



**FIFTEEN**

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PERERA-HUSSEIN  
PUBLISHING HOUSE



PERERA HUSSEIN PUBLISHING HOUSE  
COLOMBO



Published by the Perera Hussein Publishing House, 2016  
www.pererahussein.com

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ISBN: 978-955-0000-00-0

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Printed by Samayawardhana Printers (Pvt) Ltd.



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For Regi — the heart for Neelan — the soul



# CONTENTS



PEAHEN KICKSBUTT	7
DRAGONFLY SUMMER	21
THE COLOR OF LIFE	30
THE LEGEND OF AYESHAMMA	38
A LETTER IN MY MIND	50
ONE IN A MILLION	54
THE FURTIVE TEAR	59
WAITING	65
WOMEN OF COLOR	69
THE GUN	81
ENCHANTMENT	84
CELIBACY	98
CULTURE SHOCK	105
TRADITIONAL WIFE	110
GUAVA GREEN AND MANGO RIPE: FIELD TRIP MEMORIES	117



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# PEAHEN KICKSBUTT



**H**is mouth moved primly.

Open.

Shut

Open.

Shut.

His words floated out of his mouth and tried to force themselves into my ears. But they could not because I had blocked them. I knew they hovered above me. Waiting. Waiting for the moment when I would slip. Lose concentration. Weaken. And then they would, quick as lightning, viciously descend and begin their assault.

You're too fat.

You should lose weight.

You look old.

Ugly.

Untidy.

Slob.

Pig.

Fat.FAT. **FAT.**

I lolled on the bed. In such a way as to irritate him. I had been married to him for six years then. It is long enough to know such things. Through narrowed slits I looked at him puffing away on the treadmill. Sweat poured down his thick face and his T-shirt clung to his upper body, revealing spreading pools of wetness under his arms. He strode with determination while he panted out the words of hurt.

Then he stopped. His carefully monitored twenty minutes were up. He switched the machine off, toweled down and briskly began to do jumping jacks. Then 200 sit-ups. Then his warmdown. Every day. Same time. Same place.

Today, while he went through all this I munched my way through the bag of Doritos and noisily turned the pages of my magazine, clumsily licking my middle finger before turning each page, hoping to attract his attention. Hoping to irritate him. That seems to be all that I've got now.

He ignored me and walked towards the bathroom. He didn't close the door, and I knew it was on purpose. He likes to pretend that I don't exist. From the bed I had a bird's eye view of him. He stood in front of the mirror wall and leant forward. As close to the mirror as he could get. The six 40-watt light bulbs shone brightly and, reminiscent of Snow White's stepmother's mirror, gave him a message of reassuring vanity. He inspected his closely cropped hair, scrutinizing it for betrayals of gray. Every four weeks he meticulously dyed his hair - Egyptian Ebony Black – the procedure taking place with utmost

secrecy. I had been married to him for a whole year before I knew what was happening behind locked bathroom doors that only revealed splotchy black towels hidden under the vanity unit. Today he doesn't care about me anymore. It's the children now. His appointments with dye take place long after they have gone to bed but he still takes the precaution of locking the bedroom doors. He is, I must say, a cautious man. Sometimes when we do groceries like one big happy family, I have to try hard and keep a straight face when the children come bumping up and draw his attention to the Just for Men dye carton that 'Daddy might need when he gets older!' And Raj gives them a tight little smile and quickly diverts their attention with a wave towards the candy aisle. Children. Aren't they darling?

He was still standing at the mirror now smiling at himself. He practices smiles, you know. I have seen it many times before. First was a carefully calculated smile; it must have been to indicate friendliness. Then next came his version of a warm smile. Still smiling, he ran his index finger against his upper teeth. I knew what he was thinking. That the dentist had done a perfect job. No one would ever know they were dentures. Heck! I didn't know it when I got married to him.

He moved away from the mirror and kicked his clothes off, sucking his stomach in and looking at himself in the mirror in profile. First, the left profile. Then the right. Then he stepped on the scale and then he went in for his shower. And I thought, for the whole six years I had been married to him the procedure has not varied.

Now I can relax. I fished out the box of chocolates from under the bed and carefully chose an Orange Hazelnut Crème Nougat. I popped it into my mouth and lovingly rolled it around and around with my tongue. When I could feel the chocolate soften and almost give way, I sank my teeth into it, releasing the Orange Hazelnut middle. When he came out of the shower and strolled into the bedroom with his towel tied tightly round his trim waist, I had already demolished one bag of Doritos, six chocolates and three Twinkies. I made no move to hide the evidence. Plastic bag wrappers and crumbs adorned me and my bed.

‘Aren’t you ready?’ he asked, his face set disapprovingly.

‘Uh-huh,’ I mumbled and heaved myself out of bed. I shook the crumbs out of my skirt and slipped on my green pumps.

‘Are you coming like that?’ I heard him ask over his shoulder.

‘Yes,’ I said and stopped short in the middle of the room. ‘Any problems?’

‘I think you should change.’

‘Into what?’ I countered pleasantly, my voice masking my annoyance.

‘Here, let me see what you have,’ he said, invading my closet.

‘How about this?’ and he waved a gathered black mid-length skirt and a canary yellow long-sleeved high-necked blouse in my face.

‘Nope,’ I said, ‘it’s too tight.’

‘How about this then?’ and a blue plaid high-waisted dress brushed my cheek as it swung through the air.

‘No, that’s also too tight.’

‘I know you can fit into this,’ he said with exasperation, holding up a dull gray dress that we had bought for his colleague’s husband’s funeral last month. It looked... what can I say except that it looked funereal.

‘Okay,’ I replied a shade too brightly and, standing right there, I threw my clothes off and put on the dress.

‘Aren’t you going to shower?’ he asked wide-eyed, standing there in a boring blue shirt and polyester slacks.

‘Oh, there’s no time for that now. I’ll do it when I come back,’ I said, marching into the bathroom. I squirted the cheap drugstore perfume that he had given me for my birthday and placed it carefully next to his Calvin Klein aftershave.

Then I began to apply my makeup. I can never get the hang of these things. He sometimes buys me fashion magazines and throws them my way, but they confuse me. I never know if you apply the concealer first and then the foundation, or is it the other way around? Then is crème blush or powder blush better, and is matte lipstick or gloss the order of the day? What is my skin tone? Is it yellow-orange or blue-red or bloody red? I can never remember. So, not too long ago, I threw away all those magazines and stuck to the basics. The only thing that varies is the color of my lipstick, a fairly simple choice since I own only two lipsticks - red and orange. The rest stays the same. Today it would be the orange lipstick, and with urgings of ‘Hurry up. We are late. I hate being late’ constantly repeated over and over again, I hastily applied the bright orange lipstick and then applied two pink blobs of blush on the apples of my cheeks. My final touch of mascara left clumps on my

right eye that I only made worse by trying to rub off. But I couldn't delay any longer.

'Ready!' I sang out to him and went close up to him and twirled around like a drunken ballerina. 'Hmmm,' was all he said and staggered a step back, overpowered by my perfume. We were already late, and Raj just hates to be late.

At the faculty party I was brilliant. I chattered on about the most nonsensical things to the Chair of the department, Dr. Barry Wood, a handsome man who had a kindly air about him. His polite 'Hallo, how are you, Mrs. Pereira?' made me think he really wanted to know. And before you knew it I verbally held him hostage. In the far corner by the fireplace I could see Raj chatting to the office secretary, casting desperate glances towards me. I didn't care. I ignored him and continued to lecture to the small group that had gathered around Dr. Wood, hoping to wrest him from me, on the politics of Bosnia, of which it was evidently clear that I knew nothing.

While Raj and I were leaving the party I caught sight of myself in the full-length mirror that adorned the hall. My underskirt, that Raj insisted I wear, necessary or not (he has this major hang-up about modesty, you know), had worked itself half an inch below my dress. My make-up was arrestingly bright, and my hair, which was done in a matronly bun, was coming apart. I was 25 years old and I looked 40. I suddenly felt very sad. For both of us. When I got into the car I squashed the lump caught in my throat and forced myself to think of the groceries I had to do tomorrow. I did not want to cry.

That night Raj and I lay down in bed, side by side, careful not to touch each other. These days it is rare for us