Sarah is cleaning her house before Passover. Her niece Daisy is helping her because Sarah has reached the age of eighty-three and it has become a difficult chore for her. Daisy does the scrubbing and washing and leaves her aunt the task of going through suitcases full of unused clothes. Sarah sits upon a chair in front of a metal trunk which has been placed upon an old wooden bench because her back hurts when she bends over. The clothesline is full of linen that needs fresh air and sunshine before it will be packed away for another year. A basket full of clothes that Daisy will distribute to the poor of the village stands beside the door.

Sarah’s hands stop moving when they come in contact with a little yellow suede bag. Her fingers close around the object and she sits back in her chair. Her mind wanders back to the time when she was a young girl living with her aunt and uncle in the Dadar district of Bombay.

“Sarah, you have an offer for marriage,” Miriam, her aunt had said to her. “He is a nice young man from an observant Jewish family. He has a steady job with the Naval Dockyard and will be able to support you and your future family.”

Sarah looked up from her sewing. She recognized the worry behind her aunt’s eagerness for an answer. “I don’t know if I am ready for marriage,” Sarah said.

“You are already nineteen years old. I was married at sixteen,” Miriam replied.
“That was a generation ago, Auntie. I don’t know the man you are asking me to marry. When and where did he see me?”

“You remember the malida the Solomon family had before the marriage of their daughter. This young man and his family saw you there.”

“Who is he?”

“His name is Joseph Varoolkar. Your uncle and I have made all the inquiries. We find him entirely suitable. Your father has already agreed but I insisted that you meet the boy before we give our answer. I’ve raised you ever since your mother died. I intend to make sure that none of my daughters will be married without their consent. I’ll see to it that you will not be forced to marry a boy you do not like.”

“I want to see him first.”

Miriam took Sarah to her cousin David’s home which was close to the railway station from where Joseph took the train home. He had been invited to ‘drop in for a cup of tea’ after work. Sarah fidgeted with embarrassment as she sat and waited for him to arrive.

“Don’t worry. He does not know that you are here. You said that you wanted to see him as he really is. What did you mean by that?” David asked.

“I did not want him to dress up or be under any kind of pressure.”

“Perhaps she is referring to our combing her hair into a bun,” David’s wife laughed.

“She did not want to wear my new sari,” Miriam added. “I don’t understand why she says she feels uncomfortable in it.”

There was a knock at the door. Joseph stood there dressed in navy blue cotton trousers and a white bush-shirt. There was a blue ink stain on the shirt pocket where his fountain pen had leaked. He shook hands with everyone he was introduced to.

“Sarah. That was my grandmother’s name,” he said as he took her hand. He had a firm and warm handshake.

She smiled shyly. She recognized him, but not from the malida. She remembered a day three months earlier when she was in a jeweler’s shop with her cousin Suzie. Suzie had tried on different earrings in front of a mirror and a very patient if slightly irritated salesman. She turned around from time to time for Sarah’s opinion.

Two men had walked into the store. The older one did all the talking. He inspected several gold bracelets but insisted that he would only buy a pair that had an old fashioned design. Sarah thought that they were buying something for an aunt or a grandmother. She caught a glimpse of his final choice before the salesman slipped it into a little yellow suede pouch and drew the drawstrings. The design was of a gold braid fixed upon the flat broad bangle beneath. They made their purchase before Suzie decided which pair of earrings she wanted.

Suzie saw her friend Radha waiting at the bus stop. She was delighted. The two girls had not seen each other since their schooldays. Suzie ran across the road causing a taxi to screech to a halt and its driver to shout, “Are you crazy?” Sarah followed more cautiously. Ten minutes later the three girls sat in the ice-cream parlor called Joy. Suzie and Radha chatted and caught up on the news about their other classmates. Sarah rested her head on the back of the booth. She did not know Suzie’s friends. She had continued in the school where she studied before she came to live with her father’s older brother and his family. She could clearly hear a voice from the adjoining booth. She immediately recognized it as the voice of the older man from the jeweler’s shop.

“You should understand the reasons behind this purchase,” she heard. “You have to make the girl feel important as part of a tradition. She will not know that the bracelets did not really belong to your grandmother. She will think of you as a man who values and respects all the members of his family. If you are respectful of your grandmother’s wishes and family traditions you will be respectful of your wife’s wishes and traditions she is attached to too. If you are the kind of man who takes care of his family you will naturally take care of her and your children also.”

Sarah could not hear what the younger man said. Then the older one replied, “I know that you are getting married for your mother’s sake and not your own, but which young girl will agree to that? They all want something romantic in their lives. Believe me, no girl will be willing to leave the city and go to a village to care for your mother and your fields. I know what I am doing.”

The other man must have said something about the new appearance of the bracelets because she heard the answer, “We will say that we have had them cleaned. Remove them from the jeweler’s pouch. It has his name and address on it. If the family decides to trace it they’ll discover the truth.”

The men paid their bill and left. Sarah heard the waiter’s comment about the smallness of his tip. When they rose to leave she peered into the booth the men had occupied. The
little bag that had contained the bracelets lay upon the table. She picked it up. It would serve as a container for her threads and needles.

This memory had flashed through Sarah’s mind. She listened to David and Miriam’s conversation which was skilfully inlaid with questions about Joseph’s family, his work and his prospects. She listened with special interest when he spoke about his village outside Alibagh. His father had died a few years ago and his mother managed the farm with its animals, orchards and rice fields. Agriculture was hard work the dividends of which depended on the fluctuations of rainfall. He had wanted a steadier income so came to the city to work. He had rented a room in the part of Bombay called Andheri. David and Miriam also spoke of Sarah, her schooling and her achievements. Joseph nodded but made no comments and asked no questions. He did not speak directly to her. She thought of it all as the usual small talk people made when they wanted a young couple to get to know enough about each other before they decided to take the plunge.

“Auntie Sarah,” Daisy’s voice breaks into her reverie. “What are you dreaming about and what is this in your hand?”

Sarah laughs. Age has its advantages. She can throw aside all the conventions of what is proper and what is not. She tells her niece the whole story with droll humor. Joseph’s uncle is described as a pompous, know it all. The conversation when she met Joseph for the first time at David’s house is made to sound funny, bordering on the ridiculous. Sarah has to stop from time to time because Daisy is laughing.

“You married Uncle Joseph after knowing all that!” Daisy asks. She sounds incredulous. “You knew what a selfish man he was and you still went ahead and married him. You knew he would leave you in the village to tend the fields and care for his mother while he worked and stayed in the city.”

“Yes. I knew the worst I could expect when I consented. The rest could only be better,” Sarah replies. Then she smiles.

“There’s something more,” Daisy declares.

“He did not know the worst about me. He did not know the selfish reason behind why I agreed to marry him. I craved for independence and freedom. I did not want the constant presence of a man who would tell me what to do and what to say and what to think. My father and uncle were both overbearing dictators. I believed that all men are like that. On the farm I would be my own mistress. Daily decisions about running it would be mine. If I worked hard the laborers would respect me and come to me with their troubles. There was a certain power in all this.”

“But love and romance, Auntie!” Daisy exclaims. “Wasn’t that missing from your life?”

“No it wasn’t. During the early days of our marriage I discovered that Joseph was very different from what I had imagined he would be. He was considerate and caring. I fell in love with him. He loved me very much too. We lived our lives for the days we could spend together. After his mother died he wanted to take me to the city but I refused to sell this house or the land. It had become an important part of my life.”

Sarah looks down at the pouch. “One year we had a drought and there was much death and disease in the village. I sold the bracelets to pay for vaccines and medicines. I kept this old thing as a memento. Joseph never complained about my selling his grandma’s bracelets. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him that I knew the truth about this so-called heirloom.”

Sophie Judah was born in 1949 in Jabalpur, in Central India, to Bene Israel parents. In 1972 she moved to Israel where she later studied English Literature at the Bar-Ilan University. In 2007, she published a collection of short stories, Dropped from Heaven, that chronicles life in a mythical Indian town, Jwalanagar, which is not unlike the Jabalpur of her youth.

Photography by Yoraan Raphael Reuben