

The South Asian neighbours had long conceded comprehension of Dr. Kenneth Rosten; indeed, his notions of small talk presumed a ubiquity of macroeconomic genius. A generous supposition, no doubt—but it was easier to just smile and nod. Though it had been years since his sister’s slow, cancerous death, Dr. Rosten had remained in deep West London. This was distinctly Rosten of him: Rostens despised change; and so ‘their’ apartment had remained ‘his’. The furnishings were dusty—porcelain owls and framed Punch cartoons topped shelves, all markedly un-spruced. (Sister, too, rarely dusted, for even female economists rarely dust, you understand.)

A dishevelled, though formally dressed, Rosten—tummy exposed above linen trousers—sat slovenly on a mock Eames (1956 Lounge Chair, reproduced with care); *Modern Products Liability Law* by Richard A. Epstein lay—unopened—beside his bare, swollen feet. And hark! This afternoon’s aria: bubbling red cabbage, tremolo contralto; so, when the landline shrilled its solo—he answered only to shut the damned thing up.

“Is this Dr. Rosten?”

“Afternoon,” the doctor grumbled, “to whom—”

“This is Anna Sloane. From the Telegraph. Care to comment? On the death of Lord Delmore.” The woman cleared her throat. “Sorry. Do you wish to comment? I’m writing a retrospective—”

“I worked with Delmore for years.”

“Indeed,” came Anna liltingly; one discerned a youthfulness in her cadence, and, thusly, vaguely archaic expressions curled precociously off her tongue. “I do hope you were already informed of his passing.”

“I was.” Rosten paused. “He was a bright man.” Another pause. “Chicago. Ho hum.”

“Sorry?”

“A monetarist.”

“Yes.” She sounded tired. “Have you eaten? We could talk in person—”

“I am still peckish,” he interrupted. “*Saravanaa Bhavan*—marvellous food,” he continued, “The World’s Number One Indian Vegetarian Restaurant Chain. Or so *they* say.” Anna let out an amused snort. “It *is* Southall, I’m afraid. Do hacks leave ‘The City’ ever?”

Mr. Shah eyed his pristine franchise eatery. He felt his breasts swell, just as a prideful restaurateur’s bosom really ought; after all, we stand in his temple now—stained-glass immigrant entrepreneurship. *Saravanaa Bhavan* had been spiritually lucrative for the handsome Shah-sahib. And though his collar squeezed the boastful breaths from him, he appeared loose, his silver tie—typically less crooked than he—lay defiantly askew. Shah was standing by the restaurant’s open door, awaiting a kabuli chana delivery, when a broad limbed, oblong bodied, white man came into his peripheral vision.

“Ah! You await the chickpea man, Mr. Shah,” teased Dr. Rosten, hand extended.

“Always he’s late,” the restaurateur replied, feigning pessimism; and then, with the flash of a knowing look, reached to grasp Rosten’s outstretched hand. “What would *you* tell such a man, Mister Kenny?”

“Ah! Chickpea trouble... yes. Well, the chickpea is, of course, the great Indian profit spinner; so, one must ask: the unpunctual delivery boy—is he cheap?” The two men’s hands stayed locked.

"The cheapest."

"So let him be late. His lateness, Mr. Shah, is Pareto-optimal."

"I don't like to wait for tins, Mister Kenny." And with one more emphatic shake, the two ceased their handholding.

After exchanging a fumble of polite gestures—each insisting the other go first—Rosten emerged the loser: he, as the customer, really ought to enter first, or so Mr. Shah colourfully illustrated. Rosten begrudgingly obliged, his powers of politeness thoroughly discredited. Inside the gaudy dining room, where gold-hued wallpapers violently clashed with frilly floral tablecloths, the restaurateur watched as the doctor inhaled the kitchen's aromas. Like a lamb to the slaughter, Shah thought—or perhaps a lamb to the bhuna.

Anna Sloane had never been to Southall before. A Hampstead girl through and through, she was awed—overstimulated—by the endless parade of flashy foreign fashions, the corn-peddling street vendors (their tinny Bluetooth speakers disseminating atavistic sitar drone), and the £17.5 million Hindu temples—'churches'—wedged between hardware stores and dried fruit merchants. Her London? The Gail's-swigging, afterparty types; souls from which a (non-suicidal) out ought to be sought. Here in Southall—far from champagne conviviality—Sloane had but one lament (refreshingly few, she noted): *Saravanaa Bhavan's* glass door, its cruel reflection staring back—pale, thin-haired, caked in newsprint grey. The mirror showed precisely what she was: a journalist.

"Sorry I'm late, doctor," Sloane said, crossing the threshold while modulating her breath to feign exhaustion. The impatient Dr. Rosten, seated fifteen minutes ago by Shah's watch, had wearied of waiting. Yet as he rose mechanically for courtesy's sake, something piqued his interest—his eyes sharpened, widened. Her smile stretched.

"You look terribly familiar," he said, hand extended in cautious familiarity.

"I.S.L.T. 2016, doctor," she replied sheepishly, her lips now touching her ears; she met the economist's hand with a rehearsed grace. Rosten, visibly thrilled, turned towards the restaurant's kitchen and cupped his mouth with his other hand.

"Shah!" he bellowed, the kitchen's doors bursting open in response, "Shah you must meet my guest at once!"

Rosten, with that peculiar Rostenian duality of controlled precision beneath visible jubilation, informed the restaurateur that across twenty-seven years presiding over the Intercollegiate Sociological Lecture Tournament, only 2016's prized presentation 'The Uberisation of Modernity'—"the gigging economy's *Theorien über den Mehrwert*," as he'd told *Bloomberg's* flagship podcast—had resuscitated his belief in "the intellectual capacity of youth." And here, in "your very eatery, Shah!" stood its "phenom": this, to Shah's bemusement, urban bride of Frankenstein.

"But you were not then Anna *Sloane*," Rosten recalled.

"Anna *Simons*." Her smile wavered; Rosten nodded pryingly. "I married in 2019."

"How wonderful!" Rosten threw up his hands.

"Divorced." She took a deep breath. "Ho hum."

"He was not then the one man for you, madam!" waxed Shah, interrupting her looming sombreness. "You *will* find love! Someone for everyone!" He too threw up his hands.

The three—Rosten having unrelentingly insisted Shah join them—took a table by the window. Much to Shah's dismay (a dismay he maintained behind the appearance of success), the eatery was completely empty. One by one, they observed the signs of a looming global recession: a blank "Daily Specials" chalkboard; a half-stocked, blinkingly lit *Mirinda*-branded refrigerator; most palpable, of course, was the distinct lack of commerce—invisible customers tended by the lonely waiter; indeed, the type busied with the wage-justifying polishing of already spotless cutlery.

"The Telegraph—that's great British news! Better than *TikTok*! Yes, Mrs. Sloane, it's real news that you write!" Shah was sincere in his praise of the broadsheet, a fact which seemed to deflate Anna's spirits; that is, until Rosten intervened with what passed, amongst boomers at least, for empathy:

"Shah is right, of course—a great many people do read worse. And Anna, dearest, knowing that a mind like yours steals a Tory's wage? It makes me despise the rag...well, let us just say—less." At this, Anna took a deep breath. "Yes," she began, teasing, "and, of course, it was your good word—"

"Well, I remain my sister's brother, lest we forget. It is her they think of, and rightly so. Her free-market think-tankery always did help the media compartmentalise my more...leftist... indulgences." Rosten laughed gregariously. "He can't be all that left-wing,' they say, 'his sister was one of us, after all.' She wasn't, of course...much too rugged an individualist for those Eton boys."

"Oh how my brother Sanjit admired the Lady Rosten!" Shah said to Anna, shaking his head glumly. "She was 'good for us businessmen,' he'd say... I think he was scared of her!... at least a little bit, I think." At this, the whole table smiled as one. "Such memories with the four of us— isn't it, Mister Kenny?"

"I miss them both very much, Shah." Rosten took a long pause, breathing far too audibly throughout. "Now, let us each enjoy a mango lassi."

"Did you keep your sister's manuscripts? I'd love to have a—"

"I don't run a museum, Anna dear. These things—they're much better to be rid of. I'm sure you didn't keep your husband's, I don't know... library?"

"Actually, I did keep his books." The table laughed. Then she mumbled: "Well, the valuable ones, anyway."

Shah sprang to life. "Well, I keep my brother's recipes under lock and key!"

"And those are priceless, Shah-sahib!"

Anna stared at the two men in pseudo-disbelief. "What are the origins of this?"

"This, what?" replied the ever-clueless Rosten.

"The friendship?" Anna brought her lassi toward her lips. "Your friendship?"

The two men shrugged instantaneously, simultaneously.

"Probably our success," Shah offered smugly.

"Or lack thereof," Rosten retorted. "Though I speak only for myself. What you've built here, Shah, is most commendable."

Anna once again eyed the vacant eatery. "Doctor, please. *You* lamenting a 'lack of success' makes me—"

"It makes me too, Anna. Oh yes."

In the subsequent hours, a Gangetic glow filled the restaurant, great swarms of sunbeams, hordes of floating marigold pollen, queued tirelessly (as one hears they do outside viral Manhattan eateries) to hear *Saravanaa Bhavan's* new panel of 'experts' put the world to rights. The three talked much about little for some time. And it wasn't until she got on the tube that Anna Sloane realised: she never did ask about fucking Lord Delmore. When the chickpea delivery came, Shah tipped the boy handsomely. And Rosten—just this once—fancied doing some dusting.