

The Dowry

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What to think? The groom was tall, dark, and handsome. The bride was tall, dark, and beautiful. This well-attended wedding feast was enormous, and the food was presented in a sumptuous style, and was carefully prepared. The parents looked pleased. I was not. I saw in the bride's eyes a calculating look and the groom looked pensive. The feast lasted three days, gift giving was generous. Her parents owned dairy cows; they had two horse teams and several riding horses. I was seven-years old. Where was I going with this apprehensiveness? We were closely related by blood and marriage. My uncle was a brother to my grandmother. They were very dark people, more copper than red with smooth skin and really dark eyes. Their movements were quick and not wasteful.

I grew up and moved away. When I heard of the great tragedy between those two, I thought of my uneasiness. Where had that come from? What information had filtered to my young consciousness to produce such clouds?

I scoured my brain for distinct memories. Only one came to light. We were in a classroom. She was in front of the classroom being reprimanded for some kind of infraction. The teacher was furious. But the other was enraged: she went to strike the teacher who moved out of the way. The student did not return. It was the one and only time that I had ever seen a student raise her hand to strike a teacher.

His trial made the newspaper—a domestic quarrel gone terribly wrong in a far away place. He claimed that he had agreed to marry her after a matchmaker had arranged for the union of their families. She was neither obedient nor easily comforted or willing to cooperate with him. This was a match made on earth with too many character flaws on both sides.

But it was important to listen closely to his plea of being pushed beyond his capacity to endure. I had read *Jane Eyre* and knew about Bertha Antoinetta Mason, the deranged wife of Edward Rochester who was locked up in the upper rooms. I dug a little deeper. Somewhere in the trial transcript, none too conspicuously, was the statement. Her dowry promise of two dairy cows to be delivered at the time of marriage had not been fulfilled.

What was it like in a household when your dowry commitments remained unfulfilled? It's a constant low flame ready to burst into a raging fire. Who hesitated to pay the price? Why was she forgotten once she was married off? Was her highlighted copper skin but beautiful countenance not a selling point? Why not bring her back if she was failing as a wife? It is done all the time. Failure happens. Even unfaithfulness can be forgiven. Why did she not come home by herself? That too happens and is understandable. I thought it was a total shame that no one went to get her. The custom was to visit the couple once they are in their own home. Was that done? Did she mention the two dairy cows, a substantial gift to any household? I think a failure to speak out, a failure to be heard, and a failure to keep promises are serious at anytime.

Two young people should start with all good wishes, all promises should be kept, and their families can help them. Domestic violence is a serious issue for families. It is not well understood because we so want privacy. However, wherever it exists, it is so harmful that it should never be ignored under any pretext. Some countries have no laws whatsoever, not even customs to ease the strain of every day living. This country has a system of shelters for women and families. At that end of the spectrum, we have a movement to provide respite care for families in conflict. People sometimes cannot resolve conflict, but a time of reflection can provide a willingness to transform such situations. If it requires removal so be it. The alternative is too horrible to contemplate, hence most of the time it is listed as a crime of passion. However, it has a trajectory path, it takes a while to recognize it, but it has to be faced with honestly and with immediate action.

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