

Lara

by
Tara Mukund

E-mail: taram@bu.edu

FADE IN:

INT. FAMILY ROOM -- EVENING

A small family room, in a cramped town house. LARA, 25, a young woman of East Indian descent, is seated on the couch talking on the phone.

She is dressed in a rumpled men's button-up and baggy khaki pants. There are several pots and pans on the stove in the attached kitchen area. In front of her on a TV tray is half a cheeseburger and an open beer bottle.

LARA (On Phone)

They're closing down the burger place.

RIA (O.S.)

That's nice. I'm sure it will work out great.

LARA

No. It won't.

RIA (O.S.)

(Calling out to her husband)

Sanjay, don't you dare eat those cookies.

LARA

I am in the middle of a crisis and you aren't even paying attention.

RIA (O.S.)

What crisis?

LARA

I said they are closing down the burger place!

RIA (O.S.)

(To Sanjay)

Sanjay if you don't put those cookies down...

RIA (O.S.) (CONT'D)

(now back to Lara)

What's the big deal? Just go someplace else.

LARA

Go someplace else?! But this is the place. That's why it's called the *burger* place. You should know. You used to eat there, remember?

RIA (O.S.)

Not anymore. Listen, I really need to go and guard those cookies from him. We are supposed to go out to dinner and you know Sanjay has no control when it comes to sweets. I'll talk to you later.

LARA (On Phone)

Whatever.

LEELA, 56, enters the kitchen through the family room and attends to one of the boiling pots. Lara slams the phone back into the cradle which sits on an end table next to the couch. On the table is a wedding album with the words Ria weds Sanjay embossed on the cover.

LEELA

Was that Ria? I wanted to talk to her and find out what time she is coming down on Saturday.

LARA

She can't talk right now. She's busy. *Sanjay* got into the *cookies*. What's Saturday?

LEELA

Saturday is Maya's daughter's engagement party. I told you six times already.

LARA

Do we have to go? That Maya lady is always bragging about her would-be-son-in-law, Raj, the classically trained Indian dancer. I'll tell you one thing she won't be bragging about anytime soon and that's her grand-kids.

GRANDPA, 85, a very frail old man but with a dignified presence walks through the family room into the kitchen. He is wearing a snow cap that covers his ears and mittens. He opens the fridge and pulls out a jar of olives.

LEELA

What do you mean?

LARA

Not that he can't produce children, but I was trying, and clearly failed, to cleverly euphemize the fact that I believe him to be a homosexual.

LEELA

Lara, don't be so vulgar!

LARA

I don't even know what that means.

LEELA

It means you get all these crazy ideas from watching too much of that MTV. All I know is that Maya's daughter seems very happy. Not all girls are as picky as you.

LARA

Clearly I have set my standards too high in requesting that my future husband be at least minimally attracted to women.

LEELA

What about Sanjay? He's not gay as you would say. Would you marry him?

LARA

First off, he is married to my sister so that would be enormously creepy. But more importantly, I would never marry anyone even remotely like Sanjay because he's a self-righteous ass--

LEELA

Enough. I don't have time for this right now. Go upstairs and change your shirt and put on some earrings. Make yourself at least semi-presentable. We have company coming.

Lara swigs the last of her beer, and observes her Grandpa struggling with the olive jar.

LARA

What company?

LEELA

That uncle and aunty I was telling you about. Do you ever listen to me? Your dad has gone to pick them up from the airport. They are visiting their son in New York and made a trip over here to see Disneyland and are going to stay with us the next few days. They're your grandfather's mother's sister's neighbor's nephew and his wife.

LARA

Such close relations. It's shocking that we've never met before.

LEELA

And their son is about your age. It won't hurt you to make a good impression on them. You know Ria was around your age when she started looking.

LARA

Good for Ria. And while my would-be-in-laws are with us. Where am I supposed to sleep?

LEELA

You can sleep in Grandpa's room.

LARA

No, it's mid-July and Grandpa still turns the heater on. Plus, last time he stepped on me on his sixth trip to the bathroom. I'll just sleep down here.

LEELA

Suit yourself.

Lara gets up from the couch and heads for the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN

Lara pops open the olive jar for her grandfather. He smiles at her.

GRANDPA

(singsong)

Thank you.

INT. LIVING ROOM -- EVENING

NEIL, 64, is seated in a large, ugly recliner watching a basketball game on television, disinterestedly paying attention to the conversation. Grandpa is seated on a love-seat next to UNCLE. He has a bowl of olives in his lap and pops them into his mouth with his gloved hand. Leela is seated on an adjacent sofa next to AUNTY. They are both looking at the wedding album. Lara descends the stairs which are visible from the living room.

AUNTY

Your daughter really looks so beautiful in these photos. Sanjay is a very lucky boy.

Lara enters and pulls up a chair.

LEELA

And this is our second daughter,
Lara.

AUNTY/UNCLE

Hello.

Leela finally really looks at Lara. She realizes that instead of changing her shirt, Lara has simply put on a pair of pearl earrings and a pearl necklace, which look ridiculous with the men's shirt she is still wearing. She flashes a look of annoyance at her daughter. Lara, responds, with a knowing smile.

LARA

(To Aunty and Uncle)
It's nice to meet you.

Neil gets up from his recliner.

NEIL

(To Aunty and Uncle)
Can I offer you guys anything to
drink? Some red wine?

UNCLE

No thank you. We don't drink.

Neil goes through the attached dining room into the kitchen and returns with two glasses of wine and hands one to Leela.

NEIL

We do.

INT. DINING ROOM -- EVENING

All are seated around the table, enjoying various Indian entrees. Lara does not eat, but sits with the others drinking a beer. Neil and Leela nurse their wine glasses.

UNCLE

Jai has recently been traveling to Japan a lot for business, and he is constantly calling and complaining to us that he cannot find any pure vegetarian restaurants. Are you a strict vegetarian as well, Lara?

Lara shakes her head no.

LARA

But I make sure that the cows I eat,
are.

Leela laughs uncomfortably and shoots a withering look at Lara.

Neil smirks at Lara. She returns the smile.

LARA (CONT'D)

Ria used to love cheeseburgers, but now she's married to Mr. I won't eat an egg even if it's in my own goddamn wedding cake!

LEELA

(To Aunty and Uncle)

Sanjay is very strict about his diet. He does not drink either.

Leela, Neil, and Lara each take a sip from their drinks.

INT. LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

All have resumed their seats from the earlier living room scene. Coffee cups line the coffee table.

UNCLE

Jai just finished up his Ph.D. in nuclear physics. The recruiters were after him before he even submitted his thesis. What do you do Lara?

LARA

Mostly, I nap.

Leela shoots another withering glance at her daughter.

LEELA

Lara just finished up college. She is applying for her Masters and is looking for work.

Lara shrugs and smiles at Uncle and Aunty.

LARA

I do that in between my naps.

UNCLE

You know Jai ran the marathon last year. He is very health conscious. He goes to the gym daily, sometimes twice. He even convinced me to run it with him next year. Neil, you, should consider training for the marathon.

Neil is half asleep in his recliner and is perturbed by this statement.

NEIL

Why?!

Uncle is thrown off by this.

UNCLE

I don't know.

A beat.

AUNTY

(Yawning and rising)

It's getting late. We should get some sleep. We have an early start tomorrow. Good night.

UNCLE

Thanks again, Lara, for letting us have your room. I hope it's not too much of an imposition.

LARA

It's no problem. I am used to having strange men in my bed.

Nobody laughs, but Neil chuckles to himself silently.

UNCLE/AUNTY

Good night.

They walk upstairs and disappear from sight.

Leela glares at her daughter and begins picking up coffee mugs. Grandpa struggles and rises. Neil remains in his chair.

GRANDPA

I'm going to call it a night as well.

He makes his slow ascent up the staircase.

LARA

Good night Grandpa.

Leela, a mug in hand, stands in place staring at her daughter. Lara lounges back on the couch.

LEELA

Neil, I cannot believe this girl. Who raised her to talk to people like that? I *know* she didn't get this from me.

NEIL

So it's my fault?

LARA

No need to fault anyone. You should congratulate yourselves on a job well done.

LEELA

The way you behaved tonight. You've ruined any chance at meeting that boy. You have ruined a perfect opportunity to meet a *handsome*, intelligent young man.

LARA

You've never even seen him!

LEELA

Well, he *sounded* handsome.

Lara lets out an exasperated sigh.

LEELA (CONT'D)

Why do you act like this? Ria never acted like this. And look how happy she is now.

LARA

Screw Ria. She just completely deserted us for the first moron that came along wearing cheap cologne.

LEELA

Sanjay is not a moron. He is a great catch!

LARA

Why because he's a neurosurgeon? As if anyone couldn't do that if they wanted to.

LEELA

You couldn't. Honestly, my cholesterol is high and my blood pressure is rising. One of these days I'm not going to be here.

LARA

If I had a nickel for every time you promised not to live to see tomorrow..You know, Mom, you really shouldn't make promises you can't keep!

Leela points a finger at Lara and is about to launch into a tirade. Neil sees this and interjects.

NEIL

Lara...

LARA

I'm sorry.

NEIL

Leela leave this mess for tomorrow.
Everybody's tired. Let's all get
some rest.

Leela turns away and puts the mug down. She walks upstairs, muttering to herself.

LEELA

I just don't know what to do with
this girl.

Neil looks at Lara and walks over to her.

NEIL

You shouldn't annoy your mother like
that. She means well.

A beat.

NEIL (CONT'D)

I know you miss Ria. We all do.
And I know you don't care much for
Sanjay. But he's part of the family
now and we have to give him a chance.
If you want to keep Ria in your life,
you have to learn to live with the
guy.

Lara smiles at her dad. Neil lifts up his daughter's chin with his finger and kisses her forehead.

LARA

Good night, Dad.

Neil exits upstairs. Lara leans back against the couch.

She picks up her beer off the coffee table and takes a swig.

She sees the wedding album, lying next to her and slams the bottom of the bottle on Sanjay's picture.

She pauses a moment. Rolls her eyes, then picks up the bottle and wipes the album with her sleeve.

INT. MINI-VAN -- EVENING

Leela is in the driver's seat and Neil is seated next to her in the passenger seat. In the middle row, SANJAY, 30, a balding, diminutive man is seated next to RIA, 28, a very attractive girl. Aunty is seated next to Ria. In the back seat, Lara is seated uncomfortably between Grandpa and Uncle. They are all dressed in traditional Indian attire. Grandpa is struggling to put on his seat-belt. Lara reaches over and fastens it for him.

GRANDPA

(singsong)

Thank you.

RIA

That was really a nice party. Not as nice as our engagement party, but nice.

AUNTY

Maya's daughter looked really lovely.

SANJAY

But not as lovely as my wife.

Sanjay kisses Ria's cheek. Ria looks up at him. Lara observes the two of them.

AUNTY

Raj looked pretty good too.

GRANDPA

I can't quite put my *finger* on it but there is something not quite right about that boy.

SANJAY

Perhaps that's because you're not really his type, Grandpa.

Everyone in the car laughs except Aunty and Uncle. Lara approves.

Leela is on a surface street and is having trouble finding the freeway. Lara observes this and gets annoyed with her.

LARA

You're not supposed to be in this lane. Signal over and move right.

Leela signals over and moves right but accidentally cuts in front of another car and is honked at.

LARA (CONT'D)

Mom, please try and get us home in one piece. There was no booze at this party and I have a beer waiting for me that would be really unhappy if I don't make it home to drink it.

UNCLE

You know Jai is an excellent driver. He drove us all around New York City. He always maintains speed limit, and is very courteous, always waving people in. He has never even received a parking ticket.

LARA

I bet that when Jai defecates...

RIA/LEELA

Lara!!

UNCLE

(unphased)

So, Sanjay, do you work out?

SANJAY

Actually, I..

UNCLE

Jai works out daily, sometimes twice.
He even ran the marathon last year.

NEIL

You mentioned.

UNCLE

While Jai was at Columbia, he became
a very avid runner.

SANJAY

I used to know a Jai Rao at Columbia.

UNCLE

Oh, that's our Jai! That's odd.
Jai usually mentioned his top ranking
classmates, but your name never came
up.

SANJAY

We had different majors. We became
friends through Sanskrit lessons we
used to take in our spare time.

LARA

Shocking...What'd you two do when
you really wanted to be crazy? Cook
up some tofu and binge on Shirley
temples?

UNCLE

I don't think Jai cares much for
tofu.

INT. LIVING ROOM -- NIGHT

Lara is seated on the sofa drinking a beer. Ria and Sanjay
are seated on the love-seat looking at the wedding album.
Sanjay's arm is around Ria. Lara observes the two of them.

RIA

What is this face you are making here? I really need to give you a posing workshop. See how nice I look here.

Sanjay attempts an awkward attempt at an improved smile.

LARA

If there is one thing you have to admire about Ria, it's her incredible humility.

RIA

Falling well in pictures is a skill. Don't get mad at me just because you could never master it.

Ria yawns, rises, and looks at Sanjay.

RIA (CONT'D)

I'm going up to bed. You coming?

SANJAY

I'll be up in a minute.

RIA

Just be careful when you come up. Grandpa is known to step on people while they're sleeping.

Ria exits upstairs.

Sanjay and Lara are left alone in the room. There is an awkward silence for a few seconds. Sanjay continues to look at the album.

SANJAY

Don't ever tell Ria I said this. But I really have never seen a more beautiful bride before.

LARA

I don't know. I think Raj could give her a run for her money.

Sanjay laughs. He opens his mouth to speak, but then decides against it, but then begins again.

SANJAY

I know that you don't really think that much of me, but I really want you to know how much I love Ria.

LARA

The fact that you willingly entered into this family means you're either some kind of sadomasochist or really love Ria. And while the fact that you don't drink sounds really painful to me, I guess in your case it's the latter.

SANJAY

Thanks.

A beat.

SANJAY (CONT'D)

I know everyone's trying to push this Jai character on you, but you should know that his dad has no clue what he's talking about. The Jai I knew in college just used to hang out and smoke weed all day. It's a wonder the guy was able to graduate. He only showed up to the Sanskrit classes because he was after some girl in there.

LARA

And the marathon?

SANJAY

(Laughs and shakes his head no)

I think once he almost made it through a marathon of MASH, but I'm pretty sure he fell asleep during the last episode.

Lara is amused.

SANJAY (CONT'D)

But don't get discouraged.

LARA

I'm not...

SANJAY

I'm sure there is a guy out there that'll be as good for you as I am for Ria.

Lara stares at him in silence. Sanjay rises and puts the wedding album down on the coffee table in front of Lara.

SANJAY (CONT'D)

I'm going to head up to bed. See you in the morning.

Lara watches him go upstairs. She takes a swig of her beer and stares down at the wedding album. She rolls her eyes in exasperation.

LARA

No, I definitely still hate that guy.

Ria descends the stairs and goes through the family room into the kitchen. We hear her filling a glass of water.

RIA (O.S.)

So what were you two talking about?

LARA

Nothing worth repeating.

Ria, water glass in hand, comes through the dining room. She sits next to Lara on the couch.

RIA

At least it's good to see you two talking. Because I really want the three of us to spend more time together.

Lara smiles half-heartedly at her sister. Ria grabs the beer out of Lara's hand and takes a swig. Lara is taken aback by this.

LARA

Aren't you afraid of what *Sanjay* would have to say about this?

RIA

Growing up in this family, there are some things that are just a part of me. If Sanjay can't understand that...

Ria shrugs and smiles at Lara. Lara enthusiastically exits and returns with another bottle of beer. Hands it to Ria. The two sit on the couch drinking and looking at the album.

FADE OUT: