

Mrs. Menezes peers at us through her horn-rimmed spectacles and makes a disapproving pout with her mustachioed lips. Mr. Harbinder ("Oh call me Harry!") Singh's thick eyebrows do the jelly belly dance. Shanti's mouth is wide open in shock and she looks almost like a taken-by-surprise fish.

Why do I always seem to gravitate towards these people who are huge public embarrassments, I wonder wryly. I really seem to have a knack of doing this to myself.

"These young gurls and their ridiculous tantrums. They do not even know how to behave in the office!" says Mrs. Menezes tut-tutting in a stage whisper clearly intended for Laila and me to hear.

I desperately need some air. I cannot bear to see all those shocked faces. I grab Laila's arm, smile apologetically for her and make a quick exit.

"I want to live on the beach... have my own cozy but exotic restaurant... I'll serve chicken *idlis* and prawn *dosas*... maybe even start a nice handmade artifacts shop... you know the kind that sells cane furniture and scented candles and coir mats.... I'll make some good money, wine, dine, party.... and reeeeeaaaallllllly live life..." Laila says, getting increasingly animated as she inhales more quantities of fresh oxygen, once we are

outside the claustrophobically, centrally air-conditioned building we work in.

I heave a huge exaggerated sigh. "Don't we all?" I ask her.

"Then what's stopping us?" she says, turning to me, a sudden gleam of excitement in her eye.

Uh oh, I warn myself. It is time to back off. Time to put on the brakes. Otherwise I might just get carried away with her fantastic dreams.

"Because sweetheart, you and I have no money. You only cook Maggi and can not even make an omelette without burning it, and because it is just a fantasy that cannot ever be true," I say, pragmatic as ever.

Sometimes, it is better to be truthful and risk hurting your friends than see them get hurt later on, because no one told them the truth in time, I think righteously to myself. But then, on second thoughts, don't all of us have this secret dream. Don't we all long to get away and do

something daringly different? If wishes were horses then beggars would really ride. I nod to myself, for I know I am doing the right thing.

"You are one of them. You have lost all your dreams and want to be stuck in this rut forever!" accuses Laila, filled with smoldering hurt and anger.

I roll my cuffs up, all ready to enter the wrestling ring. But then I see the steely determination in her eyes and decide to back off for the moment. I breathe in deeply, close my eyes and tell her the truth. "No baby. I'm just being practical. Think about it. How on earth do you plan to go about your dream? Do you think money grows on trees?"

"Oh, you are so terribly boring! Here I am caught in this huge debate about naming my restaurant and there you are being so negative. I quite like the sound of

"The Turquoise Watermelon" - what do you think? Does it not sound cool?" she says flippantly, suddenly taking off on an altogether new track and throwing me completely off guard.

I catch my breath. "The Turquoise what?" I say. Then I get confused. "Excuse me, aren't watermelons supposed to be red?"

"Really Ria, what on earth shall I do with you. First you tell me I'm impractical and now you ask me nonsensical questions!"

"But how can a watermelon be anything but red?" I ask helplessly. This discussion is fast getting out of hand and I cannot seem to remember how or why it started in the first place.

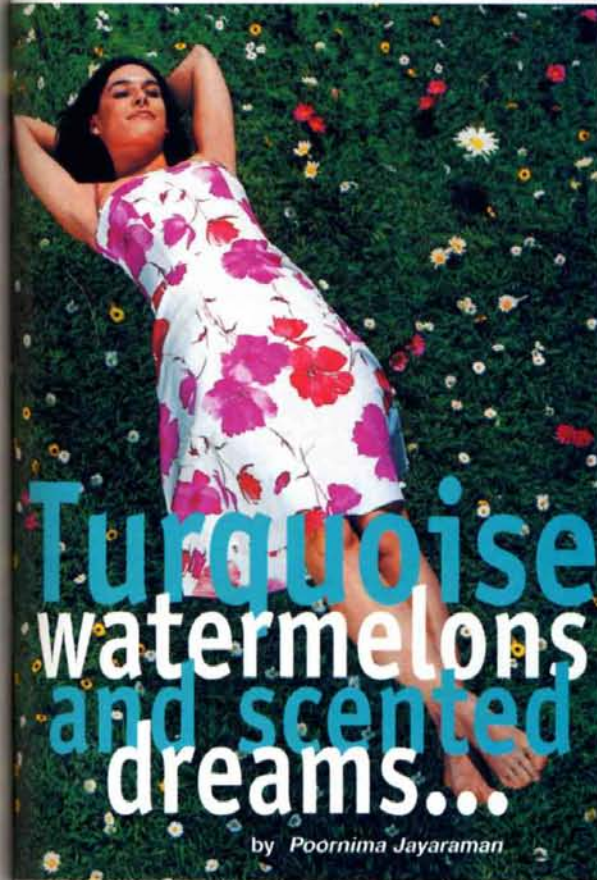
"Don't you understand? I'm going to have a *trés nouveau* and *exotique* restaurant, which will cater to the *crème de la crème* and let them relive their hippy days!" she drawls, with a distinctively French put-on accent. "I'll be mistress of my dream, flitting and socialising with horribly irresistible men at the Turquoise Watermelon. You will eat your heart out darling!"

I look at her and want to hug her. My poor darling Laila, with stars in her eyes and dreams in her heart. If only she could go ahead and live her dream... I'd be the loudest to cheer her. But for now, she will just have to be content with living in a small, rented room, shared by three other women and earning way too little for the number of hours she slaves away at work.

All she has to go on for now, is hope in her heart and stars in her eyes...

Reality beckons. Dreams will have to wait a while. I smile at her with sudden empathy and lead her back to office. We have a whole day's work to tackle. And dreams will have to be put on the backburner till we go home...

GURLZ



Turquoise watermelons and scented dreams...

by Poornima Jayaraman

"Can you keep that window open Ria?" asks Laila, one day in our fifteenth floor, glass and chrome office. "Why?" I repartee in puzzlement.

"So that I can jump out of it one of these days!" she says with comic angst.

I double up in laughter and the tears run down my face. "You're funny Laila. You really are!" I say wagging my finger at her.

"No I'm not. I just can't take this job anymore! I cannot bear to see all these self-satisfied lumps of humanoids, so engrossed in their own worlds, glad to be of service, with no dreams, no personal goals or ambitions. They like living their monotonously boring lives, where nothing exciting ever seems to happen. It makes me want to scream!" she says with melodramatic poise, raising her red painted nails to the sky for added effect.

A hush falls around us. Everyone looks at us. I squirm in embarrassed mortification.