to get to the yoga studio by 5 a.m., but she was lucky and found an autocab in time. She grimaced through the jolting ride, wondering how this was possibly helping her injuries; any of the dubious benefits of the yoga would be cancelled out by the travail of getting there.

After painfully getting out of the vehicle, she stood on her crutches in front of Shanthi and Michael's house, trying to make herself walk through the door. Then a tall American came walking down the lane. Even in the pre-dawn murk she recognized Tad.

"Look who's here!" he said in a loud whisper. "Shanthi told me you were coming. Where's your mat? Haven't got one? That's okay, they have extras."

"Why are you whispering?"

"Oh, I guess I don't want to disturb anyone preparing for class. Anyone inside, I mean."

"You guys are scared shitless of Shanthi, aren't you?"

He snorted, turned on his heel and walked into the house, leaving her to handle the door and her crutches on her own.

Doug had been there more than a week and she still hadn't spent any time alone with him, so when he invited her to come along on an interview he was doing for his book, Stella readily agreed. She suggested that Chandrika could cover their classes this once, since she had already done it several times for Chandrika. But Doug said the interview was in the evening, and Chandrika was coming along too. She was the one who had arranged it, through her BPO position.

The interview was with a medical transcriptionist named Neela, at her home. Stella was expecting a tiny two-room apartment but the woman lived with her parents and extended family, including a grandmother, two brothers and a sister, plus other assorted relatives, in a large house -- almost a villa -- in a middle class neighborhood. The roads were paved and the houses were protected by high stone walls. But on the streets there were large piles of garbage at regular intervals, and Doug wondered out loud about them.

"Presently there is a conflict between the BMP and the clan that owns the waste management company, the Pandiks," Chandrika said. "The Pandiks want to reduce the amount of payments to the municipality because Karnataka state is demanding more from them. The BMP vacated their contract and hired another company to pick up the garbage, but the Pandiks threatened them, so no garbage is being collected now."

"When you say a payment, you mean...?" Doug asked.

“Precisely,” Chandrika said.

“Chandrika, you’re such a fount of information,” Doug said. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Oh, you are too kind,” she said in an almost giggly way. Even in the dark, Stella could tell she was smiling. Whatever, Stella thought, they’re adults. Still -- weird.

They reached the house and were ushered inside. After a series of confusing introductions -- with gifts presented by Chandrika as having come from Doug -- and a round of tea and cakes, the interview commenced. Neela was about Stella’s age; she sat, attired in fashionable western clothes, surrounded by her parents, with the grandma in a green sari, staring at Doug through thick glasses.

She performed her medical transcription job at home, Neela said, using the internet to receive digital audio files, listening to them with a headset as she transcribed, and archiving the finished files in a document management system. They would be reviewed and approved by the doctor, while a manager of the transcription company, a joint Indian-American venture, also reviewed the work and gave Neela a quality score.

“Oh, there are many difficulties,” Neela said in answer to a question. “First, of course, all the medical terminology, names of medications, and abbreviations. Then, doctors often dictate while they are eating, so it is hard to understand them. Or they are very sleepy, the interns especially -- a few times I’ve had a doctor actually fall asleep in the middle of the dictation, and I find later that the poor man has been working for two days. But I must carefully listen to the entire tape because it’s imperative not to miss a single word. Or sometimes they begin speaking to a colleague or take a mobile call in the middle of the dictation, and forget to pause the tape, so I must choose when to stop transcribing what’s on the tape and when to start again. And some accents are very hard to understand, like some Chinese people.”

On the other hand, she had a favorite doctor. “Dr. James Vickery from Atlanta, Georgia. He always speaks so clearly, and he has such a warm voice. Sometimes my supervisors ask me to do extra work and I can say no, but to Dr. James Vickery I cannot say no.”

“She works too hard,” the woman’s mother suddenly interjected. “Sometimes ten hours.”

“Sometimes it’s very technical.”

“Do you have medical training?” Doug asked.

“No, I am a licensed architect,” Neela replied. “There is not enough work for all the architecture graduates in India,” she explained, seeing his surprise. “It’s a shame, because so many buildings are in bad repair; they could be replaced with beautiful new ones. We could develop housing for the poor. Unfortunately this has not happened yet.” She looked regretful, perhaps envisioning a design for a new housing project. Then she looked up. “In the meantime, I am happy to have the opportunity to make money without having to leave the house.”

“There is danger to women workers outside,” her father spoke up.

“You mean the --”

“You have read the news reports; let us not speak of them.”

Doug nodded vaguely. “So your daughter helps support the household.”

“If she didn’t spend so much on clothes.”

“It’s my money, papa,” Neela said gently.

“Money, money -- you lack nothing here. There is no reason for you to work at all.”

“No reason for me to get a degree in architecture either,” she said.

“Don’t say that -- education is most important.”

“Maybe you could go to a place where you could work as an architect.” Stella said. “America, or Australia, say. Why not go there?”

Neela looked down, as did her mother and her brother. Her father’s mouth twitched and he seemed to be stifling a sharp retort. Finally he said evenly, “We hope she will raise a family here.”

After a while the conversation turned to her brother, a software engineer. Though he was younger than Neela, he had already worked for a year at a company in California, making more money than his father would his entire career. He was planning on going back as soon as an agency, which made connections between American companies looking for visa-ready programmers amid the glut of Indian engineers, found him a suitably lucrative position. Meanwhile “I am enjoying the fruits of my labors,” he said complacently.

“He goes out every night,” Neela said, partly chiding, partly envious.

Stella brooded in the taxi on the way back to their apartment. “It’s like that woman is trapped in her father’s house,” she said. “And her with a professional degree, having to transcribe some slob’s dictation while he eats a hot dog.”

“*Many* people are working beneath their capacities,” Chandrika said pointedly.

“Of course,” Doug said. “You have an MBA.”

“Finance, actually, not Business Administration,” Chandrika said. “But yes. We all do what we can.”

“I’m not exactly going in for a career correcting people’s accents either,” Stella said. “But at least I’m here -- I wasn’t forced to stay at home. You know what, I’ll bet they’re holding out for a big dowry. That’s what he meant about wanting her to raise a family there. Talk about ‘payments’!”

They bounced along the street in silence for a few minutes, still passing piles of garbage that in some places threatened to bury small cars. Finally Doug said, “One thing I’ve learned as a journalist, you can’t judge people in another culture.”

They were silent for another minute before he added, “You know, I think I stepped in something.”

Chandrika was present for only one morning that week, and it was only coincidental that Stella ran into Chandrika at all. When she left work with a headache immediately after the afternoon class, she was going up the stairs as Chandrika was coming down.

“Oh -- so where have you been?” Stella asked, not really expecting a straight answer.

“BPO business.” Chandrika didn’t even slow down. “But your father asked if you wanted to come to dinner with us on Friday evening.”

“Um, yeah...” Stella said. Her headache was a bad one, and the ride home in the afternoon glare had not improved it. She barely had the presence of mind to ask, “Uh, wait -- uh...”

“Yes?” Chandrika paused at the bottom of the stairs.

What could Stella ask? Are you fucking my father? Are you going to see him now?

Chandrika sniffed with impatience as she waited, and finally Stella said, “Never mind -- we’ll just... go to dinner from work on Friday, huh?”

“Sure.” Then she was gone.

In the apartment there was the strong smell of shampoo, deodorant and perfume, as if Chandrika were going out on a date. It was a far cry from the weeks she had camped out on the couch; Doug's arrival had clearly stimulated something in her.

Even the students noticed. In the Friday afternoon class the women giggled and chattered among themselves. Gleefully aware of the double meaning, they loudly chirped the phrases "Please tell me how *else* I can help you?" and "Let me tell you about our *other* services." Anything for motivation.

At dinner, Chandrika had much to inform Doug. "The encroachments near Bellandur Lake in the east part of the city are commonly flooded during downpours... The storm drains there are filled with garbage being dumped by city workers during the strike by Pandik... Puttenahalli Main Road was filled with slush," she reported, consulting a notepad like a cub reporter.

"Chandrika's becoming a journalist," Doug said.

"Oh, Doug, you should not tease." Stella could swear Chandrika actually batted her eyes. She felt like belching or doing something else utterly juvenile, just to break up the flirtatious mood, but she limited herself to asking them to pass the curry. Chandrika had them dining at the city's top Indian restaurant, or at least the best one that foreigners would be able to handle.

"Did you know there's a whole tier of restaurants and clubs for Indians only?" Stella asked. It was something Richard had described to her. Chandrika wasn't the only one with special information.

She was gratified to see her father's attention waver from Chandrika for a moment. "Really?"

Stella told him about the secret world where doormen turned away non-Indians, including rich Chinese and Japanese, giving the excuse that an establishment was a "private club." In fact it was just an agreement among a small group of businessmen to give their countrymen a place to escape and pretend globalization hadn't happened yet. One club even harked back to the 60s when the USSR was friendly to India, serving Russian vodka and featuring unhealthy-looking cocktail waitresses imported exclusively from Romania and Bulgaria.

"Wow, what a trip," Doug said, clearly interested. Stella continued describing the secret world of global businessmen, and when she ran out of stories Richard had told her, she just started making stuff up. The exclusive clubs, she said, had trained monkeys that would bring your bill, because it was illegal for the Iron Curtain maidens, who were in the country on ersatz student visas, to process payments. One club was decorated just like one in a famous Bollywood movie, and at 11 pm every night, the entire staff staged the film's climactic musical number live, while the monkeys went around collecting tips. Stella got so wrapped up in her own fantasy she almost convinced herself the scenes were real. It was like a *StarryShine* entry.

At some point Doug had realized that at least part of this was a joke. "That sounds like it would go over great in Las Vegas," he said archly. "Bollywood World or something -- could be big."

Chandrika was not amused. "This is not the real India," she complained.

"You mean this is?" Stella said, waving her arms at the Taj Mahal murals and the turban-wearing waiters.

"At least the food is authentic. Maybe a little less spicy," Chandrika allowed.

"Not to mention less salmonella and e-coli," Stella said. "Otherwise, very authentic."

"Girls," Doug said. "Ladies. Please."

Stella worked out an understanding with a certain autocab driver whom she had had the luck to hail outside her apartment building two mornings in a row. The third morning he had been waiting there for her, though she hadn't recognized him. Before she could give the destination, he turned around and said, "Yes, yes -- go Chord Road, yes? Very good." After that he was waiting for her every morning at the same time, 4:45.

It saved her a lot of worry, over both getting a cab in the first place and finding a driver who wouldn't abduct her -- as someone had a call center worker at another company, in a case that had become a statewide scandal -- and she tipped him well. It was only when the city, reacting to the abduction, made all autocab drivers display a plastic license with their names and pictures that she learned what to call him. She called him Nilesh for two weeks before she realized that the Nilesh pictured on the license didn't look anything like her driver.

Her students were amused that Stella had begun taking yoga. After smiling nervously and having a few words with in Kannada with another student, "Angelina" piped up: "Here, it's mostly old aunties and uncles doing yoga. But young people usually aren't interested, unless it's a family business."

"In the U.S., people are convinced it will keep them healthy, which is actually a way of saying, they think it will keep them young," Stella said, "but Americans are kind of crazy that way. Or, I guess, some Americans. Most are pretty unhealthy."

"Yes, like here."

"I don't know about that. In the U.S., it's a billion-dollar business. What's a billion again?" she asked.

"One hundred crore," several students chorused.

"And a million?"

"Ten lakh."

Stella picked up a pile of Xeroxed sheets for a lesson she had personally composed. Once she had learned that Indians ran their personal finances very differently than Americans -- the Indians were unfamiliar with the concept of automatic deposit, shocked at the concept of kiting a check a couple of days before the automatic deposit happened, and awe-struck at the amount of credit card interest most Americans carried -- she went off the syllabus whenever she felt like they needed some background. Today the students were to learn several ways to respond to a customer whose ATM cards had stopped working.

She had just started handing out the worksheets when Chandrika, who hadn't been present for more than a week, breezed into the room. "Well, everyone, I'm sorry, sorry to be late," she said, ignoring Stella. "My BPO work has been very demanding, but here we are again. According to my schedule we should be on Lesson 26, is that correct?"

The class exchanged guilty smiles with Stella. "We're only up to 21," Stella said. "It's my fault, I've been doing practical stuff with them."

"Indeed! Well then, let's turn to lesson 21," Chandrika said smoothly. She flipped through the teacher's workbook, looked down at the lesson, and enunciated: "In the event we get disconnected, please give me your telephone number, starting with the area code."

The class repeated it. "Does everyone know what an area code is?" Stella asked.

"Of course," Chandrika answered pre-emptively, still not looking at Stella. "It's like the city code, like 80 for Bangalore."

"And --" Stella began.

"Let us try it all together," Chandrika ordered. "In the event..."

Stella sighed and sat down. She'd been carrying the teaching load for a month; let Chandrika take over if she wanted.

By the end of the class, however, Chandrika had made a few departures of her own. She was writing increasingly bizarre sentences all over the whiteboard in different colors, making the students repeat them: Did you get another call? Call me if I can help you. Please call anytime. Why haven't you called?

The period ended, and the students, many with mystified looks, filed out.

Stella looked at Chandrika, who stood in the center of the room with strangely bright eyes. "Why haven't you called?" she said. "What's *that* about?"

"Stella," Chandrika said, "the students' accents are truly good. You have clearly been doing a top job."

"Well, thanks, but --"

"Let's go to lunch together, shall we?"

"Together?" Stella echoed. "I guess so. The cafeteria?"

"A place of your choice. We haven't talked in some time, and I want to know how you've achieved such success. With the students."

"Okay, but... You're feeling okay?"

"Of course." Chandrika turned and looked at her for the first time. It was strange to see her with a smile at all, but this smile seemed forced, to say the least.

At lunch, Chandrika began pressing Stella for information about Doug. When had she last seen him? Did he need any assistance from her? Where was he staying, as he had left the Meridién?

He had? It was news to Stella. Men seemed to have the habit of checking out of hotels without informing her. Finally she just asked Chandrika what was going on.

"He's very busy, of course," Chandrika said, looking down at her plate. "It's a lot of work to collect all the material for a book. It's like doing the work of 50 articles, he said."

Chandrika showed up in class for the rest of the week, teaching with the same manic energy. Somehow the BPO meetings seemed to have dried up; Stella wondered how much of her so-called BPO commitment had just been an excuse to hang out with Doug.

He called Stella a couple of days later. He had moved out of the Meridién into a timeshare condo or "serviced apartment." Companies were leasing these condos from the owners -- who were mostly Chinese or American speculators taking advantage of the hotel room shortage and the fact that Bangalore had become one of the most expensive cities to travel to on business -- and renting them out by the week or month. The condo was much nicer than her own apartment and much larger than the room at the Meridién; she wondered why Richard hadn't gone this route instead. Because someone else was paying for it, she told herself.

He had just succeeded, after three weeks, in getting an appointment with the city's development superintendent. It was especially difficult because no one wanted to meet in the middle of the day. The traffic was so bad all day long that it took an hour to go three miles across the city, meaning any offsite meeting could take three or four hours. "I try to set up interviews with these people and they say, yes, but let's talk at 7 a.m., let's talk at 7 p.m. Otherwise, no go."

"They could have meetings on the web," Stella said.

“They could, but bandwidth is a problem. Again: infrastructure. And I didn’t come all the way out here to interview people on the web; I want to see them in their offices. But they often have rules against that, too.”

“Yeah, the security is getting a lot tighter. You should talk to corporate security guys,” she said. “I’d be interested to find out what they say.”

“Oh, I did. They didn’t want to meet in their offices either. The condo has a conference room downstairs where I set up meetings. Anyway, when the meeting with the superintendent came, he was busy filling potholes, so he sent an assistant who was completely clueless,” Doug said.

“But at least some potholes got filled?”

“Prove it. I heard a pothole on Brigade Road swallowed a taxi yesterday.”

Stella picked up a slim newspaper printed in Kannada, the local language -- after more than four months in Bangalore she was, at least, able to distinguish its rounded characters from those of Hindi and other languages. The only English was on the masthead: Slum Times. She asked what it was.

“You’ve seen those vendors in the street? They gave me one by mistake and I hung onto it. Get this, it’s the only local newspaper produced in the local language -- because the poor are the people most likely to be from this area. Everyone else is from somewhere else, so the newspapers are printed in English.”

“So what does it say?” Stella asked.

“Who knows? The interesting thing is that there’s a newspaper for the poor. But Chandrika’s learning the language.”

“Chandrika? She’s taking Kannada?”

“Sure. She started a few weeks ago, she told me. Something to do with her BPO work. She wants to be able to address the local workers.”

“I can’t follow what she’s doing. For a while she said she was on BPO work but it seemed like she was basically just showing you around.”

“She certainly did that. But after a while I needed less of a guide and more -- I needed to do reporting. I found out I’m out of practice. I can’t depend on the official contacts she finds, I need to just go out and talk to people. Now that I know my way around.”

“I think she misses you. She took me to lunch the other day and spent the whole time grilling me as to your whereabouts.”

Doug had been stir-frying something in a pan on the stove as they talked, and now he carried the pan over to the table and scooped chicken and vegetables out onto their plates. He carried the pan back to the stove and returned to the table without saying anything.

Stella said, “Were you guys, uh, you know...”

Doug sat down and took a swig of beer. “Me and her? No -- of course not. Well, I mean... Not that she’s not a perfectly nice woman and all that, but...”

“Nothing was going on?” Stella asked. “Maybe she thought something was -- she seemed kind of desperate to see you again.”

He took a bite of food and chewed, looking a little sheepish. “I was afraid something like that was going on in her mind,” he said. “In fact, that’s why I wanted to back off a little. You know, she confided in me.” Taking bites of food and speaking half the time with his mouth full, Doug told Chandrika’s story.

Coming from a respectable New Delhi family -- her father was a high-level civil servant and her mother was a hospital administrator -- Chandrika was expected to enter into an arranged marriage, just as

her older sister had. But whereas her sister had been paired with a prosperous, if middle-aged, doctor, Chandrika was engaged to a flabby real estate speculator whose first wife had committed suicide. To play for time, she requested only to be allowed to finish college before the wedding. The families thought it modern of them to agree, and after all, Chandrika was studying finance and her skills would enhance the speculator's business.

But Chandrika managed an escape. She got herself a scholarship to a second-rate American college and departed on a student visa. Once in the U.S., she informed her family that she would never return if it meant marrying the objectionable speculator. Then she transferred to UC-Berkeley where she got her degree and a Master's besides. She thought this might convince her family of her worth; if they took her seriously, surely they would never force her to marry someone.

On the contrary, they were even angrier at her -- she was to come home at once. She called their bluff and quickly married a young man from her department at Berkeley, a nerd who'd been mooning after her since she got there. Her family responded to that by disowning her.

Though she didn't love the fellow she'd married, they stayed together long enough for her to get a green card. Then, when she caught him cheating on her, she divorced him. Meanwhile she'd gotten the job at CaliMort. But now she felt betrayed by everyone -- her family, her husband, and when she was passed over for managerial jobs at CaliMort, her employer.

"Wow, that's more than I found out working with her for three years."

"She's looking for something," Doug said. "Maybe a father figure or, I don't know. Maybe just someone who listens."

"I listen," Stella protested.

"Sure you do, honey," Doug said.