

Runner Up of Vindigo Press Short Story Competition 2023

A SLICE OF CHOCOLATE CAKE

By Nivashnie Poonsamy



Nivashnie Poonsamy once went to law school because she'd been reading a handful of legal thrillers around the time she had to choose her field of study. Realising she'd much rather be creating fictional characters (instead of dealing with real ones), she put away her law degree and baby-stepped into the writing world by first trying her hand at copywriting. When she's not writing copy, she's thinking up stories. And when she's not doing either, she's taking cute pictures of her narcissistic dog for his Instagram account, hunting down clothing sales, and trying to improve her bad meal choices at restaurants.



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A Slice of Chocolate Cake

With a flourish, the waiter-bot presented a slice of chocolate cake Teddy didn't order. A glance at Matt, and Teddy knew Matt would – like a God – direct the universe back to its rightful course of action.

'Sorry,' Matt said, his booming lecturer voice calm and assured 'we didn't order—'

'It's on the house, of course, Sir.' The waiter-bot's eyelid trembled before closing over its eye in what looked like a facial tic to Teddy. Or was that a wink? It then shot Matt a chummy thumbs up.

Teddy shrugged at Matt's frown, her eyes moving to the three-layered decadence topped with a ganache so shiny she could almost see her face reflected in it. Natural cacao, these days, was a rarity; Teddy would not, could not, look a cacao gift horse in the mouth.

She'd just have to refrain from doing a 'Bruce Bogtrotter'.

She pictured the scene from the 1996 classic, *Mathilda*: curly-haired Bruce shovelling mounds of cake into his mouth, dark clumps clinging to his face and hands. No, the restaurant – with its white-gloved waiter-bots and plush massage chairs – demanded a tad more decorum than that.

Teddy sank a spoon into the slice of cake and heaped on a wobbling piece that would make talking a near impossibility. The airy crumb melted in her mouth, unleashing a depth of flavour that made Teddy's tastebuds sexy dance. If her tastebuds wore panties, they'd be on the floor.

Teddy's tongue snagged on something and then she was choking.

'Teddy!' Matt bellowed, toppling his chair as he jumped up.



The waiter-bot, already at her side, lifted Teddy off her chair. While she clutched at her throat, eyes bulging, it threw its arms around her midsection and pushed at her belly with the prowess of a bot that'd performed its fair share of Heimlichs.

The hazardous object shot out of Teddy's mouth and landed with a distinct 'clink' onto a saucer.

'Ma'am, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?' the waiter-bot asked, its eerily human-like face the picture of concern.

Teddy nodded numbly, her eyes zeroed in on the circular object lying on the saucer.

'Here we go, Teddy,' Matt said, easing her back onto her chair before returning to his.

'M-Matt? What the fuck is that?' Teddy pointed at the saucer, staring at the object on it as if it had just been fished from a nuclear dump site.

'It looks like a—'

'A bloody ring! You know how I feel about marriage! How could you, Matt?' Teddy sprang up. Reaching across the table, she grabbed the ring.

The waiter-bot, much like an uncomfortable human, hurried away.

'Look, Teddy, ' Matt said, his voice dropping to a whisper, 'you've got this all wrong. Let's talk about this at home, okay?'

'Home? Hah! Do you mean the flat we share or Big Mama's Palace?'

'Teddy, people are watching.'

'I don't care, Matt! Maybe you and Big Mama care about what people think, but I don't. Tell me, did you get Big Mama's permission before you stuck a ring in a piece of cake?'

Matt dragged a hand down his face. 'Could you please stop calling my mother Big Mama.'



The kid in Teddy wanted to stick out her tongue and chant 'Big Mama, Big Mama' to goad a stronger reaction from Matt, but she reeled in the child within and let loose the adolescent instead.

'She is big. And she is your mama.'

Matt, vein above his eyebrow throbbing, muttered something under his breath. She could be ... a lot. Teddy knew that. Her inner world could turn tumultuous at the snap of a finger; that's when her emotions, like roaring waves, crashed to the surface.

'If I marry you, it's like I marry her, too. She's always there, Matt! Either in person or as a hologram!'

'You're being dramatic, Teddy.' Matt's characteristic placidity was wearing thin. Teddy could just about see the anger peering through.

'Oh, am I? And what about mother dearest when you had to airlift her to hospital – on our anniversary – because she had gas pains.'

Matt had called a Helibulance because, 'Teddy, what if it's her appendix? We have to act fast.'

Really, flatulence was a far cry from appendicitis. And yes, Matt had tried to make it up to Teddy by booking them this table at Renaissance '50. But then he'd gone and done the ring-in-the-cake thing.

'Teddy, look. This,' he said, pointing at the ring Teddy had slipped onto her thumb, 'is a mishap. The waiter-bot must have got it wrong.'

'So, you don't want to marry me?'

Teddy's eyes filled with tears. The thought of marriage triggered her sympathetic nervous system: it made her want to bare her teeth and hiss, 'You'll never take me alive.' But she wanted Matt to at least marry her. Even if marriage in 2050 was as outdated as a Tesla EV.

'Not when you're so afraid, Teddy,' Matt said, his voice tender.



But Teddy had good reason to be afraid. How could she not when there were more divorces than deaths in her family?

She had the 'bad marriage gene' as her mother had put it. And no member of the Crys-Martel family had been able to switch that shitty gene 'off'. Gene therapy still had a ways to go.

The sound of a man clearing his throat pulled Teddy out of her thoughts.

'Can I have my ring back now that this fiasco is over?'

Teddy's jaw didn't just drop – it hit the floor. She scanned the man from large forehead to tailored suit to shoes that would fare much better in a circus, on a clown.

'Here,' Teddy fumed, trying to rip the ring off her thumb. Why did she even put it on her thumb anyway? She gritted her teeth as she pulled at it.

'Let me help,' Matt said, walking over to Teddy.

As Matt worked at dislodging the ring, the man shifted from foot to foot. 'Be careful with that! Damn thing cost me 30 mill.'

'Thirty mill for a piece of shit,' Teddy muttered.

'Hey,' the man said to Matt. 'You better reel your woman in. Thanks to you two and this fucking restaurant, I've got to redo an entire proposal.'

'Not a bad idea, mate. The first one nearly killed someone,' Matt said, eyebrows raised.

The man's nostrils flared, reminding Teddy of a bull, but a baby one because the man's presence didn't exactly leave Teddy shaking in her boots. His youngish face, unremarkable, was dominated by a nose that made his eyes look like two little raisins. Sultanas! Teddy decided, watching the man extract a slimline phone from his pocket.

'Sorry, baby, I'm still sorting out the, uh, glitch on the bill,' he said. 'Fucking incompetent restaurant. No, no, no. Just stay in the car.'



'Sorry, Sir, Madam. Is there a problem?' Matt and Teddy's waiter-bot reappeared. Teddy resisted the urge to point at Mr Clown Shoes as the problem. Did he actually tell Matt to "reel her in"? Was she some kind of fish?

'Yes, there bloody is a problem!' Clown Shoes bellowed. The muted restaurant chatter ceased. Cutlery stopped clinking against plates. Curious eyes that had lost interest in the cake debacle became curious once more. Teddy glared at Clown Shoes, wishing she could shoot ambient energies from her eyes like 2050 Superman. She'd singe Clown Shoes' hair, make him a B-grade Lex Luthor.

'This pathetic excuse of a restaurant fucked up MY proposal,' Clown Shoes continued. 'This woman still has my ring. And then you fucking bots went and added that overpriced chocolate cake to MY bill. Why don't you add it to THEIR fucking bill instead!'

'I am terribly sorry, Sir. If you could accompany me to the front desk, our manager will see to it that you are fully comped.' The waiter gestured for Clown Shoes to walk ahead. Teddy figured he'd much rather die than go anywhere without his precious ring.

Matt finally dislodged the ring from Teddy's thumb, leaving her thumb an angry red that, to Teddy, matched the colour of Clown Shoes' face.

'Can I have my fucking ring back now?' Clown Shoes asked, holding out his palm.

Teddy's brain-body connection seemed to ... malfunction. Without the interception of rational thought, she really had no means of stopping her arm. Her arm, as if possessed by a temperamental ghost, snatched the ring from Matt's fingers and flung it at Clown Shoes.

The ring bounced off his forehead and fell to the floor.

There was a gasp. Teddy realized it was a group effort: shocked patrons had banded together, albeit unintentionally, to release a full-bodied gasp. It was theatrical. It was almost melodic. And Teddy couldn't help but marvel at the reactions her actions were receiving. Did they think she was a crazy woman?



'You bitch!' Clown Shoes bellowed. He picked up the ring and moved toward Teddy, the baby bull in him ready to charge.

Matt stepped in front of Teddy. 'Lay off, mate.'

The two men stared each other down. Teddy watched in fascination as they conversed with each other using eyes and eyebrows and puffed-out chests.

Clown Shoes then changed tactics and shoved Matt who, caught off guard, stumbled backwards into Teddy.

'What the hell is wrong with you, you peculiar-looking delinquent!' Teddy glowered at Clown Shoes, giving him a dismissive once-over. 'You're rude and arrogant and, and, just rubbish! Take your ugly ring and leave.'

The ring may have looked ugly to Teddy, but its built-in mood detector and holographic system made up for its clunky design. Almost.

'If I were you,' Clown Shoes said to Matt, 'I'd teach this woman when to open her mouth and when to close it, if you know what I'm saying.'

Matt slugged Clown Shoes. Clown Shoes staggered like a man who'd had too much to drink. And the patrons united with another gasp. This time, Teddy gasped with them.

Not wasting any time, the waiter-bot ushered Matt and Teddy to the front desk while another bot approached Clown Shoes with a bucket of ice.

Having also been comped despite the altercation with Clown Shoes, Matt and Teddy began the long walk to the car.

'Matt, you punched Clown Shoes. You don't even kill hybrid flies.'

'Flies aren't nearly as pesty as that guy. He disrespected you, Teddy. That was unacceptable.'

Teddy stopped walking; her breath felt as if it was trapped in her chest. She couldn't believe she hadn't seen it before.

'Teddy, what's wrong?'



'I haven't been respectful toward your feelings, Matt. Not in the way you've been toward mine.'

Teddy saw herself in her childhood bedroom, duvet thrown over her head, rocking back and forth as her parents hurled insults at each other. Words, she'd told herself; they were just words. Her parents weren't hitting each other. It wasn't so bad.

No, Teddy decided; it was just as bad.

Of course, her parents didn't start by shooting canons at each other. It was innocuous enough at the beginning, but then the careless words became hurtful, then outright malicious.

Teddy reached for Matt's hand and joined it with hers. 'I'm going to try harder, Matt. I'm going to be more mindful of what I say to you.'

Matt raised their joined hands to his lips. 'Words have consequences, Teddy. Just make sure you're prepared for those consequences when you open that mouth of yours.'

Teddy grinned at Matt. 'Are you talking dirty to me, Matty boy?'

'Hell, no. You're in the dogbox.'

Well, at least I won't be able to see Big Mama holograms from the dogbox.

Teddy bit her lip as the thought fought to make itself vocal.

She'd have to invest in the latest bad-habit-busting wristband. Or a muzzle.