

WOMAN Contraception

A Whodunnit Mystery by Samhita Arni

We're staring at an outrageously pink plastic bag. A very gay shade of pink. It's lying amidst the debris of unpacking accumulated as my London-returned family moves into a new abode. It conceals an object that will initiate many thorny questions.

As the bag, with the letters "Superdrug" emblazoned in white, incriminating lettering, contains a plastic-wrapped pregnancy test and a receipt. Who bought it: is the main question at hand.

"Did you buy it?" "No!" I defensively scream back. "Why would I ever? I've been in a women's college for the last four years. Where could I have ever met a man?!"

We check the receipt date. May 5 2005.
Place of Purchase: The Strand, London.

"In any case I wasn't in London then," I quickly shoot back. "It couldn't have been me." And I breathe a sigh of relief. Yes, I always knew that I haven't ever been pregnant, but sometimes sly doubts creep in, especially when your mother is staring at you accusingly.

"Well, then, it must be your father or your brother", my mother concludes.

"How about you? You've been going through menopause - maybe you thought you were pregnant." Touché! I think! That's to get back at you for accusing me wrongly.

But my mother has ultra-powerful mind radar. She fixes me with a mind-numbing stare. "Well, there was that one time your father found a condom in your purse. And then an empty condom packet in your brother's things."

"If it was my brother," I add, "I would have hoped to dear heaven that he

gave the test to that poor girl who needed it."

"Yes," my mother affirms. "But suppose it was your father?"

I sense a divorce in the offing. "Who would ever want to have an affair with pa?" I ask. Oops. Wrong thing to say.

But her eyes drift away. "I don't really care," she melodramatically sniffs. "But I just wish I knew."

I look at the receipt again. Cashier Hosnat. May 5 2005. 6.99. The last four digits of the credit card number and the expiry date are also given.

"Look, ma," I cry excitedly, "We can check if it's Pa's number."

She looks, and frowns. It couldn't possibly be my dad.

Or could it? A third glance informs me that the mystifying pregnancy test had been purchased at the Strand, London. Suspiciously close to his office.

We call dad. And my mother tries to keep calm.

"I don't know. It wasn't me," my dad exclaims. "Who could it have been?"

He thinks. The seconds tick by in a strained, agonizing fashion.

"Who visited us in May?" my progenitor mutters aloud. Then he recalls. "Yes! It's Ramesh Shetty!"

What?! Ramesh Shetty is a sexagenarian family friend who lives in Coimbatore. This tantalizing tidbit, inadvertently revealed, leads me to imagine Uncle Ramesh engaging in all sorts of exciting, illicit adventures... Yuck! But, hang on, why would he buy a test in London?

Why couldn't he get it at his neighborhood pharmacy?

I don't know his reasons. But I know why I wouldn't - in India I would never have the guts to purchase a pregnancy test. Because of what the shop-wallahs will think. Why should I care? Because they do.

Because if I go up to a counter and ask for a pregnancy test contraceptive, they will either snicker lecherously, or give me a disgusted grimace as they reluctantly *hand over the worn, dusty packet of condoms.*

They've passed judgement on me, and they don't have the right.

Everyone - from housewives to prostitutes - has the right to buy contraceptives and pregnancy tests. Few of us exercise this right, to find out whether we are really pregnant, or to seek prevention against fatal STDs.

Because we are scared of what others may think of us. This fear can kill us.

We should find the courage to buy a condom, and assert that our partners use it.

It's our own lives on the line at the end of the day.