



The Henna Wars

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BY ADIBA JAIGIRDAR

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Hani and Ishu's Guide to Fake Dating

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to queer brown girls,
this is for you



content warning

This book contains instances of racism, homophobia, bullying, and a character being outed.





"I donate my truth to you like I'm rich
The truth is love ain't got no off switch"

-Janelle Monáe, "Pynk"





1

I DECIDE TO COME OUT TO MY PARENTS AT SUNNY APU'S engagement party.

Not because of Sunny Apu and her groom, or the buzz of the wedding in the air. And not because everything about a Bengali wedding is so palpably heterosexual that it's almost nauseating.

I decide to come out because of the way Ammu and Abbu look at Sunny Apu, with a mixture of pride and love and longing. It isn't directed at Sunny Apu at all, really; it's directed at the future. At *our* futures, mine and Priti's. I can almost see Ammu and Abbu stitching it together in their heads: Castles in the air, made of deep red wedding saree dreams and lined with thick gold wedding jewelry aspirations.

I've never thought of my parents as traditionalists

before this. I'd seen them as pioneers, people who made things happen even when those things might seem impossible. They'd broken rigid tradition, and have what Bengalis call a "love marriage." Though they've never told us the story, I always imagine a movie-moment meeting, exactly like in a Bollywood movie. Their eyes meet across a crowded room, maybe at a wedding of distant relatives. Ammu's in a saree, Abbu in a sherwani. Suddenly, a song starts in the background. Something romantic, but upbeat.

My parents' "love marriage" is one of the reasons they work so well here, despite the lack of family and support. Without anything, really. They uprooted their lives one day to come to Ireland. To bring *us* here. To give us a better life, they said, even when in some ways they are stuck to the past. To Bangladesh. To everything Bengali custom tells them.

Unfortunately, one of those things is this: a wedding consisting of a bride and a groom.

But my Ammu and Abbu did make it past the customs that told them love before marriage was unacceptable, and that love after marriage was to be hidden in a locked bedroom like a shameful secret. So maybe—just maybe—they can accept this other form of love that blooms in my chest sometimes when I see Deepika Padukone in a Bollywood movie, and *not* when I see her male love interest.

So that is how I spend Sunny Apu's engagement,

trying to construct the perfect coming out moment, and wondering if that even exists. I try to think back to every movie, TV show, and book that I've ever seen or read with gay protagonists. Even gay side characters. Each coming out was tragically painful. And they were all white!

"What are you doing?" Priti asks when she spots me typing on my phone in the midst of the engagement ceremony. Everyone's eyes are turned to the bride- and groom-to-be so I thought this was the moment I could Google "gay happy endings" without someone peering over my shoulder.

I quickly slip the phone into my bag and shoot her a wide-eyed, innocent smile.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

She narrows her eyes like she doesn't believe me, but says no more. She turns back to the bride- and groom-to-be.

I know Priti will try to talk me out of it if I tell her what I'm thinking of doing. But I also know I can't be talked out of it now.

I can't keep living a lie. I have to tell them at one point or another.

And tomorrow is going to be that point.

It's weird, but after I've made my decision I feel like I'm on borrowed time. Like this is my family's last day together and something is about to break open between us. When we're driving home from the engagement party,

it's past midnight. The streetlights cast a strange glow on the road ahead, marred by the bright, full moon in front of us. It's a clear night, for once. Priti is dozing in the backseat beside me. Ammu and Abbu are speaking in a low hum, so I can barely understand what they're saying.

I wish I could bottle this uneventful moment—a flash of time when we're all at peace, together and apart at once—and keep it with me forever.

I wonder if this is what things will be like tomorrow too, after I've told them.

But then the moment's over and we're home and stumbling out of the car. Our churis jingle against each other, sounding too loud and bright in the dead-of-night quiet on the streets.

Inside, I strip my face of all the heavy makeup Priti carefully dabbed onto it just hours before. I slip out of my itchy, uncomfortable salwar kameez and bury myself in my blankets, where I pull up Google again and translate the word *lesbian* into Bengali.

The next morning, Priti flits off to her best friend Ali's house with a smile on her lips. She's promised to tell Ali every detail she can about the engagement party, and the upcoming wedding. With pictures.

There are still a few hours until Abbu has to leave for the restaurant, so it's perfect, really. I take my time making my morning tea, stirring especially slowly and going over

the words I practiced last night. They seem lackluster and silly now.

“Ammu, Abbu, I have something to tell you,” I finally say, trying to breathe normally but somehow forgetting how breathing works.

They’re sitting at the kitchen table with their phones in their hands, Abbu reading the Bengali news, and Ammu scrolling through Facebook—so reading the Auntie news/Bengali gossip.

“Yes, shona?” Abbu says, not bothering to glance up from his phone. At least my momentary breathing amnesia isn’t obvious.

I stumble forward, nearly spilling my tea, and somehow make it to the chair at the top of the table.

“Ammu, Abbu,” I say again. My voice must sound grave because they finally look up, twin frowns on their lips as they take me in, trembling hands and all. I wish all of a sudden that I had spoken to Priti. That I’d allowed her to talk me out of it. I am, after all, only sixteen, and there’s still time. I’ve never had a girlfriend. I’ve never even kissed a girl, only dreamed of it while staring at the cracks on my ceiling.

But we’re already here and my parents are looking at me with expectation in their eyes. There is no turning back. I don’t *want* to turn back.

So I say, “I like women.”

Ammu frowns. “Okay, that’s good, Nishat. You can

help your Khala with the wedding.”

“No, I’m . . .” I try to remember the word for lesbian in Bengali. I *thought* I had committed it to memory, but clearly not. I wish I’d written it on my hand or something. Like a cheat sheet for coming out.

“You know how Sunny Apu is going to marry Abir Bhaiya?” I try again.

Ammu and Abbu nod, both looking equally bewildered by the turn this conversation is taking. I’m right there with them, if I’m being perfectly honest.

“Well, I think in the future I won’t want to marry a boy at all. I think I’ll want to marry a girl instead,” I say lightly, like this is a thought that just popped into my head, not something I’ve spent years agonizing over.

There’s a moment when I’m not sure they understand, but then their eyes widen, and I can see realization settling into them.

I expect something. Anything.

Anger, confusion, fear. A mixture of all of those things, maybe.

But Ammu and Abbu turn to each other instead of me, communicating something through their gaze that I don’t understand at all.

“Okay,” Ammu says after a beat of silence passes. “We understand.”

“You do?”

Ammu's frown and the chill in her voice suggests anything but understanding.

"You can go."

I stand up, though it feels wrong. Like a trap.

The mug of tea burns into my skin as I grab hold of it and carry it upstairs, stealing glances back the whole way up. I'm waiting—hoping—for them to call me back. But there's nothing except silence.



"I told them," I say as soon as Priti slips in the door. It's just past nine o'clock. I don't even give her a chance to breathe.

She blinks at me. "You told who what?"

"Ammu and Abbu. About me. Being a lesbian."

"Oh," she says. Then, "Oh."

"Yeah."

"What did they say?"

"Nothing. They said . . . 'okay, you can go.' And that was it."

"Wait, you actually *told* them?"

"I just said I did, didn't I?"

"I thought maybe . . . you were kidding. Like an April Fool's joke or something."

"It's . . . August."

She rolls her eyes and shuts the bedroom door behind her before flopping onto the bed beside me.

“You okay?”

I shrug. I’ve spent the last few hours trying to figure out exactly that. I’d spent years going through all of the various scenarios of coming out to my parents. None of those scenarios had included *silence*. My parents have always been forthcoming enough about their thoughts and feelings; why is now the moment they choose to shut themselves up?

“Apujan,” Priti says, wrapping her arms around me and resting her chin on my shoulder. “It’ll be okay. They probably just need to think, you know?”

“Yeah.” I want to believe her. I almost do.

To distract me Priti pulls up a movie on Netflix, and the two of us slip under my duvet. Our heads touch lightly as we lean against the headboard. Priti loops her arms through mine. There is something comforting about having her there; I almost forget about the rest of it. The two of us must drift off to sleep because the next thing I remember is blinking my eyes open.

Priti is softly snoring beside me, her face pressed against my arm. I push her off—gently. She groans a little but doesn’t wake up. I sit up, rubbing my eyes. The clock on my phone flashes 1:00 *a.m.* There’s a murmur of voices off somewhere in the distance. That must be what woke me.

I crawl out of bed and push my door open a smidge, letting in the air and the voices of my parents. They're speaking in low, careful voices just loud enough for me to make out.

"Too much freedom and that's what happens. What does it even mean?" Ammu says.

"She's confused, she's probably seen it in the movies, heard her friends talking about it. Let her work it out and she'll come back and change her mind."

"And if she doesn't?"

"She *will*."

"You saw the way she was looking at us. She believes it. She thinks she'll . . . she'll marry a *girl*, like that's normal."

There's a deep sigh and I'm not sure if it's Ammu or Abbu, or what it means, or what I want it to mean.

"What do we even do while she *works it out*?" It's Ammu's voice again, dripping with something akin to disgust.

Tears fight their way up my body, trying to burst out. I choke them down somehow.

"We just act normal," Abbu says. "Like nothing's happened."

Ammu says something else, but it's lower. I can't make out the words.

Abbu says, "We'll talk about it later." And the night descends into silence once more.

I push the door closed. My heart is going a million miles a minute. But before I can even think, even process, Priti flings her arms around me in an embrace. We both stumble backward, making more noise than anyone should at one o'clock in the morning after eavesdropping on their parents' conversation.

"I thought you were asleep."

"I woke up."

"Clearly."

"It'll be okay," she says.

"I'm okay," I say.

But I don't think either of us really believes that.



Thank you for reading the first chapter of *The Henna Wars* by Adiba Jaigirdar.

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