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The Sarita Affair

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## Abstract

### The Sarita Affair

By Samyukta Mullangi

*The Sarita Affair* is the story of Leela, a young girl living in small town India, whose mother hires a nanny for her following the sudden and violent death of her father. The novel explores their friendship and the lessons that Leela learns from Sarita about life and love in the aftermath of her personal tragedy. Issues of class consciousness and religious differences test their relationship until it is completely upended by one man, Vivek. Leela soon discovers that Sarita is hiding a terrible secret, and it is that revelation that changes everything for her. *The Sarita Affair* is a novel about secrets, identity, the power of language, and the meaning of unconditional love.

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To my parents: Bringing Pranee and me up in India was the best thing you ever did for us. I owe everything to you and your love. I cannot wait to visit India again soon. The first thing I'm going to do is drop to my knees and kiss the land for all it's given me.

To my friends: I can only write well when I'm happy, and without a doubt, I would be miserable without you guys in my life. Thanks for always being there.

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## Chapter 1

It had always made sense to me to think that things happen in twos. Perhaps the Newtonesque symmetry simply appealed to me, but I saw events as creating and filling vacuums. As we go up, we go down. Thus when Sarita entered our lives one day during the summer of 1999 only a few weeks after my father died, I knew it was meant to be.

Mum had told me about her, but only briefly.

“She’s coming to take care of us,” she said. “Make sure you’re not afraid of being alone at nights.”

“How old is she?” I asked. Mum didn’t know. Our conversations had withered in the wake of my father’s death. Nothing that we could say to each other could ever be enough. So I anticipated Sarita’s arrival with more than passing interest; we were desperate for change.

We had never met her before the day she simply walked in, carrying her clothes in a rice gunny sack, Bata slippers on her weathered feet, and long black hair tied into a plait that swung left and right with every step she took. She was frail and pale, a weathered look to her round face, but with a gummy smile that told of a greater vitality. My eyes bulged when she told me her name.

“You’re my new nanny?” I asked in disbelief.

“In a manner of speaking, yes.” She winked.

“But you’re so young! You cannot be more than twenty years old.”

Sarita cocked her head and appraised me for a moment. “And you look not a day over ten although you sound much older.”

“Aah, well most people say I’m precocious for my age.”



Sarita chuckled. "Glad to hear that."

We were conversing in Telugu, the fluid and malleable language of our state. By stretching the last syllable of every word for an extra half-second, Sarita proved herself to be from the south of Andhra Pradesh, probably near the border of Tamil Nadu. I silently wondered if this was her first journey from home alone.

"But seriously, how old *are* you?" asked Sarita.

"I'm actually thirteen, thank you," I said pertly. Remembering my manners, I then said: "Well you look really tired from your trip. Do you want me to show you your room? We have leftovers in the refrigerator if you're hungry. Do you like stuffed brinjal?"

Sarita nodded vigorously through the entire speech. I felt good somehow, as if Sarita's relatively young age was making me feel older, more valued as a person with real opinions. I mattered to this girl.

She put her gunny sack down very reluctantly in her new room, as though afraid to pollute the floor with its grimy surface.

"Do you like it?" I asked. "We used to store old boxes and broken furniture here. Actually I'd like to thank you for forcing us to get rid of a lot of junk."

"I love it," Sarita said simply. Her quiet manner seemed to suggest that she really meant it. She did not move for another minute. "A room to my own."

I looked around as well. The room was fairly adequate, a hundred square feet with a sizable cot on one end and an old dresser that we had dusted and polished in another corner. Mum had found an old stand mirror at the junk yard where we unloaded a lot of our own stuff, and had brought it back. The white fluorescent tubelight on the wall was

something I actually detested; I was never fond of the powerful white lights that inevitably attracted all sorts of bugs and green lizards.

I clapped my hands impatiently. "Well let's get moving. You need to eat and I have all sorts of questions for you."

"Really?" Sarita smirked.

"Yes! And don't think I didn't forget that you never did answer my very first question. I still don't know your age."

A cloud seemed to pass over her face, and the moment became fraught with tension.

"That makes two of us," she said softly before turning her back to me and setting about unpacking her sack.

I crept out of the room quietly. My heart thudded for a moment before I remembered that breathing could be done without attracting too much attention. Sarita and I apparently belonged to very different worlds, but now here she was in mine. I clenched my fist and silently resolved to make sure that she didn't feel like a complete outsider for much longer.

The living room glinted with sunlight reflecting off steel plates, mirrors, polished tiles. It wound around the wooden beams, crisscrossing intersecting lines that seemed yet stagnant, dust particles hanging in a soupy suspension. It was only three in the afternoon and mum would get out of work late. I left Sarita to her reflections and pursued mine outside.

Mum and I lived in the doctor's quarters of the St. Clare's Hospital, built by Swiss missionaries in our sleepy town over a century back. It provided the best medical care in the district, but was poorly planned by its architects. Stretching a kilometer longitudinally,

and situated right next to a wide irrigation canal, the layout suggested that as the hospital's ambitions grew, new buildings were constructed one behind the other. From my vantage point at the farthest end of the compound, I could see the entrance arch as a small speck in the distance. Adi, the rickshaw-walah who took me to school every morning, would have to pump his pedals for over three minutes just to make it out of the campus.

I could imagine how Sarita must have viewed it when she arrived. My eyes were well accustomed to the setting and I needed to use her as a proxy with which to experience it anew. The hospital was beset by a large multi-story apartment complex to its right, and an assortment of bag shops, wholesale stores and typing schools across from it. The canal provided a natural dead end to the small street, and the hospital was the last stop for any traveler.

The entrance arch was made of beautifully curved metal rods, harking back to the days of the British rule. But over it was a more natural construction; the weight of the dead branches on the juniper trees had bent to form a tendrilled competitor whose extensions almost blotted out the rusted lettering. Good bye Brits.

Sarita would have been overwhelmed by the sight that welcomed her as she walked in. On her right stood magnificent hospital buildings in white stone, the paved brick path between two such columns teeming with patients, family members, harried doctors and sisters in white habits. On her left would be the strong, swollen canal, a nameless tributary of the Krishna river. A tall wired fence limited her access to it, but its banks looked like a scene out of the Jungle Book: trees, bushes and flowers of every origin, crocodile and snake heads glimpsing in and out of the ebb and flow, tortoises and snails crawling through the metallic gaps to the other side. And in between the fence and outer wall of the hospital lay a

shadowy path, where the cement was rough and torn in places, moss grew wherever it could, a bee hive could be seen ensconced into a nook in the wall, and the air was fragrant with the scent of jasmine and wildflowers. I always thought of it as an observation in evolution, for this path seemed like the synthesis of two different worlds. It was on this path that Sarita would have embarked, and walked for fifteen minutes before following it to its natural end: the doctors' quarters.

On the way, she would have seen how a wide space opened to her right after a few hundred meters. Terraced gardens carefully tended by the nuns flanked this opening, which led straight to the campus chapel. The doors of the chapel would probably have been open, and though it wasn't prayer time yet, a few sisters would have been sitting in the pews, heads bowed, the sunlight transformed into a dim, orange glow once inside. I liked the chapel a lot, and had visited a few times in the past, especially during Christmas. One winter I even dressed up as an angel and led the hospital Christmas contingent around the wards. A baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the three wise men counted among our group. Mum had fashioned aluminum foil into a little halo for me, and snapped a photo when I was ready.

The doctors' quarters were comprised of six bungalows in a square, with an ancient mango tree in the central courtyard for shade. It was a living and learning community. Three of the bungalows were occupied by doctors who had children my age. I had lived here my entire life. My mother's room had a balcony that held the most spectacular view of the *kachcha* path and the canal itself. Sometimes, when I felt afraid at night and would creep over to sleep with my mum, I would be lulled into quiet dreams by the sound of

water kissing the muddy banks. Owls would hoot a lullaby, and I would fall asleep to the sounds of crickets chirruping under the window.

Sarita came and sat down next to me.

“Do you miss home?” I asked, wondering how and if I would ever leave this place.

She sighed. “Don’t we all?”

\*

With her, I became an anthropologist. Observations: Sarita, in her usual white salwar-kameez, sitting with her back to the stone pillar in the middle of the living room. Her long, curly hair cascading down her shoulders and draping the knees she draws up to her chest. Her face is forlorn, and though I’m looking right at her, she does not seem to possess that sixth sense of being observed. Detachment.

I can’t name the emotion in my own chest. It’s not pity, empathy, or even boredom. I had held no expectations of my new nanny, and so she has neither delighted nor disappointed me. I’m solely curious.

Sarita does not say much, and much of what she does say is cryptic. I wonder if silence is her shibboleth. There is nothing revealing about her. No fancy scars that would offer a window for questioning; her face is smooth, almond-tinted, blemish-free. Her clothes are plain and utilitarian. Her Bata slippers are squeaky and ordinary, and she does not indulge in cosmetics. Is she homesick, or is this her natural level of emotion? I am unsure.

Mum had greeted Sarita fondly upon their first meeting and asked her repeatedly if she was comfortable.

“Don’t be a stranger,” she said, eyes furrowed with concern. “Leela and I are your family now. This is your home.”

Sarita ducked and hid her face from view. She was probably flushing with embarrassment. But still, no response. Not a single sentence. She was a shadow of a person, I decided. My mother seemed to understand her better.

“She’s tongue-tied,” she said.

“By the enormity of this situation,” I said, nodding.

“No, by my beauty,” my mum said, rolling her eyes.

It had been three days since Sarita’s arrival into our lives. I was sitting in my room, working on a short poem, when I heard her knock on the door.

“Come in one, come in all,” I sang. She entered with a chuckle.

“I was thinking that it’s such a beautiful day outside, and here we are cooped up in here. And for what reason?” She gestured extravagantly with her hands. “Have you ever tried to knock alphonso mangoes from that tree?” She pointed out through the open window.

I was so surprised at her sudden enthusiasm that I would have dropped whatever I was doing to follow her. Did she have a reservoir of energy that needed a few days of silence to recharge? I agreed to go outside with her.

The sun blazed down on our necks the instant we stepped out. I had on an orange Mexican sombrero that my uncle had gotten for me on a business trip. The concrete ground was gravelly, and when I kicked a stone out of my way, insects fled from underneath for a different source of shade. Sarita had her salwar pants rolled up above her knees, and her creamy calves flexed with every step. She handed me a bucket and a long towel.

“I’m going to scale this wall here,” she told me, pointing to the brick fence separating our quarters from the thatches and forest that lay beyond. “Then I’m going to whack the branches with this fat stick, and you will try to catch the falling mangoes with the towel. When you do, you can deposit them in the bucket. Good?”

“Yeah!”

“Good. Now let’s have some fun!” She rubbed her palms together excitedly, tied her hair back in a loopy ponytail and within seconds, had clambered to the top of the narrow wall. My heart began to beat rapidly as I registered how far the drop would be if her foot were to slip.

But she was absolutely fearless. Darting back and forth on the narrow space like a trapeze artist, she smacked the branches of our tree as though she were enacting a deep-seated vengeance. The branches groaned and croaked at their stiff knobbly joints. I missed half of the mangoes that came flying down, big orange bullet-like, because I had one eye on her safety the entire time. Did she not care for the integrity of her body, her limbs, for god’s sake! I swallowed my yelps as we grew more and more synchronized. Whack! Whoosh! Flump. The mango meniscus grew higher and higher. I called for a stop a half hour later.

Sarita leaped off the wall with the agility of a flying monkey. My brow was covered with sweat, and my hair had risen three inches with the accompanying frizz. Sarita arched her back to take a look at her soles. The tender skin was red with pressure, and some traces of blood were visible.

“We should go back in and rinse those off before you get infected or something,” I said urgently. “I can go search the medicine cupboard for some alcohol wipes. We’ve got many.”

“No need,” she said. “A few scrapes are nothing. I’m hardier than that.” She jostled me with her elbow affectionately.

“Are you sure? I’d rather you...”

“Oh look at how many we collected!” she exclaimed, relieving me of the heavy bucket. “We’ll have to show your *amma*, I bet I can make a mango-dal curry out of this too.” She nodded vigorously to reaffirm her idea.

“And pickle?” I asked, excited.

“Hmm I don’t know about that. These may be too ripe for pickling. Maybe some other time.”

We trudged back inside, and I popped into the bathroom for a quick rinse. No such thing as one shower too many during an Indian summer. My skin felt warm and sun-kissed from the mango haul, and I felt giddy from all the excitement. Sarita was definitely... bipolar. How was it that someone could go from being sullen and slow for three days to *that?*

I shrugged and emptied another tumbler of cold water on my head. Of course, I shouldn’t forget that Sarita was probably feeling homesick or uncertain of her new surroundings. It was only natural that she would eventually break out of that shell. And yet, there was something so *excessive* about her energy out on the wall... it felt like she really did not give a damn about her safety at all. But was I just being the old woman that my mum always teased me for, with my partiality to caution? Hmm... perhaps.

\*

I quickly came to realize that Sarita was everything and nothing at the same time. She could be anything she wanted to be: witty and sophisticated, or silly and stupid, or



quick and strong. I played American songs for her on the cassette player all day, and she taught me some basic cross-stitches to practice on handkerchiefs. We played card games like old women during the heat of the day, with mango lassis in one hand and a deck of cards with Taj Mahal prints on the backs. My summer homework, a private course in Hindi, got pushed to the side as we wiggled our toes on the front porch and watched the driveway through a haze of heat. The only times I left her side were when Minnie and Puja, my neighbors and childhood buddies, came knocking for an afternoon of play.

“You hardly spend time with us anymore,” Minnie accused as soon as we seated ourselves on her living room carpet.

“That’s not true. I always answer when you come calling!”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not the same. *You* never knock on *our* doors. It’s like you don’t even care anymore.”

I opened my eyes to retort, but stopped. It *was* true. I could remember the days on end that Minnie, Puja and I used to spend with each other. We were inseparable. We pretended to be teacher-students, police-thieves, and housewives... This summer, it was like all that had fallen by the wayside.

“When does school start for you?” I asked, changing the subject. Minnie was the same age as me; we were due to start eighth year soon. Puja was two years younger but for the fact that she skipped first grade and was to be in the seventh year class.

“Two weeks,” said Minnie sullenly.

“Two and a *half* for me,” said Puja with a smug smile.

“Gah, why aren’t I in a normal school?” I questioned, throwing my hands up to the heavens. “I’ve only got this weekend left.”

“Oh man, that’s early!” Minnie exclaimed. “Are you class monitor this year? I’m sure you are, you genius.”

Silence. Had they forgotten? My heart constricted for a moment, and I pressed hard with my thumb and forefinger on my tear ducts. No, they were dry. I was safe.

In the quietly shellshocked days following father’s death, I had made a very significant discovery. I was just beginning to realize the importance of stories. Everybody had an account for what had happened, and they trailed from the completely illogical to the hypothetical grazed from the few and limited eye witness reports. It had been on day four of the investigation that I found my voice. *I know what happened*, I told the world then. *I was there*. I sealed the case shut, because my testimony left no room for doubt. *He lost his footing. No one could have done anything*. The police found a kite that had trailed to its own bruised end later that afternoon. When the case wrapped up, my mother and I were left to satisfy our senses with only the other. The thread of conversation that had gone into overdrive during the days of the police force, the press, and the relatives was cut short. I decided to let memories rest in their appropriate place: the past. I knew that mum was going to get hurt otherwise and I had no intention of being a causal factor.

“Oh that’s right!” Puja gasped. The two shared a meaningful glance at each other, and came forward to hug me tightly. My face scrunched up at the closeness of their bushy ponytails.

“I’m so sorry I asked,” said Minnie urgently. “Gosh, I’m so thoughtless. Please forgive me?”

I felt like I had to run somewhere. Once, when I was taking a walk with my father by the canal, we had come upon a small tortoise sunbathing on the muddy side of the path. It

was small and gray-green and its eyelids were shut, as though it was experiencing one true moment of nirvana. I wanted to touch it, pick it up, stroke its soft underbelly, put it in my pocket. But the moment my fingers came near it, its five appendages darted into the shell in fright. My father had chuckled lightly.

“Honey, you’ve ruined its nap,” he said, his laugh echoing in the recesses of my mind. But I had felt like I had disturbed something greater than a simple siesta. The image of the tortoise experiencing something like bliss or simple contentment for a moment was seared into my imagination.

And now, with my two friends enfolding me like a protective shell, I felt like the tortoise that had been forced to retreat behind a wall of pretense and pity. But I wanted out. I felt claustrophobic. My breath came out in short spasms, and I fell backwards.

Crawling away from them, I got to my feet and darted to the door.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I said. “Must go.”

Sarita was sleeping on her cot when I burst into her room.

“Are you okay?” she demanded, as I collapsed at the side of her bed. “What happened?”

I shook my head. A feeling of security was already sweeping back. Wasn’t that an overreaction? I thought about going back and apologizing for the unnecessary theatrics.

“Low blood sugar,” I said by way of explanation. “Feed my hungry stomach please.”

Sarita continued to look suspiciously at me as she watched me force myself to eat more rice and curry. I avoided her eyes and concentrated on the plate in my hand.

Here’s the thing about stories: you tell one often enough and soon you’ll be convinced of its truth too.

\*

My grandmother swears to this day that when she was pregnant with my mother, she experienced more abdominal kicks than with all her other children combined.

“Her feet were going pitter-patter on the inside even then,” she told me. “Your mother was born dancing. You know, I don’t have any photos from her first roll over, or first belly crawl or anything. She skipped right past those and into her Kuchipudi anklets.”

My dancing mother, fearsome and winsome, was every paradox rolled into one individual. A religious skeptic, she decided to work in a missionary hospital and send her only daughter to a missionary school. “You need to know why we do what we do, *yaar*. Informed decisions,” she would say, a stylishly long fountain pen bouncing between her rapid fingers. Disillusioned with politics, she kept up a running commentary on every crooked fool in office from pre 1947 to post, current day. “Your great-grandparents gave their lives for this country,” she admonished me, “so you should at *least* understand the irony of their sacrifice.” Irritated with “prepubescent” concepts like romance and love, she nonetheless married the first, biggest, and only love of her life. And lost him ever so recently.

But no more on that now.

The only exercise that she was not half-hearted or scornful about was her dancing. Din tha naka naka, din din tha naka naka. Her powerful legs mercilessly pounding the marble floors of her capacious room day in and day out, skirt slashing through the air and pit stains spreading across her tight cotton blouses, her long hair tied down in a thick braid swinging across a moment too late, and wrapping her body during those dramatic pauses during which the only movements are of her big, expressive eyes and her breath audible, as

she battles composure with an adrenaline rush were as normal to her as eating and sleeping. My mother danced her way through every emotion, event, and thought of her life. Her first crush, her first English film, her first political assassination, her initiation into a college secret society, the first time she met my father, her first disillusionment, her first bribe, the day she became a physician... My mother flashed and *naached* her way through them all.

Two headstrong but entirely different women in one household was an experiment waiting to happen. Sarita's brooding contrasted as deeply with my mother's knack for expression as sulphur and silver. *Ek myaan mein do talawaren nahin samati*. Two swords do not fit in one scabbard.

"You are quickly becoming fascinated with her, aren't you?" asked my mother during a nighttime whisper at my bedside.

"What do you mean? You could say she's my friend, that's all," I said defensively.

"No" – said contemplatively. "It's more than that. She's starting to influence you, I can see it." – a pause – "Keep an eye on her. I think there's something psychologically *bent* about her, but I don't know what yet."

I kept my lips pursed, but a sudden tension made my back go stiff and a crease appear on my forehead. I absolutely hated it when my mother put ideas in my head like that. Not all of us could just dance our introspective burdens away.

"Give her a chance, *ma*. She's probably just homesick."

My mother smiled. "You're probably right, *jaan*." She kissed my forehead and got up to leave.

“You know,” she said suddenly, stopping under the door sill, “you have a wonderful heart. I need you tell me if you ever feel like I’m suffocating that.” With that, she left.

I wondered about that for a little while afterwards. Mother could be overwhelmingly intense at times, the center of attention, the star of every situation. But at least she wasn’t oblivious to that.

Sarita, on the other hand...

Where my mother relished in her social commentary, her need to put a spin on everything she encountered, Sarita seemed to be content with internalizing. She invited attention to herself through her absence – her shadows where you expected to find her form.

What I did learn about her came from chance observations and unintended comments.

I learned that she was used to manual labor, as I watched her deftly sweep the floors, broom the ceiling corners clear of cobwebs, wipe the dining tables, change the bed covers, whip the wet laundry on the stone tiles before hanging them to dry, and briskly chop vegetables to put in the *sambhar*. I discovered her love for the outdoors, for even when as she progressed through her daily chores, she took breaks and sat on the door sill, her silhouette striking against the bright reflective glare of the sun on the asphalt beyond it. She took me on walks at least twice a day, and found a way to jimmy the lock on the fence to pass through to the canal banks.

“Theoretically, you can,” I told her. She laughed.

One Wednesday, I walked ten steps behind her to the chapel mass. She sat at the edge of the very last pew, and I stood silhouetted in the doorway. Sarita had me jumping

through all sorts of hoops to understand her better. So she was Christian? Her head was bowed, and hair tied back in a long plait. The nuns and sisters who knew me well smiled at me and beckoned me in to sit with them. I did.

“I didn’t know you were Christian,” I said, when the mass was over and we caught each other’s eyes.

“I’m not.”

“Then what...?”

“I’m not anything,” she said. “I’m just trying to figure out if there even *is* a God.”

I didn’t ask anything else. Some would say that I was too young to be thinking about God and heaven and hell, but the subject was difficult to avoid when one lived amidst a gaggle of nuns.

“What do you think?” she said suddenly. Probingly. I was surprised. She rarely seemed keen to continue conversations, and most of ours tended to morph into interrogations on my part.

I hesitated. “Not to sound presumptuous or anything,” I said, lowering my voice as we were still sitting in the sandalwood pews, “but I think the question is irrelevant.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “How so?”

“I mean, I definitely like being Hindu...”

“Despite your mother’s views?”

“She lets me make my own decisions. This is what I think: We all have had our imaginary friends, haven’t we? If enough people imagine the same figure, and it reaches critical mass, it becomes real enough to matter. I mean, God is someone who inspires us to do better with our lives, make morally sound choices, and think about the legacies we’re

leaving. But being Hindu, rather than just a spiritual person, lets me in on a world full of culture, history, music, dance, art, and most importantly, community.” I shrugged. “It’s a solid bargain.”

Sarita stared at me. “So you think of it as a social construct and nothing else? Do you feel the need to actually, I don’t know, *believe*?”

“I do believe, don’t get me wrong. I just don’t think that it has to be an everyday central thought. God can be a companion, of sorts, but not necessarily one that has to preoccupy your every moment. I’d rather be good for the sake of goodness, and not for the sake of heaven or whatever abstract concept lies hereafter.”

Sarita laughed shortly. “You’re an unusual kid.”

“I live an unusual life.”

She inclined her head. “Well, you’ve certainly given me fodder for thought.”

We got up and languidly walked back to the house.

“But you’re also very cynical,” she observed. “I wonder where you got that from.”

“My mother,” I said immediately.

“I like the idea of cleansing,” she continued, more to herself than to me. “I like the visual of it. As though the dirt and sin is sloughing off my body and into the gutter or something.”

“It’s certainly compelling.”

She gave me a sideways smile. I looked ahead at the guava and jackfruit trees, their boughs laden with heavy fruit.

“Maybe you’re too young to comprehend.”

“Not an excuse,” I muttered.



“No, I just mean that perhaps we’ve lived very different lives up until now, yeah?” I looked askance at her until she explained: “It’s different out there,” she said, gesturing to the St. Clare’s gates. “The kinds of people you meet are different, the kinds of prejudices you face, the social class structures, the problems are thornier...”

“What prejudices have you had to face?”

“Are you kidding me?”

I immediately retreated. “Don’t get me wrong, the question wasn’t meant to offend you.”

“I think this conversation is over.”

That stung, and for more reasons than one.

“Now listen to me here,” I finally burst, as we neared the house. “You don’t get to talk to me like that.”

She swung around, hands on her hips. The tone of the conversation had changed, her face was closed up, and even the mango tree in the courtyard seemed to sway threateningly as though it was telling me to keep silent.

*Tell me why*, her face seemed to ask of me, but I felt even more indignant as a result. Wasn’t the reason self-evident?

“I know that we’re becoming friends here,” I said cautiously. The anger continued to simmer in the controlled tremble of my words. “But you are still a hired girl,” and the electricity of the situation seemed to crack and blaze at our very feet, but I ploughed on nonetheless, “and you *will* show me that bare modicum of respect that you owe me.”

My breath heaving, I pushed past her and into the house. The floor seemed to lurch with every breath, and the dimness and coolness of the tile floors invited me to curl up on them. I stomped to my room and shut the door.

Dinner was a silent affair with mother and me. Sarita decided to stay outdoors, and I didn't bother to change her mind.

## Chapter 2

The silence that reverberated around the bungalow these days had many repercussions. With only two more weeks to go before the start of eighth year, I stayed in my room, working on getting a head start on the reading, and writing sporadically into my journal. Everything seemed cooler somehow, and not just the frosty expressions that Sarita constantly wore. The air seemed to nip and bite more, and the languid weather of the summer had given way to little eddies of wind that played around my ankles every time I stepped outside onto the veranda. But put together with the swirling cloudy skies, I knew that this was just the chill before the mother of all storms.

For weeks now, our meteorologists had been warning us about the oncoming monsoons, and how the exceptionally large water fall this year was going to wreck havoc in the streets sans a decent gutter system. The melancholy air led me to play Bhupen Hazarika records all day, and write poetry about fishes and freedom. *Oh Ganga behti ho kyon?* Mother was booked at the clinic twenty hours a day because her patients flocked to her from every district trying to get their prenatal check-ups done before transportation became a bad joke.

“*Ram Ram!*” she exclaimed, as she flitted between the bathroom and her vanity at seven in the morning. “What happened to the weekends I used to know?”

I missed her. The emptiness of the house was so acute, it was making me tremble. After lying in bed with a vacant expression for a few hours, I got up, brushed my skirt down and made my way out to visit the neighbors.

“Minnie, let’s do something. I’m terribly bored,” I said as soon as I saw her at the door.

We went to knock on Puja's door, and settled down in the latter's bedroom for board games.

"Ooh, how about Life?" asked Minnie, waving the cardboard box with its neon, plasticky family figures smiling at us creepily.

"Sure why not," I said. Yes, this game would take real skill: rolling dice.

Within five minutes, all three of us had acquired a husband, two children, and a car. Puja's cousins were home too, but being boys, decided not to join the game.

"Man oh man," said Minnie. "This is the closest I'm ever going to get to *actually* having a husband, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you hear? Boys are gross. I'm going to be a nun."

I rolled my eyes. "You say that now..."

"What?" Minnie asked in mock horror. "You don't agree? *Hai hai*, you are just so advanced, aren't you?"

Puja got up to go to the bathroom. We took a break waiting for her to come back and fell on her bed. Puja's room was a mad pastiche of colors and crafts, because her family was always going on vacation to places that outfitted them with great souvenirs. In comparison, my own room was neat and sensible, a uniform color palette of brown and blue and only two stuffed toys.

"So," I said. "What's new with you?"

"My mother's having a baby."

I sat up. "Pardon?"

“Yes, my mother, who is nearing forty, has miraculously conceived. She is now “expecting”.” Minnie pulled quotation marks down in the air.

“Well you look thoroughly bummed about it.”

Minnie exhaled an avalanche of air. She looked like she had been waiting for ages to confide in someone.

“I think it’s absolutely disgusting,” she said seriously.

“What? Why are you so harsh?”

“Shut up and think about it. This means my parents... are still... doing the dirty deed.” Her eyes widened suggestively and cringed a moment after. “Apparently they’re unaffected by all the Catholicism around here.”

“And *that’s* what is upsetting you? Are you excited to be a big sister?”

“I don’t know.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Have you told Puja yet?”

“No. Have you noticed Puja lately?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh that’s right,” Minnie drawled sarcastically. “You have new best friends now and never spend time with us.”

“Stop it.”

Minnie gave me a mild version of her evil eye before brushing it off. “Well Puja’s been really - umm what’s the word for it - *queer* lately.”

I stopped. “Queer?”

“Strange, rather. She’s so sullen and unresponsive, and she never comes around anymore.”

I grinned. "Maybe this phenomenon of all your friends ditching you is a reflection on you, not us."

We could hear Puja's light footsteps approaching. Minnie looked at me meaningfully and pointed to her eyes. *Watch her.*

Puja, little Puja, only eleven years old, and in her bright yellow skirt, black shirt, hair braided into pigtails, her button nose looking shiny from the humidity, but something more... her fingernails chewed down and the skin around them nervously pinched, the exhaustion in her face showing through the hollowness of her eyes, the dark patchy bruise suddenly visible on the inside of her thigh as she sat down, Indian-style.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked pointing at it, with no room for subtlety.

Puja followed my finger and her eyes widened as she seemed to discover it for the first time herself.

"Would you believe me if I told you that I had absolutely no idea?" She chuckled nervously. "Well at least it doesn't hurt."

I shrugged at her with a smile, but Minnie continued to stare at it, and our afternoon of board games passed a little more quietly.

\*

The antagonism had reached a tipping point around the house. I had decided to avoid childishly confiding in my mother about the state of things between Sarita and me. That would only result in her teetering uselessly between wanting to smooth things over, and finding a scapegoat to blame for the whole mess, and I could guess who she would pick. Sarita would be furious at me and it would only escalate the tension. And finally, I would be

lying if I said that I didn't feel guilty for igniting such a battle so early into Sarita's tenure. To be euphemistic about it, she hated me.

I passed the olive branch to her over breakfast by commenting on her delicious *dosas*.

"And the coconut chutney has just the right amount of sour tamarind in it. Good job!"

Imagine my disappointment when the compliment dissipated into thin air.

A few hours later, I stood a little while away while Sarita whacked the wet laundry against the stone tiles out back, and wrung the suds clean out of them. When she saw me, I pressed play on the cassette player, releasing the musical notes of *Taal*, the latest Aishwarya Rai starrer, which had been consistently making the charts for the past three weeks. I knew that Sarita loved the soundtrack.

No response.

I gritted my teeth. "What will it take for this fight to just end already?" I asked her tiredly.

She turned the water tap on and drowned me out.

Filled with righteous indignation, I stomped back to the living room and paced, thinking. I could now continue to extend the white flag and be syrupy nice to her, I could just go back to ignoring her as she did me, or...

Examining the smooth, polished marble floor, I figured that she must have already swept and wiped it with phenyl water. A crafty look came to my face. I battled with myself for only a short minute before I put my shoes on and went outside. After tromping around

the damp ground for a few minutes, I came back inside and zigzagged across the floor. Then I accidentally spilled a glass of water on the floor, and hopped around some more.

“What are you doing?” asked a steely voice.

“Twirling around.” I replied lightly. Not bad, this was the first time she had actually spoken to me in days.

I turned to look at her, and watched a vein throb dangerously in her forehead. I almost faltered. “I was wondering if I got my mother’s dancing gene.”

Sarita walked away to the bathroom and I could hear the sound of a bucket being filled.

Feeling a little guilty, I took the shoes off and sat down on a chair, my legs pulled up to allow her better access to the floor.

She knelt to her knees and started wiping the marble with her rag.

After a few moments of peace, I said: “You know, it’s not very mature of you to hold a grudge against a thirteen-year old for this long.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “I thought bringing age into play wasn’t really your thing.”

Defeated, I smiled sheepishly. She was right on the mark there, and I was resorting to cheap shots.

“I’m sorry I ruined the floor.”

“I’m sorry you have to feel sorry.”

“What?” I didn’t understand her import.

She put the rag down and looked up at me, still squatting. “I’m not mad at you, nor was I ever,” she said. – a huge lie but I let it pass – “I just ended our... communication because I realized how much we were fooling ourselves.”



“I beg your pardon?”

“As you so rightly pointed out, we belong to two very different social strata.” I cringed. “And therefore we should stop pretending that we are or could ever be friends. That’s all.”

I sucked in a huge breath and held it in until my face started changing color. Sarita continued to wipe the floor, and I remained silent until she was done and was expelling the bucket’s dirty contents in the bathroom.

“Maybe we should try and even out the differences then,” I said. She jumped, not having realized that I had crept up behind her.

“What do you mean?” she asked in a clipped voice.

“Tell me something that I have that you really want, and I’ll give it to you.”

She turned to me in a violent manner, much as she had confronted me last, before the Silence had set in. Her eyes were narrowed and she was looking at me appraisingly, but at least, her face was clear of any sort of resentment.

“Anything?”

“Absolutely anything.”

I could see a million thoughts running through her head.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” she said almost inaudibly. I was startled. In my impetuosity, I didn’t realize how much this gesture actually affected her.

“I don’t mean to.”

“I’ll need to think about this.” She smiled at me and left. I ate my lunch alone, and retired to my room.

With only three days to go before the start of school, I had a lot on my plate. To begin, I had scarcely made any headway into the Enid Blyton's Malory Towers boarding school saga, which I would have to tackle soon. I sifted through my book bag and threw out all the used notebooks from the previous year. Where a notebook had been barely used, I just ripped out the used pages and kept it. Mum had gotten me new journals, and we had made a trip to the school a month back to get my new textbooks as well. I seated myself comfortably on the floor against my bed and started to cut out book covers. As tedious the job was, the manual motions of it were relaxing.

Back when father was still around, we used to wrap presents for each other for every kind of holiday – birthdays, Diwali, Christmas, Eid, Sankranti, Holi, and Ugadi. The years of practice had dealt me expert hands, and I savored the feeling of competency.

When my mother came home, she and I went to the tailor's to pick up my new uniform. A faded white shirt and blue pinafore, the uniform was pretty standard. It appeared that I had grown in height but that my shoe size had remained unchanged. At least that meant that I didn't need new black buckled shoes. My new uniform was crisp from the starch the tailor's wife must have used to wash it in preparation for us. I held the fabric to my nose and inhaled the soapy fragrance of it in the rickshaw on the way home. Mum rolled her eyes.

"Tell me what you're thinking," she said.

I bit my lip. "Oh I've just been musing over some things lately," I said. "Do you think we live in a bubble, *ma*?"

"What do you mean, a bubble?"

“That perhaps we, or rather I, don’t understand the kind of life that everyday Indians live?”

My mother studied the question by looking at me intensely.

“Where did you get these notions from?” was the first thing she wanted to know.

“Nowhere. I have thoughts,” I said defensively.

“Is this coming from Sarita? What’s going on between you two anyway?”

“You’re deflecting,” I said, in an attempt to deflect.

“No.”

“No as in you’re not deflecting or no, you won’t answer, or no, we don’t live in a bubble?”

My mother laughed.

“Really ma,” I said, trying to make her laugh harder, “It’s unfair to let one measly word carry so many connotations.”

“Fine, no, we don’t live in a bubble,” she said, wiping the corners of her eyes.

“Whatever made you think that?”

I just pursed my lips. It was the right answer to say, but it felt *too* right. I wanted honesty, and the truth.

“So what you’re saying is that though we live next to a small river, in the doctor’s quarters of a missionary hospital, and I go to private school with a spanking new uniform to boot, we are just two regular gals?”

My mother’s eyes twinkled. “Exactly.” She kissed my forehead. Then, noticing my frustrated expression, she sighed, “Of course, that depends a lot on what you mean by regular or ordinary Indians.”

I huffed. "You know what I mean."

"No, I really don't. This is a country of one billion people, with dozens of languages and cultures and opinions, and there will be rich people and poor, and people who celebrate their New Year in October and those who do it in March and still more who do it in January, and people who are the daughters of doctors and people who work as nannies and servants. You define "regular" to me then."

I glared at her. "And you act like you are so oblivious, don't you."

She laughed. "I know you like Sarita and even look up to her as a big sister, and that's fine. I'm so glad that you two are becoming friends, but..."

"But what?"

"Don't insist on pleasing her all the time if that means needing to doubt yourself, okay?"

"I'm not doing that!"

"I'm not saying you are. The two of you can be friends without having to prove which one is the more authentic Indian or the bigger victim or the faster runner. This is not a contest."

"Faster runner? Really?"

"No matter how terrible she thinks her background is, *you* don't have to apologize for it. All you can really do is be who you are, which is genuine, sweet, helpful, kind..."

"...beautiful, intelligent, charismatic."

"Humble, modest..."

I slapped her wrist and we both laughed.

“Sometimes I feel like I do need to apologize though,” I said. “Maybe it’s a collective mistake, to let things remain just the way they are.”

“And are they going to change if you beat yourself up over it”?

“No, but...”

“If you want to somehow institute social change, turn your feelings into a concrete plan. Become a social worker, or a politician, or the collector of the city. But you were born into this household, and you didn’t really ask for a doctor for a mother or an absent father or a house on the river, did you? You need to stop feeling personally responsible, understand me?”

I let out a warbled laugh. “If I could, I’d still choose you,” I said.

My mother sighed. “Please add ‘cheesy’ to your list of adjectives.”

Later that night, as I pored over the adventures of Darrell and Sally, a knock came through the door.

“Come in,” I said, absentmindedly.

“I’ve decided what I’d like from you,” Sarita said, kneeling at my bed before I could form a “hello”.

I remembered the conversation that I had with my mother in the rickshaw and wondered whether I still needed to be bargaining with Sarita. My heart thudded for a moment. What on earth was she going to ask as retribution? How well did I know her, after all? What if she wanted my favorite shirt, or my silver ring, or the movie posters on my wall?

“And what would that be?” I asked eventually.

Sarita sat back on her feet and looked down at her nervously fidgeting fingers. "If it's not too much of a hassle, I'd like you to teach me how to read."

I silently marveled at her. Despite the idiocy that we had both kept up for a week, my faith in her was restored. Not only was this request not for material possessions, something that I admired of her, but it was for something that would actually level our social differences. Sarita was giving us a reason to spend time together and have fun, and this was just the thing that would diffuse our vacuum of conversation.

"Gladly," I said, without hesitation.

She looked surprised. "You mean it?"

"Yeah, I think it's a brilliant idea." I slid off of the bed, and retrieved one of the new notebooks that I had just wrapped that afternoon.

"I used to have a Telugu textbook that would have been useful to teach you with, but I've since passed it on to a younger cousin. That's okay though. We can start out with the alphabet and I don't need a guide for that."

Sarita accepted the notebook and pen with something close to reverence.

"You really mean it?"

I sighed.

Sarita laughed delightedly. "You're a good kid," she said, in a soft voice. "I'm really glad to know you."

And with that, we got started on her vowels.

### Chapter 3

The start of school was a little more anticlimactic than I would have liked. Adi, my regular rickshaw-walah pedaled up to my house ten minutes before eight, even though I had been sitting pretty in my uniform and with my tiffin box dangling from one arm since seven-thirty. My mother had already left for work, although she did squeeze my cheeks so hard before she left that the redness remained. Adi thought I had been slapped.

“Getting into trouble already, huh?” he inquired.

“How was your summer without me, Adi?”

“Oh you know, it was okay,” he said, hoisting my book-bag into the luggage net behind the seats. “A bit dull without having to groan at your stupid jokes every morning, but I survived.”

I smiled. Adi was my designated school commute for the past three years, and I liked bantering with him in the mornings. He was hoarse, brash, and his teeth were stained red from all the betel nuts he chewed, but we were friends.

“Have you met Sarita?” I asked, gesturing to her as she stood at the door to wave me goodbye. “She lives with us now.”

“Hello beautiful,” he said, winking at her. I huffed.

With another smile and wave, we were off, to pick up about six more kids before actually embarking on the route to school.

I liked the feeling of the wind blowing into my hair as Adi pedaled lustily to gain momentum. When he achieved a reasonable speed, or if we turned a bend and started going downhill, he would quit pedaling, and let out whoops of laughter as he pretended to

let go of the handlebars. The other children in the rickshaw loved the show. We arrived at school breathing hard and looking flushed.

Anusha accosted me the moment I walked into my new classroom.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked, holding me by the shoulders.

“Nice to see you too,” I said, wrinkling my nose. “How was the rest of your summer?”

“You know what I mean,” she said significantly. “You’ve fended off every single one of my phone calls this entire summer. This conversation needs to happen.”

I shook her off.

After a certain point, I wished that people would let what happened remain in the past. I was past needing sympathy.

Anusha and I had become friends only in the past year, when her parents decided that she should take Hindi instead of Telugu as her second language in school. This meant that she got put into my section, and I met her for the first time.

We soon realized our mutual love for mystery novels, our mutual dislike of our Geography teacher, and our recreational interest in gossip. We kept each other’s secrets close though. No one in our class but Anusha knew of what happened to my father. I knew she would keep it that way unless I explicitly said otherwise.

The bell rang and we took our seats. Anusha seemed to wisely decide not to pursue the subject further but I sensed her glances on me every few minutes. Meanwhile, I perused the class syllabi, the faces of my classmates, the general air and lighting of the classroom. Eighth form was not that different from seventh year. My classmates had all moved up with me, and I could count a maximum of two new faces. Because we had all signed up for Hindi



as our language, we were inevitably stuck together, the minority group in a school that went overwhelmingly Telugu.

But there were *some* differences. I noticed that a number of girls had outgrown their skirts too but didn't order new sets like I did. An ample amount of thigh was visible on all sides. I was confused. Also, was that lipstick I saw on Monica's face or had she just picked at her lips until they became raw and red?

During recess, Anusha and I went to sit under the banyan tree in the school's *maidan*. This was where we usually stood for attention during general assembly, but owing to the extreme humidity, assembly had been held inside today.

"Happy to be back?" I asked.

"Is the sky blue? Do fishes swim?"

"It was just a question."

"A rhetorical one, apparently."

"Well I've certainly missed your sarcasm."

Anusha winked at me and picked at the grass. "Summers always feel like more work to me than the school year," she said. "*Amma's* got me going to Kuchipudi dance lessons, Carnatic music lessons, veena instrumental lessons... this year, she even signed me up to practice "the art of Henna painting on palms" if you'd believe it."

"Doesn't sound too bad."

She turned on me in disbelief. "What." Clipped tones.

"She's taking a vested interest in your betterment," I said, leaning a few inches back.

"You sound so pretentious."

“I did absolutely nothing this summer. The only good thing has been Sarita – she takes care of us now.”

Anusha immediately sobered up and her volume went down a full turn. “Well, I mean, a lot has happened to you lately.”

I stood up in disgust. “If all we’re going to do here on out is make excuses for poor old me, who lost her father so young, then I’m out.” I stalked away, feeling angrier with each step. But guilt was my companion too. *It’s just a shitty spot to be stuck in.* I knew I was being irrational but the situation was itself not rational. It wasn’t rational that my father should up and *die* like that me.

“He’s dead,” I bellowed at her, turning on the spot, fifty meters far from her. “He’s dead, dead, and dead. Let’s just leave it at that.”

No, I didn’t feel like the victim in a bad tragic film. No, I didn’t feel compelled to wear white vestments for a year, or wail loudly like some hired funeral singer, or thump my chest and pull at my hair as I sat on the banks of the Ganges. No, there wasn’t some slow dirge accompanying me with every step, and my mind was not filled with bleak and black thoughts. No, I did not feel resentful of children with living fathers, or feel the need to avenge his meaningless death in some way. And no, I didn’t particularly feel like talking about it.

Why couldn’t the rest of the world just understand that, and let me be?

Anusha apologized to me through a folded note in the middle of our next class. *I can’t pretend to understand what you’re feeling, it said, but just know that I’m here for you. I won’t bring it up again.*

I nodded.

\*

My mother was dancing in our living room when I came home from school. She had tied a sash around her waist and pinned her hair up. I turned the fan on, and got her attention.

“Princess, you’re home!” she exclaimed. “How was your first day?”

“Pretty dull,” I said. “Where’s Sarita?”

“Oh! She must be out back in the balcony.” My mother faltered as she pointed in a vague direction but I headed there anyway.

“Have you memorized those vowels yet?” I called as I walked to my room. Sarita joined me not a moment later.

“It was strange not having you at home,” she said. “The house was so empty.”

I blinked. Sarita and I had not even been speaking to each other until two nights back. Whose company had she missed?

“My mother’s home,” I said significantly.

“I haven’t memorized all the vowels yet,” she said. “There are what, sixteen of them? Who knew?”

“Boo hoo.” I slammed the door shut.

The thing about bad moods is that they spread like a raincloud around the house. My mother switched off her stereo and Sarita slunk away to mope somewhere, I was sure. But I couldn’t worry about that right now. *Sar salammat to pagdi hazaar*. I’d buy a thousand turbans if my own head were intact.

I paced the room like a Spanish *torero*. My feet felt like the arches had fallen, catastrophic. I couldn’t stand the feeling of the coconut oil that Sarita had rubbed into my

scalp that morning. I ripped my uniform off my body, finagled with the checkered tie so much that I almost choked, and fell over onto my bed in complete and utter exhaustion. Pounding the mattress was highly unsatisfactory; my fist went through and through the soft sheets. The sound of my own grinding teeth made me want to puke.

I got up and put on a pair of shorts and shirt. Bam – the door flew open, and I was startled to see Sarita sitting in the corridor. Shut down. I hurried outside and hopped onto my bicycle. I just needed to cruise around in circles or something.

The first few pumps on the pedals seemed to tear at my thigh muscles. It had been weeks since they'd been used that way. The air was so chill that it hurt to breathe. Tears came to my eyes, and I wiped them away with one hand though the motion made me jerk on the cycle.

Around and around the hospital campus I pedaled. Through the *kachcha* broken path and a left turn onto the smooth asphalt of the official hospital compound, back to the chapel intersection, a few wheel turns until I reached my bungalow, and repeat. *Ah la la la la la laaaaa* I was singing madly, not with joy, but because my body was bounding forward and my voice, not keen on being left behind, was bellowing the most primordial sound it knew.

Rumble tumble grumble go. With perfect timing and alacrity, the monsoon broke overhead. Gathering winds and whirling eddies arose out of the sidelines as the cloudy curtains parted and I felt the full blast of the rainy chorus. All of a sudden, millions of miniature frogs crawled out of the muddy canal banks, in some sort of synchronized amphibian invasion. A shudder of revulsion coursed through my body and my bike slipped.

Hard.

As I hit the pavement, I felt my body roll and hit the wiry fence with the momentum of a small boulder. My skin tore and my entire face crumpled as a reflex seized control to protect my face from the extended wires. I rolled right through the lower loosed frames, down and down, hitting bushes and small eucalyptus shrubbery. Shit shit shit! The gurgle of the flowing river sounded like a death knell in my ears.

Now it was so close, and now it was in my ears eyes nose mouth. One moment I was on solid, albeit moist ground, and the next, I was flailing in the ice cold water. Slimy things slid past my bare legs and I screamed, inviting more water to enter my cavities. How many times in my darkest nightmares had I envisioned this very event? How many times had I stood in my balcony, clutching the ceramic crisscross paneling and thanking every Hindu god in the pantheon for the distance between me and the snakes, crocodiles, Leviathan, Kraken?

So this was the end. This was how I was going to die, the last thing I would see would be this engulfing water, and the last thing I would feel would be the sea monster's teeth as it devoured me, and the last thought I would have would be *this is what Sarita meant by cleansing*.

It was true. Even as I battled uselessly to stay above water, I relished in the throb and pulse of it. The only thought in my head was the image of my father. What had been his final thoughts? Did he enjoy the finality of the end? For once, the clean breach of having disconnected the million other voices in my head felt... good. And if nature was to echo my mental chaos, I could not think of a more perfect setting. As the water rushed around me and inside me, I imagined that it was taking with it all the tiredness, the frustration, and the dirt with it. A glorious hallucination.

But somewhere amidst the glib glob of the water sounds, I heard my name being called. I was letting the current take me by then though. There had come a moment when the world snapped and a moment of pure clarity had burst through and I was still processing it. A few seconds later, Sarita was behind me, dragging my body over hers like a lifeguard and muscling her way to the shore with forceful intent.

As she thumped my chest, and beat my back in a messed up version of CPR, dragged my body back to the house, and handed me over to my deranged mother, I could only think about how close I had come to... him. Nope, that meeting would have to wait. And I had Sarita, my guardian angel, to thank for that.

\*

My mother finally let me rest in convalescence hours later, after she had cleaned me, put me in clean clothes, checked for injuries and erratic heartbeat, peered into my eyes ears nose mouth, gave me three different shots and rubbed salve all along the torn skin's fluttering edges. Before I could fall into the deepest sleep of my life, however, Sarita walked in and looked at me with furious eyes.

"What?" I muttered, uneasily.

"Do you want to tell me what that whole charade was about?"

I opened my eyes to peer at her. It hurt to do that. "Excuse me? Are you saying I fell into a raging river on purpose?"

She gripped my arm so tightly I winced. "No, I mean, when you stopped swimming after twenty seconds in the water!"

"Maybe because I was *exhausted* from beating against the current?"

She glared and squeezed harder. This time I yelped. “Don’t lie to me,” she snarled. “You were in the water, thrashing wildly one moment, and then your face changed. You gave up. You stopped and let yourself go. I was there. I saw you.”

“Shut up!”

“I will, when you give me a reasonable explanation.”

“Sarita, look, I’ve had a long day, and you are just making it worse.”

“Don’t care.”

I felt my blood start to boil, but before I could say the first insult that leapt to my tongue, I remembered the quarrel we had just gotten over, and my overuse of authority. I was the daughter of her boss and she was the servant. I was only thirteen and she was probably nineteen or twenty. I kept silent and looked at the ceiling.

“Why did you give up?” she asked firmly.

*What do you do when you’re caught between Scylla and Charybdis?*

“I don’t know.”

A full minute of silence passed. Sarita cleared her throat and let go of my hand.

“Listen, you don’t have to tell me anything. We’re practically strangers and I don’t have the authority to demand a confession from you. But hear me out. I’ve never done this before. Worked in someone’s house like this, I mean. But I had to get out of my own home.”

“What? Why?”

She looked startled as though she had confessed something only in the rush of momentum, unwillingly.

“My father... he abused me.” Her voice broke. “My mother wouldn’t believe me... and I was... I was trapped. I made the excuse that I needed to earn my dowry to get married.

Girls my age have been known to do that, and it's not like my family has any money."

Hollow laugh. "I heard of a number of families that needed a maid before I heard of yours.

I... I chose you for a reason, love. I wanted to be *your* friend, sister, companion, because you didn't have a father either. In a sense, we're a lot alike. We both don't have a father figure, orphaned long before we should have been."

I couldn't help but stare at her blanched face as she confessed this to me. Her face was the pockmarked moon and I, the object of her lunar pull.

"One difference though is that you can at least hold on to an image of a respected, accomplished father who seems to have sincerely loved you and your mother, while mine was an abusing drunk who demolished my life. This may not be a situation where it's appropriate to compare tragedies, but this much is true. Don't dishonor him by disrespecting his legacy.

"We have a tricky relationship with death. We're dying a little every day but we don't like to think about that do we?" She let out a watery laugh. "You, my Hindu friend, have at least the thought of reincarnation to sustain you, don't you?"

I smiled weakly.

"Just don't quit staying afloat, okay?"

Sarita bent forward and kissed me on the cheek. She slept by my side on the floor that night, holding my hand, and for the next three nights as well.

She wouldn't let go.

\*

My hallucinations were, interestingly enough, religious in nature.



Ram and Sita were in their fourteenth year of exile in the forest with Ram's brother Laxman. They were so close to the end that Sita could already taste the warm *gobi parathas* she would be requesting the palace cooks to make as soon as they returned.

"Yummy in my tummy," she said wistfully. "It's a matter of days now, *jaan*."

Ram smiled indulgently and Laxman continued to string his bow. What was he thinking about?

Suddenly a golden *jinka* appeared on the scene and Sita abandoned her reclined posture in excitement. It was so delicate: its long neck curving gracefully upwards and the golden sheen of its enchanted skin blinding her momentarily. A fragrant smell emanated from its skin, like musk or sandalwood.

"Ram dear, look at that magnificent deer!" she cried. "Oh how wish I could hold it close. Won't you run and capture it for me?"

Ram was on his feet in one fluid motion but Laxman intervened.

"Is it just me or does that deer seem unnatural?" he asked. "Let's do a little risk analysis here."

Ram swept his concerns away. Love had switched the positions of his heart and head. Ram was in love, just as much then as he had been fourteen years back as a newlywed. Middle age's creaky bones and receding hairlines hadn't changed that.

"Of course, beautiful," he said to Sita. "Laxman, take care of her while I hunt. Adieu."

For five full minutes, Laxman paced around the mud hut that he had painstakingly built for them before they heard the first sounds of disaster.

"Laxman! Sita! Aaah!" the voice of Ram sounded in the distance, trailing away in pain and exhaustion. "Aaah! Help me!"

Sita leapt up and clutched at her chest. Her world went dizzy for a moment as she battled hyperventilation.

“Laxman, go find my Ram,” she implored.

Laxman, the calm brother, wise brother-in-law, bit his lip. A seasoned warrior familiar with these kinds of sorcery on the part of the demons, he kept his runaway emotions in check.

Sita snapped her fingers in front of his face. “Why are you still here? Go!”

“Listen madam,” he said respectfully. “I think that the *jinka* is actually a demon and that Ram is in no danger.”

He realized how unpalatable that statement must have sounded as soon as he finished it and he saw Sita looking at him in amazement.

“And you find no problem with that?” she asked incredulously. “Laxman, I’m begging you. I think I may lose my mind if you don’t go right this moment.”

Laxman sighed and picked up his bow and arrows, sword, scythe, hammer and mace. He was no ordinary citizen, not with those bulging muscles. Before he departed, he drew a circle around Sita in chalk.

“Don’t step out of this circle,” he instructed her. “You’re only safe *in* the circle.”

She rolled her eyes and urged him to hurry. Half an hour later, an old mendicant hobbled up to the cottage and begged Sita for alms. She threw him her bracelet. He pretended to faint some distance away and asked Sita for help. She flatly refused.

The old man left her alone just as Ram and Laxman came back, safe and whole. Ram was furious at Laxman for disobeying his orders and Laxman threw his hands in the air and thought *I just cannot win with these two.*

Sita was safe and not kidnapped by the old beggar who was really evil King Ravana in disguise because she stayed within the circle. All was well and the trio headed back to Ayodhya the next week once their fourteen years were up.

Or so it should have happened. If it had, the *Ramayana* would only be one third as thick of a volume. So much of history hinges on impulsive decisions and accidents. The landscape of the past is painted in ironic hues.

I now had a raging fever, and was absolutely delirious. The monsoon storms blustered on outside and even mother stayed in because the hospital clinics had to be closed. The school was closed. The streets were deserted. It was like the entire town of Vijayawada had issued a personal insult to Prospero. Those unfortunate homeless who couldn't find shelter died in the tempest, and their bloated bodies were found much later, floating in ditches and gutters with swollen faces and blue lips.

I stayed in my circle. Literally. Sarita, acting on my mother's instruction, had drawn a circle with Laxman-rekha, the powerful cockroach repellent chalk that they sold in ration stores.

"What with all the hijinks that you've gotten yourself into, I don't want to take *any* risks," she said.

But she was more worried than angry. It was simultaneously strategic and terrible timing on my part to roll into a dirty canal. On the one hand, school was out and I didn't have to miss classes because of my fever. But on the other, so was the hospital and my mother had to make do with what we had in the form of first aid and her pharmaceutical samples.

When she wasn't mopping my forehead with ice or trying to feed me softened rice, she was dancing in the living room. She somehow managed to perform a Kuchipudi routine to the beats of Abba and the BeeGees. I guess she understood that her usual tapes of simple drum beats would drive me up the wall in the next room. This was the way she dealt with stress. The soft beats of her soles on marble were massage pats on my spine.

By then, the frogs that had decided to occupy the St. Clare's Hospital campus had multiplied and their million-sized adult population had become a newly fearless trillion. The little froglets that had now sprung up were not satisfied with just sliming up the streets. They were crawling up concrete, up our front steps, walls, windows, and front door in a decidedly Bastillesque fashion.

When Sarita wasn't sitting at my bedside, she was boiling water on the stove and pouring it down the porch to dissuade the invaders. The little critters fried and sizzled or so I hoped. Every crevice and crack in the house had been stuffed with old towels, including the gap beneath doors and around the windows. But it wasn't just the frogs that had become a nuisance. The rains had awakened all sorts of insect life in those parts, and we had to keep three mosquito coils burning constantly to offset the risk of malaria and elephantiasis.

On the whole, I wasn't missing too much as I lay in bed, eyes rolling this way and that. In fact, the real show was all internal. A whole array of fantastic images and notions were flitting through my mind.

The sunlight glints on a magnificent dam on the Krishna river. The water is sparse - obviously this is pre-monsoon geography - but clear. A dozen dhobis are bringing their day's load of laundry to the river banks and setting up shop. A disheveled man is defecating

just ten meters up stream. A herd of water buffalo cool themselves off on the other side of the river, and are tended to by a lone herder in a *dhothi* that was pulled up to look like long underwear. The air is buzzing with heat.

Wham! The floodgates open and an avalanche of water bursts through the opening. Everything is swept, clean off its roots. Spindly trees that dotted the landscape collapse under the pressure, the bleats and groans of the buffalo alternate with the gargle of dying beings, the dhobis pull themselves out but moan the loss of their day's hire... The water rushes onto the voyeuristic camera lens and the scene closes.

Sarita is standing in the crisp midnight air outside in the courtyard. My feet make no sound as they pad towards her, though I don't know what I'm looking for. I stop ten meters in front of her and she's staring right at me, though she doesn't seem to notice me. Is it just the glint of the moon or does her skin appear a pale, translucent celadon? Green tinge aside, her skin is throbbing, with some sort of primal energy. Sarita's feet have been transformed into roots, like a mythical ent, and small snakes wrap themselves around her body and hair to form a dangerous crown. Sap flows out of her bellybutton. She smiles mysteriously and turns her wrist to breathe on it. A beautiful amaryllis coils and *grows* like Parvathi giving life to her clay son, Ganesha.

"Don't come near," she says, and her voice echoes like that of a haunted ghost in a cathedral. "This baby's pure poison."

I want to contest it, but the belladonna lily turns to look at me like a king cobra, surveying me like a predator in utter silence and stillness, before it would leap, strike and devour. I can see it smirk. Its tendrils connect to her very veins, and she sucks the flower back in without a word.

She is a part of the trees and the ground; the air around her crackles and hisses as though she could launch a storm or set the mango tree behind her on fire in an instant. I wonder if her trunk-like legs allow her to move, but who am I kidding? She is at once the most beautiful creature ever to behold, and at the same time, the most terrible. More ferocious than the goddess Kali, and yet, if I can still love her, despite the monstrous beauty, I know I will not fear anything ever again.

The vision dissipated like hot wax dripping over paper and I woke up.

“You were asleep for over thirty hours,” Sarita said in astonishment. She was sitting next to my bed, as usual, and her skin was a healthy shade of brown, not green.

“Feel my forehead. My fever’s gone,” I said.

And so it had. My fever was cleansed right out of my body, and I felt refreshed, and strong and ready to face the world.

*Apna haath jagannath.* The universe inside my fist.

## Chapter 4

Minnie and Puja came to visit me the next afternoon. Granted, the rains simply prohibited them from venturing more than a few yards from their home, but it was a sweet gesture nonetheless.

“Tell us all about it,” said Minnie. “Sounds like a real adventure.”

I would be lying if I said that I didn’t tweak the story a little to make it seem like I wrestled with giant squids and sharks like a regular maverick before making it to shore but Minnie and Puja were just such a perfect audience that I couldn’t be blamed. When I was done, they hugged me so tightly that my sore bones screamed.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in my bedroom, painting our nails, sharing stories of our first day at school, and reliving my drowning experience periodically.

“Did you catch a glimpse of the beyond?” Minnie wanted to know. “Any bright lights or jingling bells?”

I stared at her. “You mean the blank whiteness of hypoxia?”

“I had a dream last night that was crazy,” Puja said. “I dreamt that my henna was mixed with acid and it corroded my palms into beautiful, bloody patterns.”

“What on earth?” Minnie grimaced. “Your mind is so twisted. My dreams were gorgeous. I saw a snowfall over the ocean last night.”

I gasped out of sheer delight. “Wow does that ever happen?”

Minnie shrugged. “Why not?”

“I’d just never heard of it happening.”

She laughed. “Well thank god for the remaining mysteries of the world!”

“When do you think our breasts will pop out?”

Minnie and I turned to stare at Puja.

“What?”

“Just curious,” she said nonchalantly. “My cousins were teasing me about it the other day.”

“You... you’re only eleven. How are you guys even, *why* are your cousins discussing this with you? That’s so... so wrong.” Minnie sputtered indignantly.

“Also aren’t your cousins all boys?”

“Why the hell are your *male* cousins talking about that?”

Puja turned a lovely shade of puce. “You are blowing this entirely out of proportion. It was just a passing remark! God forgive me! I’m going to go use the bathroom and when I come back, we’re not talking about it anymore.” She threw her hands in the air and stalked out.

Four eyebrows shot up and calmed down by degrees. What goes up must come down.

“No seriously, what is up with that girl?” I asked.

“That’s what I said! Remember?”

“Yes but I thought you were exaggerating as usual.”

“Much thanks.”

Puja came back, very composed. If my mother was in the room, she would have been remarking on Puja’s emotional quotient. The girl’s face was a mask and no trace of the previous conversation’s effects showed.

“You girls feeling better? Let’s eat, I’m starving,” she said, standing on the doorsill.

We nodded dumbly and followed her to the kitchen.



“Do you have anything already prepared that we can tackle?” she asked over her shoulder.

“No but I’m sure Sarita can whip something up for us.”

“Poor girl, no let’s leave her be. We can cook for ourselves.”

*Poor girl?* I never had an inkling that Sarita resented her work. In fact I always thought that she was happy doing it! The paradigm of the bourgeoisie? Shit.

I put my foot down and didn’t let anyone near the stove. Puja was short enough to set her hair on fire if she leaned close to the gas connection. So we contented ourselves with mixing rice puffs with a garlic-chilli paste and ghee. It was so delicious, my mouth started watering as soon as I got the first whiff.

“Do you think Sarita will want some too?” asked Puja.

“Uh... I don’t know. I can ask.” I felt supremely awkward as our roles reversed. When I went to find her whereabouts I discovered her practicing the Telugu alphabet again.

“Would you like some of our garlic rice puffs?” I asked.

She looked just as astonished as I felt strange. “Sure.”

I went back to the kitchen, poured some in a bowl and went back to her.

“Well thank you very much,” she said smiling. “I appreciate it a lot.”

I smiled shortly and ran back to the kitchen. Was I suffering from some aversion to gratitude or something? It made me distinctly uncomfortable to be the one performing favors for her. I needed a therapist.

When mum came home from work, I ran to her and told her how I had felt that afternoon.

“Well let me ask you this,” she said. “Do you feel weird when you do something nice for *me*?”

I racked my head trying to think of something I actually did for her. Usually my mother needed nothing from me. She was so independent. Fetch the newspaper once in a while? But for everything else, we had Sarita.

“No, I guess not,” I said finally.

She tutted. “Well then I think you may be suffering from a mistaken sense of superiority towards her.”

“What!” I protested. “I do not, in any sense, feel superior to her. In fact, you’re the one who accused me not so long ago of following her around like a lapdog!”

“Are you sure you weren’t just curious about the shiny new toy in the house?”

When I didn’t immediately reply, she continued, “Have you ever asked her about her family, her feelings, her hopes and dreams?”

“You know that that’s like squeezing water out of a stone! She’s so famously reclusive. I would have better luck extracting information from Mata Hari.”

Mum conceded that. “Maybe you should think of this as a challenge. The unfortunate outcome of Sarita’s reclusiveness may have limited you from seeing her as a three-dimensional being. Try and get to know her better. Make a real effort.”

I agreed. This wasn’t a social phenomenon; it was a case of two girls with communication issues.

\*

Most of the nuns at St. Clare’s came from Kerala, where St. Thomas had arrived on the coast from Portugal and converted people like it was his job. Or perhaps it *was* his job.

Honestly, evangelism flew right over my head. I couldn't understand the purpose of missionaries.

Sarita and I were taking a walk around the hospital campus. There had been a daylong respite from the rains, and school was going to start back up the next day. I was telling *my friend* about the history of the hospital.

"Why do you think they decided on such a longitudinal layout?"

"Maybe they wanted to maximize their view of nature?" We giggled. "I don't know. They probably built it slowly over time, as they got funding or something."

"Or maybe that's the kind of land they got," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, maybe they got the flood-prone river banks because of their outsider status. Christians in a Hindu country, after all."

I frowned. "You always go for the controversial opinion, don't you?"

She laughed ironically. "It's always hard to be a minority."

I gave her a sidelong glance and plunged in. My mother wanted me to get to understand her better; this was part of the project.

"Tell me."

She shook her head. "I'm being rhetorical, that's all."

"You're useless."

Sarita snorted as she laughed, and we held hands and skipped. My legs were still a little sore from the Indiana Jones recreation, but it wasn't that bad. Ever since her heartfelt confession, I thought that she felt more comfortable with me. But though she was willing to

hold hands with me, she was still as tightly shut as a clam whenever I asked her to talk to me. *You win some, you lose some.*

“So when do you think you’re going to get married?” I asked with the subtlety of a bullet. “Do you have the boy picked out?”

She shook her head. “I’m still looking.”

“Do you have a certain age by which you want to be married?”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” she said. “I’m a complicated person and it might be years before I can find someone who can accept that.” She grinned

“Tell me what your Prince Charming would be like.”

“What’s a Prince Charming?”

“Oh!” I was astonished. “I mean, your ideal man... tell me about him.”

She laughed. “Well, I suppose he would be tall... I’d really need him to be at least 177 centimeters tall –“

“That’s pretty tall,” I interjected. “Where are you going to find such basketball players in south India?”

“What’s basketball?” she asked, nose wrinkling again.

I shook my head. *Not important.*

“And it would be great if he wore glasses.” I guffawed. “And if he were lean but strong,” she continued.

“And what of his personality?”

“Well I’d want him to have some sort of education, and a decent job...”

I wondered what she meant by *some sort of education*. My heart wrenched at the thought that perhaps she thought she couldn’t afford to dream big.

“Would you marry for love if he turned out to be a complete vagabond?”

“Perhaps. I don’t know. Isn’t this all premature thinking?”

I thought of something my favorite cousin, Smitha, once told me. We had just returned from a wedding and were playing Super Mario Brothers on her Nintendo. She lived on the coast and so her house always had all its doors open, allowing a cool, salty breeze to periodically wash over us and eliminating any need for a ceiling fan.

“Leela, never settle for anything less than an MD, JD or PhD,” she advised.

I was too young to even understand what those degrees meant and had to have her explain them to me.

“What about an MBA?” I’d asked, knowing that the son of a family friend was pursuing it.

She considered it for a moment and shook her head. “Honestly, the economy is so shaky and there’s always so much corruption in the market... stay away.”

Thinking about that memory brought a sad smile to my lips. I wanted to tell Sarita to settle for nothing less than an MD but knew that that would be perceived as a cruel joke. How things might be different for her if she’d been born into a different family! The vagaries of fate!

“Do you know how Hindus rationalize one’s situation in life?” she asked me. She knew the answer of course, and wanted to share it.

“That was an unexpected transition, but how?”

“The law of karma. Essentially, the sins I committed in my past life are to blame for the hardships in my current one.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay...?”

“It’s why I decided to abandon the religion of my parents.”

“Your parents are Hindu?”

She nodded. “But I couldn’t accept its easy explanations. I couldn’t reconcile myself to blaming my previous incarnation for my poverty, illiteracy and so on.”

I saw the reason in her explanation and yet I wanted to play devil’s advocate. “So what has your exploration of other religions offered in its stead?”

Sarita bit her lip and nodded. She could see the corner I was going to paint her into.

“I’ve got nothing,” she said. “Trials, tests of faith, blah blah... but it’s all fancy rhetoric, really.”

We walked in silence for a few moments. “I think the Hindu explanation is just a euphemism,” I said eventually. “You’re not supposed to take it literally. Basically, you may as well believe in that explanation and quit resenting your neighbors, if that makes social harmony easier on your soul.”

Sarita didn’t say anything until we reached our front door.

Then: “So you’re saying that there’s no good reason why you’re born into your society and I mine?”

I put my hand on her cheek. She was short but I was still a few inches shorter, so it was actually a ridiculous gesture.

“All I’m saying is that because there isn’t an easy explanation, you may as well liberate yourself from such circular thinking. Spend that time trying to figure out your own legacy for your next incarnation.”

I went to my bedroom and collapsed, wondering if my refusal to discuss my father’s absence was causing Sarita to forget about it. Did she see me through a gilded lens though I

had faced my won share of tragedies? Perhaps we were both similar in objectifying each other's experiences?

But she had been so heartfelt in her confession. She said she had chosen me for a reason...

\*

When I told Anusha about my near-drowning experience, she thought I was joking and then got mad at me when I insisted on it, and didn't speak to me until lunch.

"Fine, don't believe me," I said over our identical bowls of rice and curry. "I also see no point in showing you the battle scars either."

I pulled my skirt up nonchalantly to show her the ugly bruises all over my thigh.

"*Hare Ram!*" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you show me this earlier?"

"Didn't think I needed proof for you," I replied sardonically.

She gave me the strangest look. "I guess 1999 just isn't a good year for you huh?"

"And we're not even halfway done with it," I said, nodding.

"Get your horoscope checked or something."

I did a double take. "You're joking, right?"

"No," she said, talking while chewing. "It can't hurt. Did you know my grandmother didn't let my mother marry her boyfriend at the time because their horoscopes didn't match?"

"You're not serious!"

"Totally. Of course, I have no problems with her decision. After all, if my mother didn't marry my father, I wouldn't be here, now would I?"

I smirked. "That's one way of looking at it."

“Let’s not even talk about the ensuing void in *your* life. Where would you be without my intelligent and graceful presence?”

I went back to my lunch. “Je ne parle pas francais.”

“Jerk.”

We had an afternoon assembly under the banyan tree. The grounds had dried, and the tree was positively glowing. Its leaves had been washed clean of the summer dust, and new life seemed to be swirling in every nook and cranny of it. When we took our usual ten minutes to meditate and focus on our breathing, I inhaled the sweet air emanating from the tree and felt healthier. But at the same time, as we repeated the Sanskrit slokas calling for respect to our teachers and for peace in the community, I wondered if they were sufficiently secular. Sarita was warping my every moment of being, for now she had me thinking about silent Hindu influences when I should have been focusing on breathing through one nostril at a time.

The one big piece of news was that the administration had decided to switch up our order of events this year. Usually we always had a Sports Day in December and an Annual Day in the spring but now it was reversed. During Sports Day, we would host various athletic competitions and all the students would have to partake in parades and various mass dance displays. The Annual Day was the arts and culture counterpart: it was when the school put on musical plays, skits, songs, and dance performances in front of parents and community members.

The entire student body erupted in hoots and applause as the resulting ramification was announced: all our fall semester classes would be shortened by ten minutes each to



open our afternoons up for practice. The caveat? Every single student in the school had to be involved in some form in a production.

“Do you have any idea what you want to participate in?” Anusha asked me excitedly. “I think I’m going to audition for the musical this year. Last year’s *My Fair Lady* was so well put on, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know. I’m probably going to join a stage crew of some sort. You know how I hate being in the spotlight.”

“Oh don’t be so lame!” she cried, but her protests fell on deaf ears. Very little in the world would induce me to get on stage.

The teachers all day were in a huff at the state of things. Clearly the announcement had come as a surprise to them and they were forced to revise their teaching plans. Apparently, our new headmistress had sprung this on them to make a display of her authority.

The rest of the week breezed past, due to the reduced scope of every class. Before I could even start nodding off in science class, the bell rang. Life was rather fabulous.

I signed up to crew for the musical. At least that way, Anusha and I could goof off our afternoons together. In the spirit of Anglophilia, it was going to be a production of the Dickens classic “*A Christmas Carol*.”

“What is culture?” I asked. “What is intrinsic, inherent, organic?”

Anusha lifted an eyebrow. “We’re an English-medium school,” she said. “What’s wrong with you?”

The bell rang.

“Ah a welcome cliché,” I said, hoisting my backpack up cheerfully. “See you Monday.”

Try as hard as I might, I could not get a word out of Adi for the entire ride home. But the fumes emanating from his person and his red-rimmed eyes gave me too much suspicion to stay quiet. When he dropped me off at the bungalow, I asked him if he was drunk.

“No,” he cried vehemently, but with the guilt of an axe-murderer.

“Adi!” I exclaimed. “How irresponsible!”

“Listen, don’t you judge me,” he cried, stretching out his thin chest to look impressive. “I’ve got a lot on my mind lately.”

“Enough to endanger the lives of seven children?”

“You think you know me so well, don’t you?” and now his tone was mocking as he lurched threateningly at me.

“Adi, I do know you!” I asserted. “You don’t want me to tell my mother about this and have her dismiss your services, do you?”

“My wife is dying, okay?” he cried.

Time and space slowed down and his words echoed in the courtyard, reverberating. Sarita had come running out at the sound of our elevated voices but now froze by the door.

“What?”

“You heard me,” he said, voice crumbling. Now his fist was pounding at his eyes, wiping away tears crudely.

“Adi, I’m so sorry,” I whispered. “When did you find out?”

“Doesn’t matter now, does it? In less than a year, my children will not have a mother, and I won’t be able to support them on my own.”

“Oh Adi...”

Now he was squatting on the ground, completely giving in to the pathos of the situation and shielding his face from me. He finally tore away a minute later, jumped on the rickshaw and pedaled away rapidly.

I mouthed wordlessly like a goldfish before turning in. He must have just found out, maybe as recently as earlier in the day. Adi had been fine when he had taken me to school that morning.

“Poor man!” said Sarita. “I wonder how he’s coping. We should talk to your mother.”

“What would we tell her?”

“Well we need to tell her about his drunken driving of course, but also see if she’d consider giving him a pay raise.”

My mother was expectedly worried for Adi and his family. And as a physician, she wanted to know what Adi’s wife was suffering from. She sent Sarita over to his dwelling, which was close to the hospital gates, to fetch him.

When he came back to our house with Sarita a half hour later, he looked a little less hysterical. He had combed his hair, brushed his teeth and put on a clean shirt, probably because he was to meet the madam.

“Adi,” mum said. She’d been sitting on the porch awaiting his arrival but stood up as she saw him turn the corner. “I just heard the news. How is your wife doing?”

She waved Sarita and me off inside. It wasn’t appropriate that we witness this conversation.

I walked to my room, lost in my own musings. The world of grown-ups seemed to be descending on my own childhood bubble rather rapidly these days. It was so frustrating to have to confront the rough edges of life so regularly.

Last year when I had read about the droughts that farmers all over the subcontinent were facing and their resulting terraform helplessness on the fields, I wanted to wave a magic wand and set things right. I had read about the farmer suicides with a wrench tugging at my gut. I thought about the three seas surrounding the peninsula and wished I was sitting in the heavens, like Indra in his chariot pulled by ten thousand horses. I wanted to be able to lift an arm and direct clouds to the locations I indicated. No rainfall in Rajasthan for thirteen years? No problem, I would send a ten day cyclone to make up for it. No vegetation in Karnataka? Let the verdure now prosper thus!

I pulled my journal and started writing whatever came to mind. It felt good to put thoughts on paper. It was as though when the words were fixed on paper, they stopped swirling around in my mind over and over again.

A story that I'd heard during a temple pilgrimage last year came to mind. I had gone to the Malabar hills with my grandparents to visit the mountain temples, dedicated to the patrons of the mountains, Shiva and Parvathi.

*One day Parvathi and her two attendants went to bathe in the Mandakini river. Parvathi, the consort of Shiva, is a mother goddess and the most powerful representation of feminine energy. That particular day, Parvathi was distant and lost in thought. After some time, her attendants said, "We're hungry. Please give us some food." But she remained lost in her contemplation of worldly matters. They waited and implored again, but she asked them to wait. "Please, I'm engaged in serious thought and don't have time for this." They pressed their palms together in divine submission and said, "Parvathi mata, you are our celestial mother, and we your children. You are known for your mercy; as a child would ask its mother, we ask you to satiate our hunger." Parvathi was moved by this speech, and not seeing any viable*

*source of food around them, severed her own head. As she sliced it off, her head fell into her left hand. Three jets of blood issued from the stump: two arced through the air and fell into the mouths of her flanking attendants, nourishing them; the third sustained her own head in a perfect parabolic path. When everyone's hunger had abated, they returned home. With this act, Parvathi became the deity known as Chhinnamasta.*

My grandparents and I had gone to the Goddess Chhinnamasta's temple during our pilgrimage. The stark depiction of the decapitated goddess, merciful enough to give her own blood to her starving devotees, with the blood gushing out of her neck and into their lustful mouths, had been impressively devoid of romanticism. It was what it was. The goddess was absolutely fearsome and a spectacle terrible to behold. I was completely transfixed.

I shut my journal as I heard my mother come back inside. Adi had left. She came in and sat on the sofa, chin propped on elbow.

"I've asked Adi to bring his wife in for a consultation," she said quietly.

I went over and kissed her cheek.

Life. Death. They were all around us, swarming like a nest of disgruntled bees.

## Chapter 5

The weeks rolled by, charted by the rolling rain clouds that had moved past the south Indian coast to go harass the good residents of Calcutta, Delhi, and Srinagar. Most of the frogs had either died or gone back to their muddy habitats, and only a few remained. These few had grown to the size of conch shells on the beach, and their ribbits were now loud and fully audible. They moved slower as well, allowing Sarita the pleasure of chasing them around the courtyard.

She had now memorized the lettering of the entire Telugu script, all fifty-two of them. She never complained once about their high number; perhaps she didn't have a basis with which to compare, or perhaps she just understood that they ensured a flexible and pleasing complexity. My success at this venture had me flushed, and I was gearing to teach her states and capitals, multiplication tables, and map reading, as soon as she was able to construct and read words. An enthusiastic student made a teacher's job heaven.

My experience teaching her made me a better student as well. In class, I was now nodding along to lectures, participating actively and offering to present to the class – things that I had never done before. Now that I knew what it felt like to be the one in the spotlight, I had much more sympathy for my teachers. Soon more and more of my classmates started following my lead, and we heard that the teachers were now praising our section amongst themselves in the carrels. They began to bring us treats for random occasions, cancelling quizzes out of goodwill, and excusing us more often if we slipped or forgot to do an assignment. It was rather nice.

The Dickens musical was being headed up by the English department. Anusha got the part of an extra, but she was content. I stood in the sidelines during rehearsals trying not to laugh too hard as I watched my peers act out their parts in profound Indian accents.

“What do you think so far?” Anusha asked.

“Watch a few BBC films and shed your *desi* accent,” I advised. She flicked me.

My mother came home from work with a bit of a frown on her face.

“So I saw Adi’s wife in clinic today,” she said, dropping her purse on the sofa. “She looked so weak, like she was ready to drop dead almost. It was so hard to draw her blood for testing.”

“Do you think you know what she has?” I asked.

“Not yet. We’ll have to wait for the results. Her idiot husband was taking her to some strange herbal medicine practitioners on the fringes of town instead of coming to the clinic. I am so mad at him.”

“You believe in ayurvedic therapy, don’t you though?”

“Yes, sometimes.” When I was younger and had been suffering from a chronic cold for a few months, my mother had finally given up on her prescriptions and took me to see an ayurvedic practitioner. He gave me five bottles of small white round pills that I took four times a day. In two weeks I was cured, and I had actually never contracted a cold since then. “But not exclusively, not as a first option, not when your wife looks as pallid as a *bhoot!*”

I was curious. “So you’d only use it for small things, like a cold?”

“This supposed doctor that Adi took his wife to wasn’t an ayurvedic doctor to start with! Why’d you make that assumption?”

She went to her room and changed into a nightgown.

“Go out and play or something. It’s fantastic weather; get some air.”

Sarita and I headed out. I had a tennis ball in one hand and she had a piece of chalk in another. I was going to go get Minnie and Puja and she was going to mark the land. We were playing four-square.

The sun was still shining brightly though it was nearing four in the afternoon. My mother usually came home for a siesta in the afternoon before heading back for evening clinic, but she took Wednesdays off. We played ferociously for nearly an hour. Minnie and Puja were always good competition.

Then, things fell apart.

“Minnie, watch out!” The little tennis ball whizzed right through her legs, and we all took a minute to laugh at the look on her face.

But Puja continued laughing especially hard. Her whole body shook like she was gripped with convulsions.

“I don’t think I’ve seen Puja this happy since...” Minnie racked her brains, “she saw the Titanic.”

I sobered up. That was a serious allegation.

Tears were streaming down Puja’s face, and Minnie kicked her bum. “Hey stupid, stop that. We need to get back in the game.”

But she kept laughing. And now we started to get worried. This was unnatural. Sarita tried to hold her wrists while I held down her legs. Minnie ran to find her parents.

She came back sans entourage. “They’re not home. What do we do?”



Sarita scooped up her trembling body into her arms. "I think she's having a breakdown."

"She may not be getting enough oxygen. She's using all of her energy to laugh like a hyena."

Sarita and I looked at each other. "She needs medical attention fast. Maybe a sedative," I said.

She lifted Puja up and started running towards the hospital. Even though it was in walking distance, it was still hard to run with a small child in her hands. Minnie went with her to support Puja's head on the way over, and I ran back to the house to tell my mother. She was in the shower, and by the time, she came out, it was probably too late for her to do anything effective. She did get Puja's parents on the phone though, and said that they were on their way over.

"So weird," I commented, going to the window to see if Sarita was back.

An unnatural wave of coldness washed over me, and the sky started dimming really fast.

"What the..." I went outside to the porch and peered into the sky. I was not prepared to see one of the most magnificent sights of my life. A full solar eclipse was taking place before my eyes as though the evening couldn't get any more supernatural.

Birds started screaming, and the night became even more clouded with their flying bodies crowding up the skies. A chorus of ribbits arose from the canal banks, and I heard the buzz of praying mantises and grasshoppers coming together in an agitated symphony. What was happening here?

Mum rushed outside and grabbed at my arm.

“Aiii!” I bit my tongue as she dragged me in and shut the door. “What’s going on?”

The electricity had gone out and darkness had quite suddenly enveloped our living room like the gathering of spirits. She ran to the windows and impatiently started pulling on the curtains.

“You get those!”

I joined in the enterprise and then went to get a candle from the almirah as my mom fished around for a gas lighter. We lit a large, waxy candle in the middle of the teapoy.

“*Ma*, tell me what’s going on?”

“It’s a solar eclipse, Leela! It’s bad luck to be exposed to the sun rays at this hour. All sorts of misfortune *Ram Ram*, come pray with me.”

I started laughing. “You’re so cute,” I cooed. “You were mad at Adi for going to some herbal medicine doctor but now you’re afraid of the eclipse?”

“Shut up and come kneel with me. Where’s Sarita?”

“She went to take Puja to the hospital – I told you what happened, right?”

My mother went to the window and discreetly lifted a corner of the curtain. “I don’t see her... why would it take her this long?”

“Maybe she’s making sure that Puja gets seen by someone?”

We waited around for another few minutes before we finally saw her trudging back. She seemed tired from the exercise and was moving even slower than usual. By then, the moon was already moving from the center; the eclipse was almost over.

“Oh God, why won’t she walk faster?” my mum whispered. Raising her voice, she yelled from the window for Sarita to hurry. “Sarita, run! Get home *now!*”

Sarita looked at us confusedly and skipped a few steps but she looked so exhausted that she couldn't bring herself to do anything more. By the time she got to our front door, the eclipse was over, and my mother was upset.

"You've been exposed to the entirety of it!" she exclaimed. "Well what's done is done, let's just hope that it's an empty superstition on my part!"

"What's she talking about?" asked Sarita.

"The eclipse. You've got bad luck now." I looked at her face interestedly. "Do you feel any different?"

"Puja's better," she said, ignoring me completely. "Her parents got there just before I left and are taking care of her. She had to be given a sedative, just like we thought."

"Oh my! I wonder what that was all about."

"I don't know, but I don't think I've ever seen anything more frightening."

"Agreed," I said fervently. "That was so strange."

I kept looking at Sarita for the rest of the evening though. I had heard that strokes could be sudden and silent.

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We awoke late in the morning that weekend. I had a feeling that my bones had somehow fused with my mattress, because the folds of the bed seemed to have shaped themselves with the contours of my admittedly flat body and it just felt so darn... comfortable. I sighed happily and wished that I had thicker curtains. Sunlight streaming through one's window and gently lapping on one's face can be delightful at times but not during such luxurious hours.

I padded onto the floor after great effort. I hated to do this to myself but I knew that I would have to shower first if I was going to be mobile at all during the day. I switched the geyser on and brushed my teeth for ten minutes. Then I proceeded to use four full buckets of steaming hot water as I pampered myself thoroughly. My mother would be ticked off when she would only get cold water for her bath but I pushed that thought out of my mind. This morning was all about me.

A sudden scream from the direction of the kitchen jolted me to my senses, however. I dunked the rest of the bucket water unceremoniously onto my head and wrapped myself in the towel before barreling out.

“Where’s the fire?” I screamed.

“Not... fire!” came a trembling voice from the kitchen. Sarita was standing right in front of the kitchen door, her back to the left counter, frozen with absolute fear on her face. From my angle, I couldn’t see what she was staring at. It gave me the chills.

I inched over to the room slowly. “*Kya hua?*” I whispered. As the full kitchen came into view, I saw it.

Coiled like my mother’s plaits in preparation for a dance, its scaly body reflecting light from the slitted window, was a cobra, hood raised off the floor and flared for dramatic emphasis, hissing and swaying like a river reed.

I screamed again. Sarita’s eyes bulged and our hearts hammered in our chests. For a moment, I forgot that snakes were deaf and my blood pressure hit the roof as I internally lambasted myself for the foolish let-up.

“Sarita... you need to get out of there,” I said, my throat muscles lurching with the effort of making sounds without actually moving my vocal cords.

She gave no response, and when I looked at her face again, I saw large pearl-sized tears rolling down her cheeks. This wasn't the time to mock her for it though. She could have wet herself and I would have totally understood.

She inched so slowly towards the door that I thought I would die in anticipation. However, before she could rest the ball of her foot back on the floor, the snake trembled. Its head jerked in our direction. How had it picked up on that tremor? Was it sensing air currents as well?

"It's no good!" I cried. "We have to get out of here!"

In one synchronized move, I tripped backwards, and Sarita sprang from her current position to one right outside the kitchen door with the grace of a leopard. At the same moment, the cobra lunged; I saw the venom practically dripping off its bared fangs, but a sickening crunch ensued as it hit the door swung shut just in time by Sarita.

I yelped again, and a tremor of disgust and revulsion coursed through my body as I imagined the horrors that could have been. Sarita had fallen onto her back and now skidded backwards on all fours like a mental crab.

"That was.... cathartic, yeah?" she breathed, her body rigid. My jaw was clenched so tightly that it hurt my neck to nod.

"We have to get *amma*," I spit out, and jumped to my feet. We torpedoed to my mother's bedroom, and pushed so hard that the flimsy lock she used to shut the door burst clean off its hinges.

"What? What?" she gasped, lurching abruptly up from her supine position. She saw our faces through her sleep-encrusted eyes and harrumphed with irritation. "I think my back just gave out," she complained. "What is it?"

I wanted to cry, as the images of the snake defiling our kitchen flooded my mind. Sarita had to explain to her what had just happened, and it was another hour before a team of hospital compounders and watchmen were able to trap it inside a precariously covered bucket and exit our house.

“Thank you so much,” mum was saying as she bid them goodbye. “Please let me know what you decide to do with it, you know, for our peace of mind. And do spread the word around the campus just in case it brought some friends with it.”

Now that the worst was over, I extended my arms up and then touched my feet and let my back crick itself to glory. My body felt like it had raced a double marathon, like the previous year when my classmates and I had stomped around the town to express our solidarity for the Kargil soldiers. Marching on the hot asphalt under a blisteringly hot sun in the hottest month of the year in my uncomfortable black loafers and collared white shirt with a tie, to make things even worse, had been less than fun. The feeling in my muscles right now was worse.

My mother came back inside with a grim expression. “Do you know what this means?”

I bolted up straight. “Hey! You were right! It’s the bad luck from the solar eclipse come to harass us! Shiva’s cobra!” I breathed a sigh of relief. Shiva, the third member of the holy trinity and the god of destruction, was always depicted with cobras coiled around his neck such that he could be understood to be beyond death despite constantly being surrounded by it. The cobras represented his dormant energy, or *kundalini*, the serpent power.

“Now does this mean that we have been blessed or cursed?” I continued.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said. “It means that we have-“

Rats. My mother, Sarita and I cautiously opened the door to a storage room that we had kept closed for months. Cardboard boxes filled this musty chamber, adjacent to my room, to the very ceiling. Cobwebs hung dangerously close to our faces as the sudden change in air pressure upon our opening the door caused them to sway. I shivered. Cobwebs were my personal nudniks and I didn’t buy the hypothesis that spiders were somehow not involved in their creation. We peered inside cautiously. Dust limned every surface in the room. This was where we moved father’s belongings permanently, and being in their presence felt sacrilegious. I turned my face away.

And then we heard the rustling. We gaped at each other. Sarita moaned. That really set it off. Now every which box was trembling and scratching and thumping sounds abounded around.

“How?” I moaned. “Just how?”

This was a calamity of mammoth proportions. Not only did we have a rodent infestation in our three-person house, but they were also destroying the mementos that belonged to my father. It was terrible.

Consumed in my own grief, I didn’t even notice the tears rolling down my mother’s cheeks. But when she spoke, her voice was as clear as daylight.

“We are going to have to dismantle the place,” she said firmly. “Hire some workers, and get them to pull out each and every miserable rat and drown it.”

“Drown it?” I was flabbergasted. Would we be chucking them into the canal as we found them? In my mind, I had considered cheese-baiting, traps, even fumigating the place, but this was new.

“It’s the most efficient way,” she said grimly. And she was back at the telephone, calling the compounders and watchmen once more.

I stayed outside while the job was being done. My mother was supervising the workers and Sarita was facilitating their work in whatever way she could, but I wanted none of it. I had watched the watchman hold one rat under in a bucket of water until it stopped thrashing and almost vomited. Moreover, it reminded me of my own terrible nearly drowning experience. I twirled outside, picked up sticks and wrote my name in the mud.

Change was happening all around me. Even as I stood by my lonesome, outside what seemed like haunted mansions, I could feel it. The rumbling ground beneath my feet. I walked to the edge of the courtyard and peered into the distance. A large truck was making its way towards the doctor’s quarters, and it was chockfull of people with suntanned faces, red bandanas and cotton saris. I stared, utterly perplexed, as it made a right turn and drove past me and came to a stop just beyond my house in the thatch of trees and tall grass past the mango tree.

The occupants of the truck hopped out and started milling around busily. I felt like an intruder watching them be, but I wanted to know what was going on. Some nuns from the interior parts of the hospital were now approaching the scene. I recognized one of the senior hospital administrators among them. They gestured across the landscape, nodded, shook hands, and seemed to give firm instructions.

While some of the people talked things over with the nuns, most of the gathering was busy setting up camp. Within minutes, small huts were being erected; hammocks hung from a sturdy tree – big ones for the adults, and smaller ones for the babies... babies! Entire



families were apparently disembarking from the truck, and children of my age and a little older were holding small crying infants in their arms. Even the infants looked sunburned and dusty.

As I watched the scene unfold, the compounders from my house started exiting as well.

“Are you done already?” I asked the watchman disbelievingly.

“Already?” he replied, eyebrows shooting up. “We were in here for three hours.” He looked at me curiously before walking past.

Three hours? Listlessness could be very time consuming.

I ran inside to see the status of things.

“*Amma*, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Would you believe it, they got over twenty rats from that room. Twenty!”

I shivered. “How had we not noticed the infestation?”

“Don’t know. In fact, I should blame you and Sarita. You are at home the maximum amount of time, and you let this small observation completely escape you. Really, *ba!*”

I rolled my eyes.

“Let’s hope they didn’t leave any babies behind. I’m having Sarita search every nook and corner of the house until we can all be satisfied.”

“*Ma*, are you okay?” I asked. “Were they able to salvage any of papa’s stuff?”

“A little,” she said quietly. “Most of it was in tatters. His clothes, his tapes, even his photos had been chewed at.”

My heart stopped for a moment. “It’s all gone then.”

Mum took the deep breath of closure. “All gone.”

I reached up and hugged her tightly. We gripped each other for a long minute.

When I went to find Sarita, I discovered her filling a bucket with phenol and water, along with a healthy measure of vinegar and other such cleaning ingredients.

“Figured I would go ahead and wipe that spare room clean while I know it’s safe,” she said.

“Smart idea,” I said, standing uselessly by the side. “Hey do you know what’s happening outside?”

“No,” she said slowly. “Am I supposed to?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I wondered whether you had heard anything about the camp that’s apparently setting up business just outside our bungalow.”

We went upstairs to the terrace for the best surveyor point.

“What do you think they’re here for?”

“Looks like a construction crew,” she said.

“But what needs to be built here? How come we hadn’t heard anything about it?”

Neither of us had any answers. The construction workers had now cleared a large swathe of the grass, set up small loos, and even begun collecting fallen wooden branches presumably for a fire later in the evening. It looked frighteningly easy to set up civilization.

Mum got word of it later in the week when she went back to the clinics.

“They’re building quarters for the nurses,” she informed us. “They’re beginning a massive nurses training program.”

The nurses at St. Clare’s had always seemed like an interspecies breed between the common woman and the nuns. Thus, they were always exclusively female, wore virginal white aprons and blue smocks, and were between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, and

completely cut off from the masculine half of society. Or so it seemed. At any rate, they usually had names like Anne and Catherine, so I supposed that they were culled from the same community in Kerala that the rest of the Syrian nuns came from.

“Or maybe they start off with names like Renuka and Neena and are converted,” said Sarita.

“But that’s just job discrimination!” I sputtered.

She sighed. “I’m sure they’re not forced into it. I think it’s the influence of living in such a unique one-sided community that does it for them.”

I dabbed my raw green cut mango pieces with salt and chilli powder before answering.

“You see this?” I asked her, pointing to the small crystals of white and red intermingling on the light yellow surface of the mango. “It’s a mosaic. And it makes the mango tastier *because* of its differences.”

I went outside onto the porch and sat down on the sofa swing. The worker’s numbers had swelled to over fifty now and the encampment was starting to resemble a small village. Swirls of blue smoke floated over the mortar wall that separated us, and I could hear bits and pieces of conversation through the barrier.

“The baby’s sick, *baap!*” said an exasperated woman’s voice. “We are staying in a hospital compound; I’m sure they can spare us some medicine.”

“Woman, there’s a pharmacy near the entrance. How many times do I need to tell you that you can just get whatever you need there?”

“But I don’t know what it needs! And where do we have the money to buy our own?”

A short pause ensued, during which the sounds of young children filtered through.

“Honestly, if the baby dies, I won’t be too torn up. We got enough mouths to feed as it is.”

“Venkat!” the woman cried. “How can you say that?” She started crying. The baby followed suit. “Oh poor thing,” she whispered, and now I had to strain my ears to catch her words. “Don’t you worry, your *amma* will find a way to make you feel better.”

I rushed inside and groped through the almirah in the corridor outside my bedroom. Five shelves held an assorted collection of items that accumulated over the years. I was particularly looking for sample medicines that pharmaceutical representatives frequently gave to my mother. I didn’t know what the baby needed, but I was sure that I could make a good guess.

“Diarrhea, fever, worms, ear infections...” I muttered to myself as I examined the labels on the strips and bottles. I was not entirely certain about which labels belonged to which ailments, but I figured the worst case scenario would be that the medicines would simply not work.

I fished out a paper bag and put in a good variety. I circled the house and included a bottle filled with filtered and boiled drinking water and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. Hopefully the new neighbors wouldn’t think I was patronizing them.

As I skipped outside through the front door and down the steps of the porch, a vision gripped me. It was powerful; I, the overlooked but precocious thirteen year old girl, rescuing a young baby from the clutches of death, to be rewarded by the parents naming the child after me... I would become its fairy godmother, much like Cinderella’s own, and would ensure that I stayed as a role model throughout its life... and I would sponsor its college education, and thus allow the child multiple rebirths, one from death, and the

second from poverty.... Inspired, I would then open an orphanage and bestow the same providence on dozens of children, molding them to become the next leaders of India, expanding their creativity, language, and empathy... the architect of the future, as some would write in their biographies of yours truly...

I poked my head around the Berlin wall and surveyed the workers. Who here were the woman and child in question? Should I just ask for the nearest termagant?

As I took another step and my full person came into view, it was as though I was fingering a magnet among people with iron bones. I had everyone's attention in a moment, and an unnaturally quick hush fell over the group.

"I... I heard that a child was sick," I stammered, holding up the paper bag. "I brought some things to help."

A tall gentleman standing by a maple tree laughed. "And what have you got for us, little girl?"

The appellation irked me but I smiled anyways. "Some medicines... soap."

Smiles were starting to form on people's faces, whether be it from appreciation or amusement. A relatively young woman of perhaps twenty-five years came forward. She was balancing a scruffy little child on her hip; though normally, the boy seemed to be old enough to be able to toddle around, she probably didn't want to risk him on uneven ground.

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "Now what have you got for us. Show me, please?"

"Well I put in a variety of medications. You can keep all of them but I'll tell you what each is for." I started going through them with her.

The tall man who first spoke to me sauntered over, his hands carelessly hooked into his trousers. He looked to be the same age as the woman I was dealing with – perhaps they were husband and wife? He looked very interested in the proceedings. His full head of hair made his head look too big for his long and lanky body. Bushy eyebrows and a silver stud in one ear, and all of a sudden he was chewing his lip and taking the paper bag right out of my hand.

“You mind?” he asked, without waiting for an answer. “What is this one for?” he asked, handing me a strip of Crocin tablets.

“Children’s fever,” I said pertly, hands angrily on hips.

“It says here that it expired five months ago though,” he commented.

I was aghast, and wordlessly let the mother know that I was unaware of that fact.

“Let me see,” I said, taking it from him and turning it over in my fingers. He was right. “Can you double check to see if they’re all like that?” I asked him.

He looked up at me curiously, as though reassessing something important. “Here, I’m going to let you girls have this,” he said, and backed away, scratching his mop of hair with one hand. “Sorry for intruding.”

I frowned. “That was weird,” I said under my breath. The woman heard it though and laughed.

“Vivek can be like that sometimes,” she said. “Don’t worry; it’s nothing personal.” She smiled at me. “I’m Afshan, and this here is my little boy, Adil.”

Adil stuck out his chubby fist and I shook it.

“And I believe that you really didn’t know that it was expired,” she said. “But expired-sheckspired... I don’t think it’ll do much harm.” She tore open the silver foil and

crushed the tablet between her forefinger and thumb and placed the bits on Adil's tongue. Before I could intervene, he gagged and she washed it down with the water.

I bit my lip. "Don't let it end here," I said. "Definitely go get him checked with a real doctor."

She winked at me. I smiled and pinched the baby's chin. He had a black ink dot painted on to his left lower cheek.

"To ward off the evil eye?" I asked.

"Of course, what else?"

"But his name is Adil..."

She laughed. "Adil, not Arjun. You're absolutely right. But my philosophy is to take what I like from wherever I want. Mix and match."

"I like that." I meant it, sincerely.

"Besides, those of us who think we have one hundred percent pure ancestries are rather deluded, don't you think? I may be Muslim today but if the dice had rolled another direction, I could have been born a Jew."

She walked away now, and cooed to Adil as she laid him down in a hammock fashioned out of a sari on a tree branch. The inky purple skies meant that I had shot overtime on my visit. I still had to go see Puja before the night crept up on us.

She was on bed rest.

"Puja!" I ran to her side and knelt. She was awake but pale. A piece of gauze was taped to the tender skin in the crook of her arm. It was blotchy. Her hair was greasy as though she hadn't been able to take a bath in a few days.

"Talk to me," I said.

She turned to me with a grim expression.

"I don't know what happened."

"Anything?"

Her eyes were turned upward, fixated on the headboard of her bed.

"If I knew, I would tell you."

I knew Puja since we were both bonny babies with cloth diapers on our behinds. She could never look me in the eye when she lied to me. And now her gaze was obstinately averted.

"What did they give you? To calm you down, I mean."

Her eyebrows scrunched and she confessed to not knowing exactly. "They put me on a glucose drip for some time, and gave me some tonic that made me queasy to the stomach," she said. "I really didn't want to take it, but I had to."

"What about school? Is Minnie bringing you your homework or anything?"

She laughed for the first time since I got there. "No, thank Jesus."

Her mom came into the room. "No, thank *me*," she insisted. "I had to have the longest talk of my life with her headmaster, but we got it sorted out."

"Jee-sus," I said.

"Amen."

"I can't wait for you to get better," I said.

When I was on my way out, Shilpa aunty stopped me unexpectedly in the foyer.

"Can you tell me something important?" she whispered. "Have you noticed something off about Puja for a while, or was this completely sudden?"



“It was sudden – “ I started to say, before I paused to reflect. Puja had been off her game for weeks now. I knew it had been a matter of weeks because I connected my observations of her behavior on the same timeline as my preoccupation with Sarita.

“No. Puja has been acting weird for some time now. Distant, quiet, nervous, the works.”

“Can you think of when all of this started?”

“Honestly the first thing that came to mind was that it coincided with our maid, Sarita’s arrival,” I said. “I don’t know. Maybe she was uncomfortable with her cousins or something?” I chuckled.

Shilpa aunty nodded slowly, and her eyes were already becoming distant. I wanted her to ask me more questions but she left me at that.

I walked home, a little troubled.

## Chapter 6

There was a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach in school the next day. I briefly wondered whether too much chilli and garlic in my diet had colluded to create a spectacular stomach ulcer. The last time that had happened, I had vomited my insides out until I could only function as a hunchback from the resulting weakness.

“All is well, all is well,” I chanted, patting my tummy.

Anusha gave me a piece of salt taffy that she apparently carried around in her pocket.

“Exactly how old is this thing?” I asked, fingering the bare corner where the wrapper had torn and frayed.

“Who cares? As if candy expires. Haha!”

I was alarmed, but in the absence of any other alternative, I put it on my tongue and let it dissolve.

We were covering the Congo in Geography class, where our teacher lulled us to sleep with her stories of “Chitti who travelled to Kinshasa with his uncle and ate *Moambe* chicken, yams, and cassava.” Our Math teacher was lecturing us on calculating simple interest and our English teacher was having us write a response to the Joyce Kilmer classic: *I think I shall never see/ A poem as lovely as a tree*. We continued to memorize antonyms in Hindi class, and wrote code in Java for computer class.

But as usual, the academic part of the day finished happily early by one o’clock, and we were free to pursue our creative interests in preparation for the Annual Day. I ditched the rest of the stage crew and went to the toilets to hurl out my lunch for a few hours.

Unfortunately, the second floor toilets only had one Western style sit-down toilet, which was currently occupied, so I had to do my business in the sink.

The awful sound of it gave me yet another gag reflex, interestingly. I felt utterly wretched. My face was flushed and tired and my uniform felt way too tight. When I went back to the outdoor stage, I felt so irritable that I felt like growling if anyone so much as touched me.

“You look like a dog bit your bum,” said Anusha helpfully.

I stared at her.

“Seriously, you look ill. Maybe you should ask for a half day and get your mum to take you home.”

It wasn't a bad idea. I went to the nurse's office and asked to use her phone. My mother was unfortunately, in the middle of an operation and couldn't answer. My second call went home.

Sarita arrived with Adi thirty minutes later to pick me up.

“Don't you think we need to get permission from someone in authority?” I asked, as she picked up my bag for me and began walking ahead.

“Like who would even notice?” She had a point. No one was in classes anymore and no one was going to want to take the trouble of reporting me.

My heart started beating faster in excitement. I felt like Ferris Bueller. I jogged quickly past Sarita and out past the back entrance gates with the energy of a lark.

“Slow down, little monkey,” called my friend, but I began giggling as soon as I saw Adi and clambered into his rickshaw.

There were two confused emotions tugging at my chest, one lifting it up with lightheartedness and one weighing it sullenly down, on the ride home. I felt like I had picked up a jail-free card, and looked forward to the lazy afternoon ahead of me. On the other hand, I began to feel the uneasy rumblings of my stomach again, as though it had been temporarily dimmed by Sarita's arrival but now was back with a vengeance.

"You look constipated," commented Sarita, and I threw my hands up in exasperation.

"Can anyone sympathize with my upset stomach without joking?"

Adi didn't say anything.

I shushed Sarita and we reached home uneventfully. I went to the loo and Sarita made me a ginger-buttermilk concoction that tasted dreadful but calmed the jitters down. The porch seemed to call my name, so I decided to spend the afternoon reading an Agatha Christie mystery on the sofa swing. The sunlight was perfect, despite some residual humidity in the air.

I was very caught up in the antics of Hercule Poirot when someone ambled into view and prompted me to put my book down.

"What?" I asked. I bit my tongue immediately as I realized how rude I must have sounded.

"I'm sorry, didn't realize you owned this street."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Just didn't expect to see anyone."

Vivek walked up to me and pulled the book away from my hands. I bit my tongue once more, stopping myself from saying something regrettable.

"Five Little Pigs," he read aloud. "What's it about?"

I marveled at how easily he switched from Telugu to English and then Telugu again. It was so different from the usual patois.

“It’s a murder mystery,” I said. “Have you heard of Agatha Christie? She’s the best writer in the genre, hands down.”

“I see.” He had stepped back, and resumed twiddling his thumbs from his pockets. “So why are you here?”

I was bewildered. “This is my home.”

“But shouldn’t you be in school at this time or something? How old are you after all?”

“None of your business.”

He laughed – a charming laugh, as I grudgingly admitted to myself, and apparently attracting the attention of Sarita who had come to stand at the window. Had he noticed? Did she know that I had noticed? I felt like some secret purveyor of a scene despite being in it myself.

“So where’s your mamma and daddy?” he asked, switching to English again. He was throwing me off repeatedly. How to converse with him?

“You tell me. You already know I should be in school.”

“Touché.”

“Why are *you* here?”

“Didn’t you know? We have a construction set awaiting us next door.”

“Smart alec, huh? I mean, why are you a construction worker?” He definitely did not fit in with the regular hoi polloi.

His nostrils twitched, and he pulled his *topee* down low on his forehead. "You've caught me. I'm a pundit during my off hours, and on weekends I deliver babies."

I glared. "Are you making fun of my mum?"

This time, he genuinely laughed. "Sorry, I had no idea. Of course not."

"Whatever." I was expecting him to ask the predictable follow-up question: *What about your father?*

But the question never came to his lips. He just stood there, looking at me like some curiosity, while I did the same to him. A blush arose in my cheeks after few such moments, and he noticed and looked away.

"Will you be cutting down the mango tree then?" I asked. The thought had come to me a few days earlier, and I shuddered to think of the void in its place.

"No definitely not," he said, shielding his eyes from the sunlight with his hand as he looked up to survey it. "The plan is to build around it, in an L shape."

"How tall will the new buildings be?"

"Five floors, I believe." He paused, and smiled. "Now it's my turn to ask you a question."

I nodded.

"Who's the pretty girl in the window? Don't turn around!" he added hurriedly. I hadn't even seen his eyes flick to that direction, so I was caught off-guard.

"Well since I can't see, I'm going to have to guess at it," I said tartly, and he rolled his eyes. "That would be my nanny, Sarita. She lives with us."

He made a sound of understanding, *aah*, and nodded.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

“Right around here.”

“Did you go to school?”

“All the way to the tenth grade, my friend.”

“What do your parents do?”

He actually took a step back. “What’s with the third degree, eh?”

I frowned. When you make categories and boxes for the world and its inhabitants, it never fails to give you a sense of pleasure to be confirmed when new things fit accordingly. Vivek was coercing me to either create a new category just for him or modify an existing one and I felt resistant. He was the outlier ruining my Cartesian worldview.

“Damn it,” I muttered.

He looked appraisingly at me and then sat down on the steps in front of me. “A little young to be a potty mouth, perhaps?”

“What do you do when you’re not working here?” I asked, tilting my chin in the general direction of the construction camp.

“Talking to precocious ten year old girls.” He winked. I huffed.

“I’m thirteen, thank you and good bye.”

“Mea culpa!” His palms went up in the air again, as did my eyebrows. *Fancy Latin.*

With no information forthcoming, I decided that I liked him. He was everything a rural Prince Charming in a town like Vijayawada should be. Perhaps that could be the title of his category.

He pulled out a small newspaper-wrapped parcel from his expansive pockets, and peeled away the damp coverings gingerly to reveal two soggy *rotis* rolled up around a ball of potato curry.

“Have you had lunch yet?” he asked me.

I nodded. I hadn’t expected to cut school early and so had my usual rice and curry during lunch hour. However, that had been followed with an episode of bulimia at the bathroom sinks so truth be told, I was still ravenous.

“But you know what?” I said. “I’m still hungry. One moment.”

I went back inside and asked Sarita if there was anything that I could eat and possibly keep down. She gave me a funny look that I couldn’t fathom but nodded. I came back outside with rice mixed with cool yogurt and mint.

“That looks delicious,” Vivek remarked rightly.

We ate together in silence, each trying to make as little sound as possible, as though we were rediscovering our table manners out on that front porch. It grew to such an extent that I started feeling conscious for even gulping, and began washing down half-chewed morsels down with a sip of water after each bite. When the food was gone, it was a relief.

“How long is your lunch break?” I asked.

“No one keeps track,” he said, shrugging. “I could literally be out here all afternoon and stand a chance of escaping notice.”

*All afternoon.* My eyes widened at the thought. As interesting as it was to keep company with this handsome man, it was also making me very nervous. What was keeping him here? I was not a vapid girl, but was also definitely not *that* interesting.

He wiped his mouth, chugged down half his water and used the remaining half to clean his hands out by the side of the house.

“Well I’m done,” he stated, “and I should be going.”



I was sorry to see him go, and remained sitting there for at least half an hour after. The skin of my fingers and palm was fully puckered with the drying remains of the yogurt and it was actually quite uncomfortable to sit there, hunched over like that, but I kept hoping for something to happen. I was afraid to consider what it was exactly that I wanted.

When I came back inside, it was only because the afternoon heat had made it unbearable to continue any longer.

“Well?” asked Sarita.

“Well what?”

She frowned mysteriously and went to her room. I followed her cue and went to mine. The rest of the day was spent working on my papers and test preparation, alternating with bouts of daydreaming. It was very pleasant.

\*

Mum came home later than usual from work that day. It was almost seven, twilight had set, and our stomachs were beginning to grumble again. Well, I could really only speak for myself since Sarita had not exited her room all day.

“Why so late?” I asked.

“Adi brought his wife in,” she said simply. “And I wanted to make sure I had a full diagnosis in hand before I sent them home.”

I was immediately more alert. After a few moments of silence, I prompted her to tell me what she had discovered.

“There *is* such a thing as doctor-patient confidentiality, you know?” she said.

I waved the idea away. “That’s never stopped you before.”

“Well before, I told you about the complaints of nameless, faceless patients. You know this one.”

I sat up. “Wait, you’re seriously not going to tell me?”

She shook her head no. I was gravely disappointed, but I could understand her point of view.

“Well can you at least tell me if she’s going to be okay?”

She hesitated for a moment so I interrupted again: “Is the treatment too expensive or something? I’m sure you could get it waived with the administrators, right? I mean, we *know* Adi – he’s a friend.”

She looked at me silently and my heart skipped a few beats. Honestly, if this kept up, I was going to be shipped to an early grave.

“Leela,” she said, after a moment. She frowned as though she wasn’t sure I could handle her news. “You know how we talked about how bad things can happen to good people?”

I want to say that her voice became distant, and the room began to spin and I felt like fainting, but none of that was true. The reality was that it was harsh and clear, and I had no illusions imagining the worst.

“I want to meet their children.”

My mother looked surprised. Then she smiled softly.

“I think that can be arranged.”

We put on some sweaters and walked hand-in-hand to their dwelling. It wasn’t far from the hospital gates, and we were able to find the exact address by asking around on the street. The corrugated aluminum walls and makeshift roof sat behind a pile of wet thatch,

prickly bushes, and heaps of waste right on the main street. The small hovel housed two to three times the number of inhabitants of our own spacious home. We heard nothing but silence from the outside.

“Are you sure about this?” my mother asked.

“Yes.”

We swept back the door, a glorified jute sack, and crouched inside. Adi’s family was sitting around against opposite walls, staring at nothing in silence. I admired the way my mother deftly set the sudden awkwardness in the room to rest with her carriage.

“I heard the news,” I said quietly, “and I wanted to come see you all.”

Adi’s wife reached out and briefly squeezed my fist and I suddenly realized, much to my deep shame, that I didn’t even know her name. But that moment wasn’t the time to ask. I squeezed back, and memorized her face, the lines, creases and wetness of it – in the absence of her name, I was able to focus on her humanity. Fate chose her brood separate from its own merits or faults. These children, princes and princesses all, were chosen by blood. I saw it in their stoic expressions and the regal, unflinching attitude with which they contemplated their impending loss. Their mother’s spilt blood was on their hands, their shirts, the silver sheen of it splattered all over their faces. It elevated them to a place far from reach. They were untouchable now. Their grief had created for them a separate colony.

I wanted to extend a figurative hand: explain how I understood them, more than most other people; I, who had similarly lost a parent at a young age, and therefore capable of empathy.

Grief is a fickle lover, I wanted to say. You think you are chained to her now, but know that you'll outgrow her. She'll lead you into the darkest places you'll ever venture willingly, but listen to me and uncuff your hands. Watch her call you a traitor and a monster, but turn a deaf ear. She will wail at your front door for weeks, months, even years, but soon, she'll flit to the person down the street, and to those from the next neighborhood, and then to the next town before she'll drown in the sea with her latest ride. And that will be the end of that.

Though I wasn't known for always thinking before speaking, I did then. I refrained from expressing my thoughts, no matter how profound I thought them to be. Advice is only refreshing to an ear posteriori. Adi and his children had a right to grieve, and I couldn't expect them to learn from my mistakes. Not on this. This was organic, central, and inescapable.

We sat in silence, all heads bowed down to Mother Earth, watching the dirt from which we came and to which Adi's wife would now return.

My mother and I excused ourselves a little while later.

"Do you think going there was a mistake?" I asked. We had been awfully silent and I worried about being perceived as insulting.

"No, definitely not," she said. "That was the right thing to do. Their discomfort is nothing you should dwell on."

"Oh it wasn't *their* discomfort I was thinking about."

My mother stopped walking and stepped in front of me. "You felt uncomfortable back there?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "Well... a little bit."

She regarded me for a moment and then resumed walking.

“What was that about?” I asked, jogging to regain my spot next to her.

“Nothing,” she said, smiling. “Have I ever told you the story about the Sardar who stayed at the New York Hilton?”

I shook my head, bemused.

“Well our sardarji is a *bhola-bhala, seedha-sadha* fellow from Punjab. You know the stereotype, right? Simpleton with a turban, as my father used to say. Well, this man and his wife go to New York one year to bring in the New Year’s with the famous ball drop. And don’t even let me go into the nuances of *that...* but at any rate, they’re staying at the Hilton, right in Manhattan square! This is a beautiful hotel, mind you, with walls made of marble and glistening steel, a mammoth of a building with a spiral on top like the Queen Mother’s crowning Koh-i-noor. The sardarji and his wife get a beautiful penthouse suite near the very tippy top – this fellow is simple but pretty damn well-off. Their suite is so fantastic, that the sardarji and his wife are completely overwhelmed. They’re afraid to sit on the satin sheets, she’s afraid to lift the piano cover, and he’s worried about touching the champagne sitting out for them. Eventually, the sardarji realizes that he needs to use the bathroom. So he enters the hallowed chamber with full apprehension, and beholds the faucets looking like the Mannekin Pis, and the porcelain tub with a gilded finish, and the marble floors reminding him of the marble slabs of the Taj Mahal. What can the poor fellow do? He felt the shit coming out of every orifice, but he waited, waited, and waited.” I giggled nervously for him. “He waited so long that he and the missus completely missed the ball drop! He waited so long, he couldn’t wait anymore. He just had to let it out. So he pulls out this little handkerchief from his pocket, and does his business within its four edges.” “What!” “Yes, he

deposits it quite nicely in the cotton thing and ties it up like a little picnic dish. Terrible metaphor aside, he now has to find a place to discard it, right? He does not want anyone to know that he brought something so nasty into that beautiful room. So he thinks about flushing it down the toilet, but no it would ruin the porcelain throne; could he possibly throw it in the dustbin? but that wouldn't get rid of the nasty thing; what about hiding it in the gigantic pot of flowers? Thing is, while he debates internally for the solution, externally, he's been absentmindedly swinging the kerchief full of doodoo like he's preparing for the shotput. Suddenly he becomes aware of what he's done: his brown, smelly shit is everywhere, having flown out of the wrappings with the momentum of Vishnu's discus, and the stuff is on the mirror, and all over the sink, splattered on the counters, the floor, the Persian rugs... poor man has to flee the hotel with his lovely wife and vow never to return.

*That's how humiliated he was."*

I paused in my response to try and digest that whirlwind of a story.

Finally: "What does this have to do with anything?" I asked.

My mother smiled all-knowingly at me. "Sometimes in life, you just have to shut your eyes and do the right thing. Stop thinking about what other people think of you. The more you deliberate, the harder the shit will hit the fan. Oh, did I just make another shit joke? Sorry, that was inadvertent. When you get going, it's hard to stop, you know?"

I was flabbergasted, but I started laughing. We laughed and laughed, my mother and I, and if sorrow felt omnipresent over in Adi's home, I hoped that this laughter, following so close on its heels, would be equally contagious.

## Chapter 7

“What are your thoughts on the opposite sex?” Anusha asked me through the medium of writing.

We had slowly chipped away at the chartreuse paint that formed an easily peelable layer on our iron desks over the course of the two months that we’d been at school, and now could write messages to each other on the exposed surface with pencils. At first, we wrote banal greetings and smiley faces on it every five seconds, but now we had matured enough to the point where we reserved the action for Very Important Messages.

“How is this a VIM?” I scribbled back.

Anusha rolled her eyes. “Why can’t you answer the question?”

“Why can’t you ask me up front, like a man?”

“What, would you like me to do it right here, right now? I am better at ventriloquism than that Valentine Vox, you know.”

I chuckled. We were clearly not very engrossed in our geography teacher’s story of how Chitti got to bounce around with the kangaroos and buy eucalyptus potpourri in Australia. I had decided that when the class was over, I would personally find Chitti and take away his passport.

“Well,” I wrote in cursive. “Let’s just say that this is a conversation worth actual conversation.”

That got Anusha to sit up straighter, and as soon as the bell rang the extra ten seconds that signaled the start of recess, she pulled me to a corner of the school’s atrium that I had never even visited before.

“You *must* tell me everything immediately,” she said without preamble.

“There’s nothing to tell,” I admitted, feeling lame for having made a gaffe.

“Oh no, don’t try to hide now. You’ve practically confessed!”

I laughed apologetically. “There’s nothing to tell. I only wrote that to make you crazy, which I have obviously successfully accomplished.”

Anusha gave me a bug eyed stare on par with Uriah Heep and his lack of eyelashes.

“Are you absolutely sure about that?”

Pause.

“Okay no!” I blurted before I could stop myself. “The truth is,” and I gulped again, stalling, “that I officially like a boy for the first time in my life.”

The revelation sent Anusha into squeals of excitement. Our conversation quickly degenerated into the mindless chatter found in stupid teen novels.

“He is this guy who’s working on the new construction next to my house,” I said happily. “But he’s really intelligent, and funny, and handsome.”

“Age?”

“I’d say maybe twenty or twenty-five?”

Anusha looked impressed. “Older man! Does he like you? Or more importantly, does he know that you like him?”

I sighed. “To the first, I don’t know. To the second, I should hope not!” I was horrified at the thought.

“Okay what’s your strategy?”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, how do we progress from step one to –” she made a rainbow gesture with her hand – “step ten?”



I laughed a little hysterically. "We don't. Thank you. No one but us will ever know."

"Ayyo!" Anusha made a noise like a dying elephant. "But if you don't act fast, someone else will snatch him up, and you will regret it. Don't you remember what we learnt from reading all those Jane Austen novels?"

"You mean the novels that *I* read and described to you?"

"Every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of voluntary spies," she recited, ignoring me.

I laughed in utter confusion. "What? That is possibly the most random quotation you've ever come up with."

Anusha smirked. "It means that your neighbors are spying on him and will snatch him up before you!"

I arched an eyebrow. "What is with you and snatching up men?"

"I'm serious."

"We're thirteen years old!" I said shrilly. It was a testament to how far this conversation had gone awry that I was resorting to making an excuse out of my age – something that would normally otherwise cause me physical pain.

"And that's why the older man is perfect," Anusha insisted. "Boys develop slower than us anyway, so you and this guy are actually even. By the way, what's his name? I completely forgot to ask."

I smiled before answering.

"Vivek."

\*

*To live with the body as though it doesn't really exist...* that's how most Indian girls lived every day. I knew this because my mother, as a gynecologist, had to deal with ladies, young and old, all the time, who were embarrassed about talking about their bodies. Labia? How hideous. Pubic hair? Don't be indecent! Clitoris? Don't have 'em. Girls dressed conservatively, in baggy *churidhars* and constricting v-neck bras, their hair tied back demurely in neat little braids and the only enhancement of sexuality being their copious amounts of jewelry. When the monthly cycle flowed from unknown crevices in the body, some families locked their daughters in dark rooms with no furniture, and pushed food plates toward the hapless girl with poles. STDs? AIDS? The myth that Indians were too righteous to be having premarital or unprotected sex, reinforced by the consistent denials of the government, perpetuated a cycle of violence and revulsion towards those infected.

"Even in this non-profit, missionary hospital that supposedly aims to be a factory of Mother Teresas to distribute among the lepers, there is discrimination," my mother told me. "If there's one thing you will learn from me, it's that knowledge. Know your body, and the biology and politics of disease, and empathy will come naturally."

Perhaps the only women in India who fully understood the secrets of their bodies then, were gynecologists and prostitutes.

And me.

I simply could not understand how any woman could be content with remaining in the dark about the vehicle of her soul. When I was younger, I danced naked around the house with my thankfully clothed mother. I was the one known for refusing to put pants on. I had any number of Polaroid photographs of myself wearing nothing more than underwear and a cheeky grin.

That was the long narrative necessary to explain why I thought my mother's purchase of a pair of nude dancers was so wonderful. Statues, I mean. The dancers, one male and the other female, stood in graceful postures that somehow seemed opposed and yet complimentary. The woman's left hand was raised in a forward motion as though she had been racing up a mountain before she was frozen in bronze, and the right one held her arched leg behind her in the Nataraja-asana posture of classical dance. The man on the other hand regarded her from the side like an instructor, his bronze empty eyes smiling in yogic content. His fingers fluttered on either side like sleepy lotuses. It was as though the animation of their limbs was able to compensate for the lack of etching that would suggest pupils in their eyes.

"You want to know what the most interesting thing about these dancers is?" my mum said. "They were cast the traditional way, the way artisans in Mohenjo Daro and Harappa made metal figurines three thousand years ago! Molten bronze poured into clay shells that the artisans created. Left to harden, and then take a hammer to the dry clay. The beautiful statue emerges from its chrysalis, and your mother pulls out her purse, and voila! Here we are."

The pair stood in our foyer, welcoming our guests with their gleaming, very naked bodies. I liked their honesty.

\*

Minnie, Puja and I reunited over the weekend and decided to ride our bikes and enjoy the cool weather. The trees of the canal – neem, tamarind, frangipani, gulmohar, ashok and fig – were all waving in the breeze, and the smell of damp earth was intoxicating. Deepavali, the grandiose Hindu festival of lights, was coming up, and we could see the

preparations everywhere. Vendors were selling clay *diyas* that we would fill up with oil or ghee and insert a cotton wick that mother would spend all afternoon rolling just perfectly. Soon, I could expect that we would go shopping for a crate full of fireworks, and all the neighbors and even nuns would come out for a full night of electric crackers, pin-wheels and sparklers. This season boasted the best weather for the event too: cool enough to enjoy the great outdoors, and the crackers would generate enough smoke to kill the insect populations that arose from the fecundity of the monsoons.

“Puja, look! No hands!” My bicycle swerved dangerously but I caught the handlebars just in time and got back on the cement path. One experience of crashing through the flimsy gate and rolling down the riverbank was enough for a lifetime.

“You’re terrible,” she said derisively. “Watch this.” She lifted both hands off the handles and stretched out her legs sideways so that her only source of balance was her precarious poise on the seat.

“Hey, when do your Dasara holidays start?” Minnie asked. Another wonderful thing about this season was that due to the proximity of the Dasara nine-day festival and Deepavali, our schools combined the two into a two and a half week vacation. There were many perks to having a large divine population.

“Mine start in about ten days,” I said. “In the middle of the week after next. October something, I can’t remember the exact date.”

“Ours too!” Minnie said. “We should kick off the celebrations with a sleepover! What do you say to a night of watching Bollywood, playing games, and eating *rava dosas* and *gulab jamun*?”

I almost salivated at the thought. “I’m in.”

“What about you, Puja?” Minnie asked.

She looked hesitant. “I’ll have to ask my mother,” she said. “She’s being awfully protective these days.”

Suddenly I remembered the fiasco of a conversation that I had had with aunty the last time I was over at Puja’s house.

“Hey Puja, speaking of your mother, has she said anything funny or weird to you recently?” I asked.

“Meaning?”

“I mean, about your recent hospitalization and all that. Did she have anything to say about that?”

Puja’s face was immediately guarded and wary. “I don’t really want to talk about that,” she said quietly.

“Of course,” I said quickly.

But Minnie wasn’t done with it.

“Actually, I think it would be healthy for all of us to at least discuss it a little,” she said, in her loud and boisterous manner. She wasn’t one for subtlety. “What caused that outburst? And is it going to happen again? Have you been seeing a therapist or anyone?”

We all knew the stigma of therapy in our society. A culture that prided itself on the strength of the expanded family and large community of friends, going to see the psychologist undermined both one’s mental state as well as his or her social one. But the times were changing, and as in any period of transition, it was us, the members of the youngest generation, free from both the preconceptions and mis, who could fully embrace the discarding of old stigmas. And so Minnie and I could ask this question easily and

honestly and be aware of the history of the issue and still possess the detachment of an academic. Whether or not Puja *was* seeing a therapist however, was an issue that probably dealt with the prejudices held by her parents.

“I don’t even know what happened that day,” she said. “It was like a force within me took control of my body and I didn’t know how to stop it. But no, I’m not seeing anyone. Mother’s been taking me to the temple on Saturdays. They’re having afternoon meditation and relaxation sessions that she thinks might help me.”

The strategy that Shilpa aunty was employing reminded me of my own mother’s trust in tried and tested cultural customs. She could at once simultaneously believe in evolution, allopathic medicine and modern technology as she could in Vishnu, ayurveda and the idea that solar eclipses could be harmful.

There was nothing to disdain at the convictions of a billion people.

Shilpa aunty’s ability to practice as an psychiatrist and yet take her own daughter to meditation sessions at the local temple following a nervous breakdown then, did not seem so strange to me. Holding two different systems of thought dear didn’t seem contradictory but rather a synthesis of the old and the new.

Perhaps my mother wasn’t a unique paradox, believing in everything and nothing at once. Perhaps this was the coping mechanism that all people in the midst of change had to adopt. My mother and Shilpa aunty were emblematic of that.

“That sounds great. Really great,” I said with genuine feeling. And I meant it.

I hoped that this meant that Shilpa aunty was being proactive about fixing the problem rather than finding an imaginary source. I crossed my fingers, just in case.

\*

My mother and I curled up in her bed. She still kept the king sized bed that she had from months ago. Shortly after my father passing, I would open the door to her bedroom sometimes, if I thought I heard the sound of her quiet sobs. My heart would wrench at the sight of her, a tiny occupancy in a large space, curled sideways like a question mark. And then I would creep into her bed and hug her from behind. Whether she felt me or knew that I was there, I never knew. But she always did act surprised in the mornings to find me beside her, and I wondered sometimes if she thought my embracing arms belonged to my father. And whether finding me instead, a paltry prize, in the light of the morning sun left her disappointed.

Today was a day for questions. She sat against the bed, reading a Telugu rag propped up against my back while her hands were busy at work with a lice comb in my hair. The comb had such fine teeth that the little lice would be swept right off my scalp, if there were any. She hadn't found lice in years, but that didn't stop her from checking every month or so. She said that she could still remember her own schoolgirl days, and the embarrassment of being discovered with an outbreak.

The comb felt so relaxing, the repetitious motion of it, and the feel of her probing fingers, even though I knew she was focused more on her magazine than on me.

"*Amma*, can I ask you something?" I said.

"Leela, you can ask me anything."

"Can you tell me how you and daddy met? In the very beginning?"

Her fingers paused, and I could feel them hovering, tentatively. "At the very, very beginning?"

I smiled. "Yes."

“It was the summer of ‘84,” she said. “I was doing my internship in Hyderabad, and a few friends and I decided to spend our Saturday afternoon at the Salarjung museum. They were having a special exhibit of some sort. Maybe it was old Hyder Mahal’s jewels again. Those, by the way, are spectacular.”

“You’re stalling.”

She pinched my arm. “Just because you have no sense of storytelling, don’t project on me, smart Alec.” I grinned. “Anyway, they told us that photography was not allowed, but there was this one necklace that I loved so much, I couldn’t resist. It was so fine and delicate, unlike most of the other ones which had big jewels and too much filigree work. I surreptitiously took out my camera and got my friends to stand on either side of me so that the guard at the door wouldn’t notice. But really, I think we attracted more attention that way.” She laughed, reminiscing. “So I stealthily reached into my oversized purse and pulled out my trusty Nikon, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around, heart hammering in my chest, only to see this good looking young man, smiling widely at me and looking pointedly at the camera in my hand. I was conflicted at that point: on the one hand, I was pissed as hell at this stupid boy and his devious smile, but on the other, I couldn’t help but smile back because he was so cute.”

This was a fun story. I felt proud of myself for asking her to recount it.

“So I smiled at him and simultaneously stepped on his foot. My motto has always been to never repress your feelings. It’s unhealthy. He yelped a bit and danced around and of course, the plan had to be called off by then, since everyone in the room and their mother was looking at us. I rolled my eyes and gestured to my friends to walk out. It was when we had finished looking at the rest of the exhibit and were outside in the parking lot again,



debating whether we were going to catch a bus and call an end to our afternoon escapades or take an auto down to the Hussain Sagar lake and get samosas, that he appeared again. He came straight to me, and without preamble, asked me for my phone number. I was so bemused that I gave it to him. And so it was. He called me as soon as I got to my flat and asked to take me to dinner.”

“Did your parents know? Did they approve?”

“Oh they didn’t know at all. When we knew that we wanted to get married, he came to my parents with his own family on his side and asked for my hand in marriage in a very arranged fashion. They’re still under the impression that his family had only heard of us before that day. Dating was just not in vogue in those days. It still isn’t if you’re thinking of getting any ideas,” she added as an afterthought.

I could imagine all of that happening just the way she said it. My father had always been like that, impish and amusing, but always driven to get what he wanted. If what he wanted was my mother, he had to have her. The only problem was that he didn’t deal with failure well.

“Does it make you sad, *ma*? That he’s gone from our lives now?” I whispered it. We so rarely talked about him that I still wasn’t sure if it was kosher to do so, even after so many months had passed.

She was quiet for some time. I still didn’t turn around; I was afraid that I would see tears rolling down if I did. But when she spoke up again, her voice was steady and clear.

“Of course I miss him,” she said. “We were the Laila-Majnoo, the Salim-Anarkali, the Heer-Ranjha of our day, man! He was my counterpart. When the accident happened, I didn’t know if I could go on living. How could I continue to be in his absence? But none of us can

live forever, and we'll never know when Yama will come asking for our soul. If I knew that his time would be up within fifteen years of knowing him, would I have still married him? Yes, I would have." She said this emphatically. "But that doesn't make loving and losing any easier. The thing I especially couldn't handle was the sheer senselessness of the whole thing! How could he have been so stupid? Flying a kite on the terrace is normal; we've all done it and had great fun, but running to the edge and tipping over just isn't. It doesn't make sense to me. It knocked the wind out of me. It wasn't what I envisioned for us.

"And you saw all of this, didn't you? That's the other thing. No matter how much I suffered in the aftermath, it must have been twice as hard for you. You probably felt so helpless and tiny, watching your father's momentum finish him like that." She reached forward and hugged me to her chest.

The fabulous love stories that my mother compared her own marriage to had one thing in common: they all ended in tragedy. But my mother may have been aware of this, and therefore deliberately chosen them. Perhaps the prerequisite of every great romance was the senseless tragedy that finished it. I told my mother this.

She laughed sadly. "Maybe. Maybe."

She let me go soon after that with a "why don't you get started on some homework or something?" and shut the door to her bedroom.

But I opened my journal and spent time trying to come up with alternative love stories that boasted of happy endings. I ended up chronicling the story of Savitri and Satyavan, a story that I was once told by my grandmother.

*Savitri, the beautiful and highly sought-after daughter of a king, decided that she would marry a husband of her own choosing. She went into the heart of the forests near her*

*father's kingdom, accompanied by warrior guards for protection. There she came across the hut of a king who having fallen upon hard times, was living in dire poverty with his wife and son, Satyavan. The handsome young prince knew his duty to his parents, and spent his days collecting firewood and selling it in the village. The three lived in utter harmony with each other and with nature. Savitri was naturally impressed and fell deeply in love with Satyavan. She knew her search had come to an end.*

*Her father was not thrilled by her choice, but decided to honor her wishes. He consulted a saint for his advice and benedictions for the young couple, only to realize that Satyavan had a ticking clock hanging over his head. A fatal curse doomed Satyavan to die within a year. Though the king anxiously forwarded this information to Savitri, she remained determined to marry the only man she felt was worthy of her. The two were married with the usual fanfare and romp of a royal wedding, but when it was concluded, they went back to live in the hut with Satyavan's parents.*

*When the predestined fatal date came up, Savitri asked to accompany her husband to the forest. The day was uneventful and Savitri sat on a bed of soft leaves and flowers while her husband cut wood nearby. After the two had a late lunch, Satyavan rested his head in his beloved's lap for an afternoon nap. Then, the entire forest grew dark and Savitri looked up to see Yama, the God of Death, come for Satyavan's soul. As her husband's soul left his body, Savitri grew so distressed that she ran after Yama, calling on him to have mercy and extend Satyavan's life. When he refused, she asked him to take her own life as well and thereby reunite her with her husband. He told her to go home for her time had not yet come. But Yama was so impressed by her devotion to her husband that he decided to grant her any boon she asked him save that of her husband's life.*

*After a moment, Savitri asked Yama for the boon of beautiful and healthy children. "Given," said Yama. "But how can I have children without my husband?" she returned. And thus Yama had no choice but to restore Satyavan's life. Satyavan's body re-energized and he awoke as from a stupor. The two returned to the hut and spent the rest of their lives growing old in each other's company.*

*So strong and determined was Savitri's love that despite the curse hanging over Satyavan, she married him with such confidence that even the God of Death had to relent to her devotion.*

I put my pen down and stared at what I had written. Some people's deaths are written into their fates, and others are determined by choice. I began to cry.

## Chapter 8

“Diabetes is a form of AIDS,” bellowed my science teacher. He was a rotund man, with a thin mustache, graying hair and small black warts on the sides of his face. He wore a bow-tie to school every day, and suspenders that placed his origins in a Charlie Chaplin movie.

All around me, students were studiously writing down every *bakwaas* word that came out of his mouth. It was important to consult these class notes when our midterm exams came around again. Srinivas sir was the type who politely paused in his lecture to allow for this transcription.

I looked to the right and to the left, wondering if anyone was going to protest this “fact.” Thankfully, Meera put her hand up in the air with a frown on her face. Then I realized that she was a juvenile diabetic and therefore would be more knowledgeable than most about the disease.

“Sir, no offense, but diabetes is *not* a form of AIDS,” she said.

Srinivas sir looked thunderstruck. It was clear that he thought his branch of study opaque and certain, not interpretive like some soft language. “Excuse me?”

“I think you’re mixing it with something else.”

“Is it not an auto-immune disease, girl?”

“I’m sure it is, but –“

“And what do the letters of ‘auto-immune disease’ spell?” He paused between each word like Meera was an idiot.

“That’s not a real argument!”

“Please Meera. Recognize your own fallacy and sit down.”

She did sit down but she was trembling with anger and humiliation. The entire class was silent, painfully so. Srinivas sir took a moment to adjust his spotted bow-tie and clear his throat. We could hear the wind blowing past the windows outside.

“Someone close the damn shutters!” Srinivas sir yelled. “Stop the atmosphere from coming in.”

Some students started giggling at this. The tension seemed to break and it felt as though it was safe to move on from that awkward moment. Anusha picked up her fountain pen again and poised it over her notes expectantly.

“Meera isn’t the one who is wrong,” I said, standing up.

“I’m sorry?” Srinivas sir looked stunned.

“Just because auto-immune disease shares the same acronym as *acquired* immune deficiency does not make them the same thing, right? Why, that’s like saying cows and sheep are the same animal because they both have four legs and graze on grass.”

The silence that followed this was charged. I was as aware of my insulting tone as my audience, but my decision to say it was made clear when I saw the gratuitous humiliation that he had heaped on a student whose only crime had been to defend herself. Meera was the Fanny Price of my class: kind-hearted and genuine, she embodied the question of character versus personality. People like Meera were the kind who wouldn’t pick fights unless they truly believed in waging them, as they lacked the necessary skill in rhetoric to win them.

*Those who are already compromised in some way are the ones most vulnerable to abuse later.* My mother told me this when we were talking about real AIDS victims, in fact. She was remarking on the higher incidences of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases in

people who were compromised by poverty, illiteracy or societal ostracism. *Prostitutes don't sell their bodies because they enjoy sex more than the average person, she said. They do it because their husbands left them or died, or they've been saddled with debts, or were actively sold into a brothel by a greedy relative. They often have no other recourse. They were compromised to begin with. And when they try to get tested or treated for the STDs they inevitably contract, society shuns them because it judges them for their "sinful trade," making them even more vulnerable to disease and death.*

Meera's humiliation at the hands of an imbecilic teacher was the metaphor that I saw in my own smaller-scaled universe. His treatment of her was the starting step: I could see Meera subjected to casual taunts and teasing by her fellow students because of their teacher's own violation of the sense of decorum in the class room in the coming days. The idea of the social gradient was a powerful one, and Meera's put-down would slide her down. This alone would be sufficient to make her experience miserable, let alone the inevitable AIDS stigma that would be sure to follow her around. If enough word got around, parents might even begin petitioning for her expulsion. I wondered how many people would actually make the effort to confirm or reject Srinivas sir's easy declaration. After all, he was given the authority to make such declarations by the school board. Would his students think that his facts needed to be double-checked?

Srinivas sir looked at me for a good minute, but I matched him eye for eye. Finally, he inclined his head and nodded.

"You're right this time, but watch the cheek, young lady. Now sit down."

I smiled and complied. My classmates looked at me wonderingly. I shrugged, as if to say, *all in a day's work*. Meera looked at me for a moment and inclined her own head. The

difference between her gesture and sir's was that she meant it as a mark of gratitude, while the latter was coerced into it out of anger and regret. But I was my mother's daughter, and I respectfully did not give a damn about Srinivas sir's feelings.

Later I would tell my mother about this incident, and she would probably pinch my cheek and call me a chip off the old block. Srinivas sir would probably try extremely hard to find excuses to fail me during every succeeding exam cycle but wouldn't find any. Word would get around in the teacher's carrels and he would face a different brand of discrimination: one that arises from an academic disdain of incompetency. Meera would feel like she owed me something, and would begin to offer me things like rides home in her air-conditioned car or invitations to her future birthday parties. Anusha would strut around as though being the best friend of the day's big sensation somehow propelled her up in our friends' collective respect as well.

But would anyone go home and look up the real facts about AIDS? Having almost committed a serious blunder at the expense of one student's dignity, would anyone take the extra steps to ensure that it would never happen again? Would this widening of the island of their knowledge also increase the shoreline of their wonder? I certainly hoped so.

\*

Adi was no longer taking me to school and back. He had taken his wife and children for a time to be with her parents, and his friend Mukul was his replacement. Mukul was nice but quiet. He clearly did not believe in bridging the gap between strangers. The ride home was silent and sullen, and all the children grasped onto poles and plastic and stared out at the view.



The rickshaw swerved in and out of traffic. Bunder Road, translated into Hindi from “monkey road” for some strange reason, served as Vijayawada’s Main Street. Three lanes wide on each end, it played host to rickshaws, auto vehicles or three wheeled cabs, Ambassador cars with their boxy frames and curtained windows, scooters, lorries, and cattle. Cows, stray dogs, herds of dirty pigs and goats intermingled with their vehicular cousins fearlessly. Their jostling for space, and for their rights to trot and excrete freely, felt like a subversion of Orwell’s own farming dystopia. Animals in our town were not less equal than *anybody*.

Mukul pulled the rickshaw in to our courtyard without a single remark, and had sped off before I could even turn and see that Sarita was there to greet me.

“And the prodigal daughter returns.”

“Well hello to you too. What have you been up to all day?”

She pretended to think. “Let me see. I swept the floors, and wiped them clean with phenol, made *idlis* for your breakfast, did the laundry, picked jasmine flowers to make this for your hair –” She handed me a small string of flowers neatly knotted with cotton thread. I turned and she began to work it into my braid. “And I just swept the front porch, and was about to turn in to go start on dinner.”

“I’ll help you. Hey do you want me to tell you a funny story? Well it wasn’t really funny, but maybe I’ll let you decide.”

She laughed. “Give me your best shot.”

“My science teacher today actually didn’t know what AIDS was.”

She looked startled. “And you do?”

I frowned quizzically. “Are you kidding? Of course I do. I’ve known for years.”

“Of course. Your mother is a doctor after all.”

I nodded, because this much was obvious. “Anyway, he actually challenged a student who asked him to verify his facts. As if! I don’t know if our education is going down the drain or what, because surely he must have known that *somebody* in the class would know their facts.”

Sarita sat down on the porch. Deciding that we weren’t going to be making dinner anytime soon, I joined her. Besides, it was only four in the afternoon. The sun was nowhere near setting.

“Where’s *amma*?” I asked. “Is she back?”

“She came back for her lunch, yes, but she’s back at the clinics now,” Sarita said absentmindedly. Her fingers rolled over and over a smooth twig. I snatched it from her and began to peel the epidermal layer away, carefully.

“Have you ever done any dissections in school?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “And I certainly hope never. I don’t know how *amma* does it, but I cannot deal with all of that.”

Sarita turned to look at me. “Really? I would never have guessed. In fact, I’d say that you have exactly the right temperament to be a doctor.”

I laughed. “I have the right temperament to be an intellectual perhaps,” I acknowledged, with a little bow. “But I don’t have the stamina to look inside a human body, or to deal with illness and such.”

“Well there’s a tragedy.” A hard tone had entered her voice, and she looked straight ahead. I attributed this to her perception of my indifference to my opportunities. Medicine

was a highly respected profession in society, and I thought Sarita took my apathy for flippancy. I hastened to correct her.

“Of course I’m very proud of my mother. She’s great at what she does,” I added.

Sarita gave me a curious look but it was gone in an instant.

“Oh I need to begin cooking for dinner,” she exclaimed suddenly. “Are you still willing to help me?”

I nodded and stood up with her. At that moment, Vivek appeared around the corner, sauntering in his usual nonchalant way, and I wanted to call off the cooking date with Sarita and go talk to him instead.

But I was committed, and she deserved better from me. I went inside.

\*

I sat on my bed and wished that I had a love seat carved into the wall of my room, adjacent to the window. Auditory hallucinations: what would it be like to go through life accompanied by piano music at every turn? I imagined the agonies of Robert Schumann, beset by mercury poisoning for his syphilis, who thought angels were playing at his ear during his every waking hour. Eventually, the angels morphed into demons, and it was a downward spiral from there on out. He jumped into the Rhine, fruitlessly, and had to spend the remaining years of his life in a mental asylum.

But for temporary periods perhaps, it *would* be interesting to have Schumann playing his organ while I studied the blank pages of my journal and imagined filling them with profundity. My father had given it to me for my last birthday, and told me that I was going to be a great writer someday. But I always ended up writing about scenes from my everyday life, which I knew would never be interesting to anyone, or stories that were part

of the folklore already. And the poetry that I attempted was so bad that I contemplated setting those scraps of paper on fire with a Deepavali sparkler.

Ah Deepavali. It was the biggest festival of the year. It was the celebration of Ram returning home to his capital city Ayodhya, following fourteen years in exile. The citizens of Ayodhya were so happy to have him back that they lit up their windows and entrances with little clay lamps – *diyas*. These diyas lent their name to what became the festival of lights, and the New Year for most of the country's Hindus. It was going to be a magnificent celebration this year. I knew it. Something big was going to happen in two weeks.

This week was going to be the last week before the Dasara-Deepavali break, and so naturally, it was mid-term exam week. Or as Anusha called them, the semifinals.

"You know this isn't an Agassi-Sampras match or anything," I remarked.

"Oh what do you care anyway?" she retorted. "We all know that you are going to smash this exam to the boundary. Think Tendulkar hitting a sixer. That's what you are."

"Calm down," I said, exasperated. "You're going to want to borrow my notes this week, so quit hating."

She smacked me playfully and returned to her script. Anusha was playing the everyman in the Christmas Carol production. She had multiple little roles throughout the play, but was as stressed as a stretched piece of fabric.

"Are you absolutely sure that you don't want to be acting, instead of doing stage crew?" she asked.

"Absolutely. Besides I think it's a bit late in the game for me to still have that choice."

“Actually, it’s not. I was talking to Shailaja ma’am the other day and she was talking about wishing there were more students comfortable enough with English to play a part fearlessly. I thought about you.”

“Well, how sweet. But no, I’m not one for the spotlight.”

“Do think about it though, within the next week or two. Shailaja may try and kick out Ankush. He’s the first ghost, and he’s setting a terrible standard for everybody else.”

“Anusha, do you remember when I was supposed to do the morning broadcast on the intercoms?”

“Yeah, in the headmistress’s office?”

“And do you remember how much of a disaster that was?”

She started laughing at my past indignities. Just knowing that a wider audience was actively listening in as I informed the school about the day’s big events made my voice quaver so much that people later thought that I was emotionally distressed and crying on air. I had more than a few people just come right up and give me a hug afterward.

“How could I forget?” she cried. “How could I forget August 4, 1998?”

My eyes widened. “You remember the exact date?”

“Yes,” she said. “It was probably the funniest day of my life.”

“Well,” I sputtered. “Then you of all people should understand why I cannot and will never get on a stage.”

“That’s right,” she cooed. “You’re a thinker, not an actor.”

“I just told you I wasn’t an actor. Stage fright, yeah?”

“Hmm, but I also meant it like you’re not a doer.”

I glared at her. “That’s unfair.”

“Oh please. You know it and I know it and there’s no point in me lying to your face about it.”

“I definitely *do* things! You make me sound like an obese vegetable!”

She pretended to think, but shot back with an example so fast that it made me wonder how deep it was really buried in her memory. “Well what about that time when someone stole all my new pens and my diary and plastered some pages all over the bulletin board? I was pacing around, raging at the idiot who did it and trying to see how I could bully them to come out and confess and you sat in a corner and wrote an essay about the invasion of privacy or some shit.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh goodness, what could I have possibly done at that time?”

“I don’t know? Helped me come up with an idea? Consoled me? How hard can it be?” Anusha walked ten feet away from me and then walked back. I thought I saw tears in her eyes so I slapped her.

“Stop it,” I said. She muttered some foul words under her breath. “Okay really. I’m genuinely sorry about that incident, but I really thought that publishing an article about the issue in the paper was a step in the right direction. It was as close a solution as finding the culprit would have been. You know this.”

“Do I?” Anusha said distractedly. “Well whatever. Let bygones be and all that.”

She stalked back to the classroom, and I stood in place, feeling the void she left behind more acutely than her presence. Was I really so passive-aggressive? And if that were true, was it really so terrible?

\*

Deciding to be an actor, I walked steadily to Vivek's side of the courtyard. I was on a mission. Thinking about thinking put images of a ruminating cow chewing on a piece of cud in my mind. I frowned and then filled with self-loathing. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I *was* passive, all the freaking time, and it was time to embrace a change.

The construction workers had cleared their side of the yard, and the long grasses and marigolds had been sliced away to their very roots. A gigantic hole in the ground was now being filled with wet mortar or cement – I really didn't know and didn't really care much either. I wore an orange skirt that stopped right above my knees and a plain cotton white shirt. My hair was free from its braids, but remained wavy as though it was holding on to the memory. I felt really pretty. And I chose to cross the yard at dusk because Sarita once told me that the light hit me just right at that time.

"Oy Vivek!" I called out, as I saw him in the distance.

He perked up at the sound of his voice and seeing me, jogged over. I smiled unconsciously. There's always something nice about having a level of command over someone that attractive. People were looking around at us curiously, and I felt a flush come over my face.

When he greeted me with a breathless "hi Leela," I smiled meaningfully and walked over to my house. He followed.

"I felt self-conscious attracting all that attention," I explained.

He shrugged. "What attention?"

I wondered if he lived in the bubble reserved for such attractive species that they didn't notice the stage they walked on anymore. It was entirely possible.

"I guess they noticed something unusual," I said hesitantly. "You know, about us."

He continued to look at me with a puzzled expression. When I recovered from the deep embarrassment that I was plunging myself into, I would emerge and go kill Anusha for her corrupting influences. Why, oh why, was I here, talking to him like this?

“Sweetheart,” he said. My heart skipped a few beats. Gosh, I was such a stereotype. “You’re imagining things. Next time, if anyone gives you a wonky look, let me know, and I’ll knock some sense into her.”

I laughed. “Why would you assume it came from a woman?”

“Because only other women are capable of reading anything into *this*.” He waved a limp hand between us. “Anyway, what’s going on with you? I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I want to ask you three questions,” I said. He looked taken aback but he nodded. We sat down on the steps of my front porch. I spent a few moments straightening out the wrinkles in my skirt.

“Well?” he prompted. “Go on. Hit me with your hardest.”

“Have you ever had a girlfriend before?”

He reacted like I had punched the air out of his lungs. He literally mimed Luke Skywalker falling into the void. “Well aren’t you direct?” When I continued to look at him expectantly, he laughed. “Okay then. No, I have never had a girlfriend before. Next?”

“Do you want to have a girlfriend?”

“Oh my god, what is this about?” he exclaimed. I winked at him, and he laughed.

Obviously he thought that I was only playing casually with him, and that he was in a safe space. Well, he *was* in a safe space; it wasn’t like I was going to jump him. I wasn’t *that* forward.



“I guess I do want one,” he said. “Why, do you know of anyone for me? What about that nanny of yours, eh?”

I slapped his arm. “Stop joking,” I said. “I’m being very serious here, and you are reacting very flippantly. It’s inappropriate.”

That just made him laugh harder.

“Okay, bring on question number three,” he choked out. “I cannot wait to hear it.”

I thought about it for a moment. This entire conversation was unrehearsed but I thought I was doing a pretty good job of it so far.

I stood up and twirled around. “Do I look pretty?” I asked. “My mother got me this skirt only last week.” That was a lie, but he didn’t need to know that. Besides, I only ever wore that skirt about twice a year.

He put his fingers to his chin like a photographer setting up his camera tripod.

“You look like a gay French designer,” I told him. He nodded like he knew exactly what I meant.

“Well, after great scrutiny, I have to say that I think you look absolutely ravishing in that,” he said, with a flamboyant flourish of his hands. “Simply marvelous.”

“Good,” I said, sitting back down with dramatic effect. “At the very least, you know all the right answers.”

“I know how to speak the truth,” he said solemnly. I smiled at him. Was this love? Was this the reason my favorite Bollywood film stars broke off mid-scene and resumed in the lovely snow-covered mountains of Switzerland, breaking into songs and sashays? I could fully empathize with them in that moment. I heard Schumann playing his love songs for Clara in the background.

“Mission accomplished,” I said aloud. Anusha would have a fit if she ever found out about this conversation. For the first time, I could not wait to gossip with her.

“Were you sent by someone?” Vivek asked suddenly. I looked up at him in surprise. Apparently I had forgotten that he was still keeping me company.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, did someone ask you to interrogate me? Or was this part of a bet or something?” he trailed off uncertainly. I swelled with pleasure.

“Don’t doubt yourself,” I answered cryptically.

“What do you mean?” he rejoined.

“You know what I mean.”

With that enigmatic finish, I got up and signaled the end of our conversation. He smiled like he didn’t completely understand me, but waved a goodbye and walked back to his side of things.

## Chapter 9

Not even the threat or sheer probability of diarrhea was enough to keep my father away from roadside *chaat*, back in the day. Those savory snacks, oft made with fried dough and garnished with tamarind and mint sauces, cool yogurt, boiled potatoes, garbanzo beans and spices, were apparently enhanced by the fact that they were sold on rickety old carts on the side of the street, flies buzzing around and shitting on every edible morsel.

“It’s the blessing of the flies that makes it even better!” he said at one point.

Mum tried to find a happy medium by searching for good, sanitary chaathouses – respectable shops where boys scrubbed the table surfaces frequently and the proprietors looked like they believed in washing hands. However, my father insisted on eating off the side of the road every time. He was so aware of the onset of suffering however, that he would always wash down the *chaat* with a Dependal pill, strips of which he carried around in his back pocket.

Since his passing, mother and I had desisted from eating *chaat* at all. Unaware of this aversion, however, Sarita had taken some puffed rice and mixed in tomatoes, onions, coriander and a spice mix that she had been making in bulk all weekend for us a surprise. When mother saw the *bhel puri* set out on the dining table instead of our usual dinner, she spun on her heels and walked to her room. Sarita looked stricken.

“I think I’m going to refrain from having that as well,” I said.

She looked embarrassed but I touched her elbow and told her that it was okay. She hadn’t known.

“Well what should we do with this now?” she asked.

I thought for a moment. "Why don't you give it to the construction workers or something?" I suggested. "It's still only six o'clock; some of them might still be out there."

As she nodded and took the bowl from the table, I went to find my mother. If she wanted, I could go across the street and order our usual fare from the *dhaba*. These cheap restaurants, selling heavily fried and spiced Punjabi fare were favorites of both truck drivers and my family. When we wanted to get take-out, we ordered the garlic *naan* and the *mutter paneer*, served with fresh onion slices. It was pure heaven, and I knew that the idea would cheer mum up somewhat.

I knocked on her door. No answer.

Pushing open the door, seeing how the flimsy curtains billowed in the breeze, feeling the evening sunlight palpable on my skin and the hollowness in my chest return with full force... my mother's bed was empty. I suddenly feared the worst. Without pause, I skidded back to the door and up another flight of stairs, up until I could push the flap door and emerge onto the terrace.

"No!" I screamed. "No, *amma*, no!"

She looked around at me, confused. Her feet were a safe two feet away from the ledge, and firmly planted on the floor. I collapsed.

She walked up to me and paused in front of me. I knew this from her shadow that fell over me. She didn't bend down, didn't act fast enough; in fact, she didn't even touch me.

"What did you think were my intentions?" she asked softly.

"You don't want to know," I muttered. I was getting mad at her indifference to my exertion.

"But I do. Did you *really* think that I would jump?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what assumptions I had made in my split second decision to burst through the flap door. And I was right, wasn't I? She *was* on the terrace, albeit not for detrimental reasons.

"I had my misgivings," I said finally. "Put yourself in my shoes. If I had reacted the way you did down there, what would you have thought?"

"I wouldn't have thought anything of it," she said harshly. Too harshly. "I would have trusted you not to be so foolish!"

"How can you be so mean?" I asked, with a whinging tone to my voice.

"Mean? Not mean, no. I only have some expectations. After what happened to your father, I would hope that you value your life enough not to be foolish with it, and that you would lend me the same courtesy!"

I sucked in a deep breath. Tried to count to ten but no –

"I hate you!" I screamed. "You're so stupid! Why can't you understand?"

There was a shell-shocked moment of silence on the roof, and the look on my mother's face was one of catatonia. Crows circled over our heads and came to settle on the three foot wall separating us from our deaths down below. A piece of crow shit fell a foot away from us. Not wanting to have to endure anymore diatribe from her, I got up and left.

I ran down the two flights of stairs, passing my bedroom by and blazing through to the living room, and then walked briskly out the front door. No doubt that Sarita had heard our war of words and I didn't need her probing questions right then.

I wanted to get on my bicycle and make wondering circles around the hospital compound. The accelerated speed that the vehicle would give me would be freeing. I wanted to slip outside this body for a time. I wanted to shed this integument clean from the

underlying fat and muscle, and walk around completely and literally naked. Would I be recognized? Definitely not. It would make me invisible.

Hopping on to the bicycle, I took a sharp right and then a skidding left to get on to the *kachcha* road. I cycled through and through, disdaining the potholes by pedaling right into them without a care in the world, until I reached the watchmen's hut by the gate. Normally, at this point, I would have made a sharp turn left and taken the *pukka* road home, crisscrossing between all the patients and visitors and cutting in front of the chapel, but this time, I jerked to a stop. Never, in my thirteen years of life had I ever actually exited the hospital compound on my bicycle. I knew that many of my classmates regularly cycled to school and thus saved a paisa and shed a kilo in the process. But my mother had always forbidden it, even for pure recreation. A tall apartment complex stood next door and I knew a few kids from school who lived there, with whom I would have loved to bike in their massive parking lot. But in the age sans cell phones, my mother felt more secure knowing that if I fell to my death and bled out on the cement roads, it would at least be within reach of a doctor.

But while I stood in front of the gates, perched slantingly on a bicycle that I couldn't even ride with one hand let go, a new idea came to my mind: how about escaping this scene for a while? I wasn't homogeneously filled with ill will and sole intentions of breaking my mother's rules. I just thought that it would be best to let off some steam before having to head home. At that moment, even the thought of my mother unfairly turning the tables on me was enough to make me think violent thoughts.

It was decided then. I would go.

I wasn't a complete fool though. As much as I wanted to be a reckless rule-breaker, I wasn't ready to sacrifice my personal safety for some contraband cause. I dismounted from my bicycle and walked it to the apartment complex next door. Only then did I get back on and spend the next two hours deliberately avoiding having to go back.

Seeing the friends that I never interacted with outside of school was refreshing, and I would have continued to hang out with them but soon the sun set and the sky was plunged into sudden dimness. Lights began to be switched on in every window, and mothers stuck their heads out of these windows, calling for their children to return home for dinner. One boy, my age, limped with his crutches to the elevator, and discovering that a power cut had rendered that useless, clutched his crutches under one armpit and valiantly began to ascend the stairs.

I threw my bicycle down, disregarding the possibility of it being stolen, and ran to help him. The parking lots were mostly deserted and it was just he and I.

"You can go. I'm used to doing this alone," he said, in perfect English.

"I'm not doing it for you," I replied. "I'm trying to tone my flabby arms."

He laughed. Unfortunately for me, Feroz lived on the third floor of his multiplex, and I scraped more than one shin and ankle lugging his crutches after him.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" he asked, when we finally reached his apartment.

"I really should be heading home. My mother will be worried," I said.

His mother appeared at the door after two rings on the bell. Behind her person, I could see framed pictures of the Kaaba and stylized Arabic calligraphy on the walls. The

couches were covered with silk brocade linens, and the smell of stewing halal meat drifted to the door.

“About time that filthy son of yours came home,” bellowed a deep masculine voice from inside.

Feroz’s mother shivered and Feroz’s ears turned slightly pink. He averted his eyes.

“Feroz,” his mother whispered urgently. “Say goodbye to your friend. Papa’s been drinking tonight.”

I looked up. *What?*

Feroz looked at me apologetically. “It’s just a bad time.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I hastened to say. “I’m expected at home anyway.”

The corner of his mouth lifted and then he was painfully shuffling into the apartment. His mother lugged the bicycle in behind him and shut the door.

I left, feeling introspective, found my bicycle exactly where I’d left it and walked it all the way home. *Papa’s been drinking tonight.*

The foyer was blaring with Hindi film songs from the eighties and early nineties. I could hear the music even before I reached the front door. I parked the bicycle near the entrance, letting it rest against the side of the house, and sat down on the front steps. It was nearly eight – I could tell without a watch just by watching how long my shadows became as I walked home before the spirit that animated them was quenched completely. The moon was rising, a silver specter in the middle of a terrible sky. My mother’s thick silver anklets, *gajalu* as she called them, were clinking with every footfall on the hard floors. She had always had such a good sense of rhythm.



When I was younger, *amma* wanted me to take dance lessons with her. She wanted to have mother-daughter sessions with her dance guru. Perhaps she thought that this would be her legacy to me, a gift that we could have in common. In almost everything, I had resembled my father, was serious and stoic like him, devoured books and spent time scribbling my thoughts everyday in a journal like him. We shared a passion for spicy foods rich in garlic. We liked to listen to instrumental music together, and create our own words to their lilting tunes. It always seemed like the only thing I had in common with my mother were our genes. I lacked her gift for comic timing and conversation, or so it always seemed. She never wanted to be sitting around in contemplation; she liked doing things with her hands, cooking food, creating art collages, seeing her patients. When my mother first suggested the idea of joint dance lessons, I was actually just as excited as she, if not more. Finally, here was something that would give me leverage with her. She, the exalted, multi-tasking, successful, wholegrain woman, and I, her flatfooted protégé, her clumsy investment. Mother-daughter bonding.

Unfortunately, it turned out that mum had skipped over 'dancing' when she passed down an imperfect set of genes to me.

Father had simply laughed it off, and reminded me of my inability to even fall down correctly at the end of Ring around the Rosy game.

But I had cried for days in secret. Mum had this *release* mechanism, this back up reservoir that she could turn to whenever she was feeling her entire oeuvre of emotion. And I? Well I had nothing. Nothing to confide in, and certainly nothing in common with her. All I had was a stupid notebook that my father gave me in the aftermath, a petty consolation prize. Anyone could write. What was so special about that? Father was a math

whiz, and could juggle numbers faster than anyone I knew. It was what made him so successful as a banker. Mother had an unlimited supply of talents. After all, what had my grandmother said about her? – she was *born* dancing. She didn't even need the practice. And surprise, surprise, both of them could *also* write.

I cracked open that journal, and smelled its fresh notebook smell for the first time only a few months back. It was only after father went missing in our lives that I went searching in my room for every reminder of him. And I began writing in it only because I thought that that was what he wanted me to do.

And so here we are.

My mother was lost in her dancing: this was a clear sign that she had forgotten about our spat already or was trying to, at least. I figured it was for the best. I slipped in through the back door and went up to my room and study and sleep, my legs at least, intact.

\*

Friday. The last day before two weeks of bliss, celebration, smoke and fire, friends, surprises, new clothes, extra sleep. How is it that the day one wants to get through the fastest always turns out to be so disappointingly slow? In fact, since my class was finishing midterm week today, it would make more sense for it to disappear in a haze of oblivion. No one remembers exam days. That's why when they get their dismal test scores weeks later, they absolutely cannot understand what went wrong. I believe it to be a mental defense mechanism. I went into Friday fully informed of this rich history of forgetting.

Yet, as cruel fate would have it, the day passed by excruciatingly slowly. I couldn't make sense of it. I was heavily sleep deprived, having stayed up all night trying to memorize Chitti's expeditions in foreign lands for this stupid geography exam. Yet the only

thing I had to show for it was the slow wrench of lower back pain, so crippling that it hurt to hunch and it hurt to sit up straight. A regular Catch-22. My eyelashes felt like corn husks, grazing my skin every time I blinked. My nose was congested and yet simultaneously leaking, a frightening development in my Saleem Sinai persona. For the first time all year, it was actually cold enough in the classroom that goose bumps, or as my mother called them, goose pimples, rippled up and down the length of my arms. It was hideous.

As usual, classes ended at noon, we broke for lunch, and then went off on our separate ways. Anusha and I both went to the play rehearsals, but we didn't get to talk for very long. I was bored out of my mind backstage while she lived it up in the spotlight. Anusha was always good with handling that kind of attention. I preferred to be part of the crew, I truly did, but I did wish that it was a little more exciting. There was only so much practice that you needed to be able to move a few curtains and props around on the big day. Sulking on top of a cardboard box in a dark corner of the room was not entirely unappealing though. I got to lean comfortably against the wall and people-watch. It was comforting to be unobserved for once.

After the incident with my father, I went through a phase where I was always watched. Always. It was understandable, of course. Everyone wanted to make sure that I wouldn't do anything rash or become really depressed. My grandmother took the train in from her small town and spent an entire month with my mother and me in the aftermath.

Looking back on this section of my life, neatly cut and understood like a slice of apple pie tasted and remembered in midnight dreams, I see things differently. There are certain incidents in our lives, personal, political, and historical, that form defined chapter breaks. Partition in 1947, the Challenger explosion, the Bhopal disaster of '84, 9/11 and so

on and so forth. My first personal chapter break occurred with my father's death, and the pages parted neatly from there on out. The things that I was accustomed to before the event and after-the-fact were radical departures like a motorcycle running with wheels turning in opposite directions. It was disorienting and everything that happened in the months afterwards could be reread in light of the fact. My father's shadow was cast over every new relationship, fight, epiphany and silence that I experienced in the aftermath.

My relationship with Sarita was borne literally out of the event. Her entering my life coincided not unexpectedly or coincidentally, but deliberately because of his departure. She wasn't just a nanny, a maid, a friend, a big sister .... she was a replacement. My need to know as much as possible about her wasn't the curiosity that anyone would have with someone who shares their living space. I can see that now, at least. I needed to know her inside and out because she was the surrogate, the doppelganger, the beta version. In that sense, I came to see her not just for herself but for everything she stood for. She was there to protect me, to never hurt me, to give up her own small pleasures for mine – just like my father used to do. I was allowed to take her for granted, use her as my excuse for anything and everything, trust her to keep my secrets even from my own mother, and know that she would never displace me herself. We needed each other, or at least, that is what I imagined. Even when I knew that I didn't know her as well as I should, I felt like we shared each other's confidence just the way my father and I used to.

The repercussions of this perspective will be elaborated on in the pages to come, but Emerson will do for now: the years teach much that the days never knew.

Back to people watching on the set of *A Christmas Carol*: Anusha, tall and beautiful, concentrated only on herself and trying to be self aware about her posture and delivery and

yet trying to look unaffected. Zee, an upperclassman whose real name I didn't know but which I had tremendous fun trying to guess: Zain, Zorro, Zubzub? Deepak, large and feminine, with unkempt hair and shifty eyes: my guess was that if the school rules didn't disallow it, he would grow out his wiry hair and beard until they reached the length of a holy mendicant's by the banks of the Ganga. Pia, our North Indian celebrity: she managed to make even a blue pinafore and black buckled shoes look sexy. The five English teachers scurrying around in their mass-produced nylon saris, consulting each other in private and yet contradicting each other in public – they were a motley crew pushed together only by their common subject.

I turned my thoughts inwards for a moment. I knew so many people from such diverse backgrounds, families, religions because of this artificial structure of schooling. Would I have met them and befriended them outside in the real world? We all wore uniforms and conservative appearances. Even glamorous divas like Pia could, at most, only differentiate themselves with their school bags and expensive fountain pens. Most people just accepted the uniformication and stopped trying. Because of it, you could never tell if the person next to you in morning assembly was Muslim or Christian, if their father was a banker or a cobbler, or if they lived in a palace or a hut.

It afforded one the dual identity of private invisibility and public recognition. While your personal story might glom above your head out in the real world, in school, it was by and large defeated. We were like a school of fish: try and try to discern the differences between any two, and the most anyone would find would be entirely uninteresting. But outside, everyone knew who you were by the uniform you wore. When we marched through the streets of Vijayawada with students from all the other schools in town for

Solidarity day, we knew how to address our peers from those various institutions by their colors and stitching. The uniform was annihilating and yet served as a badge: it gave us place by affirming all of us into one identity.

I didn't have a problem with it but I knew that some of my classmates did. Once upon a time, we were allowed to abstain from the uniform on Fridays, or "dress day." And we were also allowed to put on our best clothes for our birthdays, thereby letting our friends and strangers know to wish us appropriately. Our new headmistress abolished both practices, stating that these glimpses defeated the purpose of the uniform and its equalizing effects. It was partially true: many of the children's parents began to show off on Fridays by dressing their children in such gaudily expensive and unwarranted outfits for school that it became a competition. For the ones who couldn't afford to enter the contest, Fridays became the day of shame.

While I didn't personally mind the revision of uniform policy, Anusha was filled with a righteous anger at the headmistress for months. She was unable to let it go. To be fair, Anusha never wore such bawdy ensembles – I wouldn't be her friend otherwise – but she liked the individuality it lent her. She liked being different and making an impression on people by the choices she made for herself. When the Friday and birthday practices were abolished, she responded by rebelling in small ways: painting her nails with unusual colors for weeks when nail polish itself wasn't allowed, pinning small brooches to her shirt collars, or using pink ribbons instead of dark blue ones to tie her braids up in a loop. It was hilarious. As much as I didn't really share her indignation, I was proud that she was standing up for what she believed in instead of bowing down to higher authority. I

appreciated the uniform's pros but I didn't want it to kill individuality completely. In Anusha's case, it definitely failed in that aspect.

"To hell with that," she declared very quickly, when we first heard of the new policy. "If they're going to fail me out of here because I like letting the world know that I appreciate my individual self, then this school has already lost me, long ago."

That's what I liked about Anusha. She was completely unafraid. She was so different from me, but she also complemented in me in so many ways. She liked to be the standout, the one odd fish in the school, the hippie in the junkyard with an eclectic scarf and a nose ring. In so many ways, she reminded me of my mother. Anusha was opinionated and loud, and the boys revolved around her like flies. But I was probably the one person in the world who could tell her to shut up and actually see it through. That's the thing about being thrown into an environment as unusual as school together. Anusha and I would never have met, never have discovered each other's sense of humor, learnt to respect each other's intelligence, quarreled, competed, gossiped, confided or been as bitterly honest with each other as we were. I saw myself through the mirror that she held up for me. She reflected everything that I did completely truthfully, putting me in my place when I needed it but also standing with me when she agreed with me.

But then again, how else do we ever know ourselves? Just as a solitary tree in a forest makes no noise, can anyone know himself truly without knowing a true friend?

Enough rambling. I think I'm okay. For now.

## Chapter 10

Break had started. Life was fabulous. For the first time in a long time, I could go picking for guavas with Sarita and know that nothing was waiting to be completed back home. No math homework or English reading or Hindi vocabulary memorization. Just two young girls, guava picking.

“Sarita,” I asked. “You’re working for us because you want to earn a dowry right? Do you have a husband already picked out then?”

She laughed. “No not yet.”

“So you’re preemptively planning for a groom that might not show up?”

“Why are you so concerned? Do you have any one in mind for me?”

I chuckled. “Hardly. But when the first one comes by, I will be sure to introduce you.”

She was quiet for a moment and we resumed our leisurely pace.

“Where is this coming from anyway?” she said finally. “What’s really on your mind?”

I looked at her in confusion. Did some ulterior agenda always have to lurk under the surface of our every conversation? When and how did she lose so much trust in me?

“I see that you were never made aware of the concept of chatting,” I said archly.

“You just aren’t the chatty type,” she shot back.

“I totally am!” I exclaimed. “Why, that’s so far from the truth, I – ”

“Is it? I don’t know if we’ve ever had a single conversation that didn’t hinge on some deeper subject, be it religion, marriage, class status....”

“ – don’t even know how to respond. So unfair,” I continued, like she’d never interrupted.



“It’s true. And what’s more, I think you speak to your little diary more than you do with me *or* your mother.” She folded her arms and finished with emphasis, like she’d just won a case in court.

I thought back to all those nights, me recording every detail of every emotion of every day so painstakingly. I was Anne Frank, albeit less persecuted and less eloquent. But nonetheless, Sarita was off base here.

“Sarita,” I said seriously. “Are you insinuating that you are jealous of a little book? Can there be such a thing?”

She gave me a sour look. “I just want to know what it says about *you*,” she said, “that you would rather confide in blank pages than me, your friend.”

“What’s there to confide about?” I asked. “I always tell you about my day. I don’t see what you’re missing.”

She paused for a moment. “Why are you so afraid of criticism?” she asked finally.

“*This* is criticism? Why, I cannot wait until you show me some praise! Can you please promise to write my obituary when I’m gone?”

She gave me another queer look. Images of my rolling into the canal, currently only ten meters away from us, floated between us like a magical dialogue bubble in a cartoon. I rolled my eyes. She sighed.

“Listen, I’m coming off all wrong,” she said. “I *want* to chat with you, and be carefree and blithe. I was just surprised, I guess, because that rarely happens.”

She looked down at her hands and turned the guava in them round and round. I reached forward and hugged her, impulsively. Even though I talked to her like an equal, she was at least three inches taller than me and my forehead hit her chin. It hurt.

“Well honey,” I said in English when we let go of each other, “I got me two weeks of freedom and bliss, and we got a lots of talking to do.”

“What was that? You’ve been watching way too many American films, child.”

“Don’t *child* me!”

She cooed, and I batted at her hands, and we linked arms for the remainder of our walk.

\*

Some cultures believe that we begin in clay and will end in it, and that the bodies we use in life are nothing more than a potter’s clay vessel. A full and contiguous circuit. I liked that image a lot, but I also liked the one espoused in ancient Hindu texts: we begin in sound, and the sound, the female counterpart of Brahma the creator, works to reify concepts previously only articulated in Brahma’s thoughts.

Brahma speaks and therefore we are.

Talking is what I always imagined to be the most important difference between humans and all other forms of creation. We speak, almost excessively. We speak, and our words don’t disappear at the end of their wavelengths. They continue, in a Jungian form of human consciousness, repeating over and over in commoratio, building on previous words and if they’re lucky, getting encoded into tangible texts. My mother taught me to kiss the books that I accidentally stepped on, as a child. *Respect your books and you’ll learn to respect and love yourself*, she said. Sticks and stones may hurt my bones but words will form and destroy me.

When a Hindu person dies, the family will hold funeral rites or *antyeesti* by letting the priest conduct special prayers for the dead person before the funeral van comes to take his

or her body to the cremation grounds. The host will not welcome those who visit to offer condolences. These relatives will leave silently without saying goodbye. The absence of sound at this occasion, of words that denote affection, compassion, and evidence of relationships, is not a coincidence. We begin in sound and end in silence. *Khamosh*. Finish.

My words, even if not part of a command, will create something new every time they are uttered. Something new is created every time I speak, and the world is changed forever. I liked that concept. I am more than my body. I am my speech.

\*

It was a beautiful Sunday morning, and my mother had commissioned Sarita to clean the house thoroughly inside and out. This meant that instead of just mopping the floors with a rag, Sarita threw down buckets of water and used thin bramble sticks to literally push the water out the door. She threw water at all the windows and flushed out every last particle of dirt. She attached our small broom to a ten-foot wooden pole and angled it at every ceiling corner to clear it of cobwebs. My bed was stripped and the sheets soaked in bleach and water. Every last kettle and container in the kitchen was taken out and Sarita pumped boric acid over every surface. Dozens of cockroaches came scurrying out, which made me sick to think of the implications, but they twirled around for a moment before keeling over, dead.

Once the house was truly delayered, Sarita and I sat down on the porch. She was now sifting pebbles from rice and I was sketching her side profile on a piece of parchment.

Vivek appeared around the corner just as Sarita stood up to go put the rice in the cooker. But which happened first?

“Kind lady!” Vivek addressed me as I sat outside on the porch. I looked up at him, a smile already creeping on to my face.

“How can I help you, sir?”

“I have just finished building a contraption that is so disingenuous that you will marvel at – “

“I think you meant ‘ingenious’,” I interrupted, laughing.

He glared. “Ingenious then. The artifact required great planning and original research, combined with natural and prodigious skill and knowledge of subjects such as momentum, hydraulics, velocity and weight. I would like to present it to you and enquire whether you would make me the happiest man alive and be the first to try it out.”

He finished with a flourish of his hands, tweaked a nonexistent moustache and did a corny little bow. I sighed

“Take me to it,” I said imperiously.

He led me by the crook of his elbow and we walked past the concrete walls and into the heart of the mango tree’s canopy. He had me shut my eyes while we walked, and though I was nervous, I walked with my head high and center intact. I trusted him.

When I opened my eyes, I immediately kicked his shin.

“Ow!” he yelped in a high-pitched tone and hopped away from me.

“This is a swing,” I said. “You exasperate me.”

“Whatever, princess. Get on. I’ll push you.”

I seated myself demurely and he pulled the swing back as high as he could manage it and let me go.

“You’re a lightweight!” he called after me, as my feet cut a tunnel through the dusty wind around us. I giggled madly. The pure adrenaline rush that tore through my body was exhilarating. My hair had shook free of the loose braid that it was tied in, and it cascaded down my face with each motion. The air above us rumbled ominously, and I began to wonder whether my levels of emotion were somehow supernaturally tied to the weather. Somehow it seemed as though a certain amount of excitement was guaranteed to bring down the heavens.

I must have called it, because not a second later, it began to pour. Vivek, that jerk, whooped delightedly and ran away, leaving me to try and stop the swing myself. By the time I managed to get off and run to the safety of my house, I was drenched and he was standing at the door, amused.

“Looking wonderful, *yaar*.”

“I hate you.”

“You keep saying that but I know otherwise.” He winked, and I hated myself for finding that irresistible.

Sarita came to the door and was surprised by the both of us standing there. Vivek immediately straightened up.

“Hi there,” he said awkwardly. “Do you mind if I stay here until this rain lets up?”

She nodded uncertainly and looked at me. I stared back.

“How about you two come inside and I can make some tea?” she finally said.

“An amazing plan!” Vivek said and stepped inside before I could get a word in edgewise. I huffed and was about to follow when I stopped at the sight of his shoes.

They were ordinary white slippers, long and so worn out, the rubber casing having slowly eroded like sandstone in the Sahara. The mud from the wet ground coated the bottoms. I looked to make sure that no one couldn't see me and stepped into them. They were still warm. I took a few steps before the one fell off; I tried again, and this time the other slipped off.

"Just can't get them on, I guess," I murmured, wiggling my toes. I slipped them off back where they were and joined Sarita and Vivek inside.

She was in the kitchen, watching the stove and stirring a pot full of brown water. He was in the doorway, leaning like he did when I first met him, watching her intently.

"Am I crashing the party?" I asked, inching past him and into the tiny kitchen. The aromatic fumes of the chai swirled dizzily.

"Yes. Get out," said Vivek.

I stared at him in surprise. He kept his stern expression for only a moment before he started laughing.

"The look on your face! Priceless!"

I laughed too. I liked that Vivek kept me on my toes; I could relax and be myself with him but he never let me sink from contentment into boredom.

We took our cups of tea and sat down at the dining table. Vivek looked around as he walked.

"You have a beautiful house," he said.

"Thanks!" I turned to smile at him, but he was looking at Sarita. I was confused. Did he think that Sarita was part of the family? Well she was, I supposed. But I couldn't

remember if I had ever introduced her. Sarita sat the remainder of the tea down on the table and left abruptly. A moment later, the door to her room clicked shut.

A sudden awkward moment enveloped us. Vivek sipped at his tea steadily, not pausing until he finished.

“Careful, you’ll scald your tongue,” I said. I was drinking like an English lady myself, my little pinky obnoxiously sticking out in the air.

“It seems that I already have,” he muttered. I didn’t press further.

The rain outside was a steady waterfall. I stood and went to the window to look at it. I was already dripping wet, and yet was watching the rain from the inside like I always did. I bit my lip.

“Here’s a game,” I said. “Have you ever danced in the rain?”

“Not dancing, no,” he said with a smile. “Why, what are you thinking?”

“I think you know,” I said. I beckoned, and we both went outside again, this time voluntarily and with full knowledge of what we were signing up for.

He extended his arm and I let him clasp my hand before we stepped out from under the awning and into the downpour. I screamed. It was so cold, and so ferocious. I felt like I would come back inside and discover bruises from the sheer velocity of the raindrops. He yelled too, but with the giddiness of a mad man. We both tilted our necks backwards and let the rain fill our mouths.

“This is pure, unfiltered,” he said. “It’s the taste of the Ganga. This is holy water, straight from the heavens. If you’re Christian, you’re being baptized right at this instant. If you’re Hindu, treat this as *prasad*. If you’re Muslim, well I don’t know. Maybe Allah is giving you a bath!”

I started laughing. "Seriously?" I said. I had to speak so much louder to get him to hear me. "You're lucky I'm not Muslim because I would kick you for being so insensitive."

"It's a joke," he said, putting up his hands. "Everyone needs a bath, and I would sure appreciate some higher being ensuring that I have one every now and then."

We clasped both our hands, crisscrossed, my left in his left and right in right and began circling with high speed. When we lost our grips and fell to the ground, swept up in centrifugal force, I spread my arms and legs and made water angels on the ground. I didn't even mind that I now had mud on every inch of my body and in my hair. This was a limitless feeling.

Looking up, I saw Sarita watching us from her window. A sudden feeling of guilt swept over me. Of course she would look disapprovingly at my nonchalance. There she was, having spent all morning cleaning the house until it sparkled, and I was about to trod my muddy self all over her shiny floors. I stood up and let the rain wash me again, this time not for pleasure but for utility.

Seeing Vivek looking at me curiously, I shrugged. "I guess I *am* Muslim after all," I said. He laughed.

"I like you, Leela," he said, watching me stand there with arms stretched out. "You're really something else."

I looked up at him, face wiped of expression. I could chat, banter, tease and be teased, but compliments? Couldn't handle them.

"Thank you," I finally said with a wink. "I'm glad I made the mark."

It was passable. My heart was thudding inside, and I felt like we were two characters from a sappy Mills and Boon novel of the kind that my mother liked to read sometimes. But



did any romance novelist ever courageously delve into the gory, visceral details of such a moment? The clenching feeling in my gut, the way restraining myself from running and hugging him actually hurt my stomach, all the unshureties and uncertainties of waiting for the chips to fall where they may, the self-reprobatation that my sense of self-worth was handing to my vulnerability... It hurt, but it hurt in a masochistic fashion. I let the feeling wash over me with the rain. It was good. Vivek was saying exactly what I wanted to hear and where we were at the moment was okay with me.

When I went back inside to clean up and dry off, I thought about confiding in Sarita. Isn't that what big sisters existed for? She would listen to my ramblings, be amused by them, offer me advice, and be stern if she needed to... but I decided against it.

The problem with secrets is that though they may kill you slowly as you try and keep them in, you can't live without them. Having a secret forms you, gives you shape and meaning, differentiates you from all the other nice, pleasant girls out there. Secrets give you identity; the more you give away, the more transparent you become, and the less you retain your essential core. What makes you who you are? There have to be some thoughts that float around only in your mind, because if they're all released into the world, you're empty.

Secrets are synecdoches for your soul.

My secret was that I liked Vivek, tremendously. It brought a curve to my lips, a bounce to my step. That would stay hidden in here.

\*

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" my mother asked me a few days later over breakfast.

"Actually, I have no idea."

“Really? You’ve never thought about it?”

“*Pepe*,” I said. “That’s ‘no’ in Chitonga. It’s the language spoken in Zambia.”

My mother paused. “And you know this because?”

“Geography class.”

She laughed. She had heard too many of my rants about the inanity of that class to not be amused.

“You know, when I was a girl, I thought that I would be a professional dancer,” she said.

“But that’s obvious.” When she looked at me quizzically, I continued, “You’re obsessed with dancing. No greater truism. Of course you would think about pursuing it professionally.”

“Well when I decided that I wouldn’t pursue it, I thought about becoming a politician,” she said.

This time I looked up. “But you hate politics,” I said.

“Exactly. I hate politics as it is today. I hate the status quo. That’s why I thought seriously about getting in and reforming it. I may not always show it, but I do care very much about how this country fares.”

“I’m not saying you’re not patriotic,” I said. “I think the same things as you.”

My mother leaned forward. “And how much of that is because you think that for yourself and how much is my influence?”

I frowned. “Can you really separate the two?”

“Maybe, maybe not. But you know, it’s never too early to think about your long term plans.”

I nodded and finished eating my *dosa*. How miserable to think that my life wouldn't always be like this, lazing around, reading Tolkien at my leisure, anticipating fireworks, new clothes and good food in the coming days and so on? The biggest crises in my life at the moment were about getting Vivek's attention and hoping that I passed my math exam. They say that children always want to act like adults and adults constantly mourn the passing of their childhood. I was different. Though I recognized the value of maturity, I definitely did not take my young age for granted. The freedom and time that I had at my use were unparalleled. I didn't want to start thinking about career affirming decisions yet.

Besides did I have any talents? The question felt like a bucket of cold water drained onto my head. My only interest these days was in writing. But did I really foresee a career as a novelist in my future? The idea was almost laughable. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to shadow my mother sometime and think about following her footsteps as a physician.

Sarita was outside with a tray of colored powders, drawing a *rangoli* design on the ground in front of our porch steps. She had cleaned the area first with a bucket of water, swept the water clean with bramble sticks, and dried her hands before dipping into the powders. She would make intricate designs there for the next two weeks, a new one every morning. Some designs would be geometric in nature, and she would start off by marking little dots on the ground before curlicuing around them with finer lines later. Some of her *rangolis* would be depictions of the Surya, the sun god, on his chariot, or multiple little *diyas* with yellow flames enclosing another abstract design, or perhaps even patterns of lotuses, much like the ones that Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, sits on. It wasn't just our house that did this either. Everyone in the compound did it, and *rangolis* were proudly drawn in front of the homes of the other doctors, the nuns' quarters, and even in front of the chapel.

Deepavali had become a festival worth celebrating by people of every faith, much like Christmas in our community.

I went to join her after putting my dirty plate away in the sink. Sarita noticed my coming but didn't lift her head to acknowledge me. We sat there in silence. I watched her work. She seemed so sure of herself, intent on the task at hand, and oblivious to all other distractions. Steady was the word that I would use to describe her, not just then, but always. Even in her moments of passion, like when she got angry at me for my slip of tongue, she dealt with it stoically, channeling her rage into a code of silence to ensure that she herself did not say something she would regret. I envied how easy she made it seem. Her days were spent rising at dawn, sweeping and wiping the floors, doing the laundry, making breakfast, lunch and dinner, and any other odds and ends that my mother had her do. She didn't have to make any hard decisions; perhaps, the hardest she would ever face would be about picking the right man to marry. Her face was serene, devoid of any frustrations, quandaries or disappointment.

I pinched myself, hard. Once again, I had caught myself grossly miscalculating the relative comforts of our lives. Here I was, envying Sarita for the lack of horizons in her future. There was only one: marriage. How bleak that suddenly felt! I was really not worthy of the opportunities offered to me. The only mark that I would leave in the sands of time would be my butt print. It was pathetic.

"Shall I read you the poem that I've been working on?" I asked Sarita.

She looked up, startled. "What?"

"Yes, I am a budding poet. It will form my future profession. I need an audience."

"Well sure," she laughed. "If you really want me to listen, I will."

I stopped, feeling thwarted. “But I don’t want you to listen because you think I want you to,” I said. “I want you to listen because you want to listen.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Really? Are we really having this conversation?”

I got up, a fit of childish anger sweeping over me. Why couldn’t she just cooperate with me like I wanted?

“That’s okay. I’ll leave you.”

I went to my room and collapsed on my bed. As I stretched to get comfortable, I hit my head on the wall. It hurt, so I apologized. After a moment, I still couldn’t figure out why I apologized to myself.

Sarita didn’t come knocking.

\*

I changed my routine over the next two days, opening them up to spend time with Vivek, my mother, or even Minnie and Puja. The latter two invited themselves over to my house on early on Thursday and spent the entirety of it on my bed.

“So it’s been a while,” I commented, the same way one would make observations about the weather.

“You have so much stuff in here,” said Minnie. “It’s like you’re a hoarder or something.”

“What are you talking about? This room is about as bare as your stupid head.”

“Uncalled for. Look, you’ve got books lying everywhere. And who knew you even had that many shoes?”

My closet was sufficient only to hold my clothes. I really needed to ask my mother for a set of shelves or a small almirah; I was temporarily keeping some things in a neat pile in the far corner. Minnie was exaggerating so much.

“Don’t criticize, Minnie, unless you can say something nice,” Puja said.

“Or at least, unless you can offer a solution,” I appended.

“Why do you have so many books anyways?” Minnie continued. She got off the bed and crawled on her knees to the corner. “How many subjects do you kids need to take at your school?”

“Many,” I said loftily. “Obviously your curriculum pales in comparison – ”

“Math, Hindi, Civics...” she rattled off the subjects by reading the labels on my notebooks.

“English. Let’s see what you’re learning.” She flipped it open and read:

“A gourmet dining at Crewe  
Found a rather large mouse in his stew.  
Said the waiter, ‘Don’t shout  
And wave it about,  
Or the rest will be wanting one too!’”

She looked at me and said, “Wow this is really good! Congrats... I thought you didn’t have any talent, but I guess I was wrong.”

I gave her a sour look. “I’ll take that as a compliment, but unfortunately I didn’t write that. It’s actually a famous limerick, but I’m not surprised you’ve never heard of it.”

“Are you calling me illiterate?”

“Yes.”

Puja laughed. "You guys are so mean to each other," she said. "Seriously, rein yourselves in!"

Minnie was already ruffling through some of my other books. I sat back against the wall, feeling complacent and happy until –

"This is your geography book right? Wow you doodle a lot in this class. You must be bored out of your mind!"

I jolted up straight. No, it wasn't in this class, was it, that I –

Minnie cleared her throat. "Tell me who Vivek is, friend."

I scrambled out of bed and snatched the book away from her but it was too late. Now she was laughing widely, clutching her stomach and completely beside herself.

"So there *is* something there, yeah? Ooh do tell!"

"There is nothing to tell," I said in a staccato voice. "Don't be difficult."

"Are you being careful?" Puja asked.

A moment of silence ensued as Minnie and I turned to look at her. I knew that my face reflected nothing but complete astonishment, while Minnie recovered faster and began howling with laughter.

"Oh God, stop," she gasped between fits of giggles. "Stop, it hurts too much."

I threw a pen at her. "Calm down, crazy woman! and Puja, why did you just say that? Aren't you a little too young to even know anything about that? *Yaar!*"

Puja had never been as comfortable with even a teasing remark to handle outright criticism ably. She flushed red and immediately got defensive.

"Is it a crime to be in the know about safe sex? If it is, then sue me!"

I tensed. Minnie stopped laughing. "What did you just say?" she whispered as though her mother was in the next room. "Puja....?"

"You girls are the biggest bunch of prudes!" Puja said, with genuine shock written across her face. "I never realized this, but it's true. And even you," she turned to me. "You, who claim to be so progressive and ultra modern about so many things – you hypocrite!

"I'm sorry, I really am," I said, with feeling. "You're right. It's right that you should know about that. I think we girls have always thought of you as our little sister, but I guess you're growing up now. We just hadn't seen it coming. And your mother was right to sit you down and give you the skinny about the real big bad world."

Minnie nodded, and Puja didn't immediately respond. "Thanks," she said finally. "I appreciate it. But why would you think it was my mother who taught me about this and that?"

"Who else? – "

"Whoever it may be!" Puja shrugged cryptically. "I just find it interesting that you immediately designated that conversation to a mother's role."

The tables were turned. Puja was right about everything. I wasn't just a fake progressive; I was in retrograde. I might as well just tell my mother that my secret desire had always been to be a child bride and bear fourteen children.

I closed my eyes and fell back onto the bed. "I am a grade A hypocrite," I said. "Puja, when did you get to be so insightful?"

Minnie was looking back and forth between the two of us like a spectator at a tennis match. She cleared her throat.



“I think we’ve forgotten about the genesis of this conversation,” she said, voice full of mirth. “Vivek?”

I groaned. It was going to be a long Thursday.

\*

A common trope that I have heard while volunteering in the wards at St. Clare’s is the one about regret.

“Regret is the absolute worst emotion that you can possibly feel when all is said and done,” said a forty-something mother to me once. “Life is like a game of chess. Your opportunities for radical decisions or crazy choices are steadily diminished with every move you make.”

I understood her completely. Most regrets that people have are not about the things that they did but about the things that they never got to do. I knew that my mother regretted postponing having another child until it became impossible. My grandmother regretted thinking that finishing her master’s degree in Hindi and marrying my grandfather were mutually exclusive. Minnie always regrets not restraining herself from picking verbal fights with me because she inevitably loses. That’s a safe assumption, I think.

My father once asked me to create a document listing all the positive things about myself right alongside the negative things. *You need to be honest with yourself, child. Deluding yourself is unfair to yourself and your potential.* How linearly I followed his advice! I had listed my frizzy hair and dry lips as cons right next to points detailing my imagination and flair for adverbs. How meticulously did I write everything down, from the taste of the mango lassi in the mornings to how I felt about the constant rain! How much I tried to honor his lasting memory by keeping his dark secrets safe! And now I needed to question

every piece of advice he ever gave because he clearly did not follow his own. He had no outlet of his own. He didn't follow his own rhetoric.

Self-reflection: I knew I overdid it. The Leeescartes paradigm: I think therefore I know I *can* think, or so it seemed.

What were my regrets? This was the question that I engaged in for most of the day, though I intermittently did rise to use the bathroom or go to the kitchen and rummage for leftovers. I had never experienced the regret of missing my chance to say what was on my mind, for instance. In fact, it was the opposite. I spoke too much, some would say. But how honest is plainspoken honesty? Would I ever find a tall enough platform to be heard fully?

I finally gave up on the circular discourse by going downstairs and out the front door. Vivek, my intellectual friend, and aesthetically pleasing besides, was nowhere to be found. I sat down on the porch steps because experience had taught me that he would come to me if I sat out there long enough. He always did. By establishing this pattern, he had effectively cut down my opportunities to come seek him. If I did, that would be out of the norm, unusual, and would attract unwanted attention and unimaginable assumptions from his friends and colleagues on the other side of the wall.

So I sat there, twiddling my thumbs and patting my belly. The leftovers were pitiful but my pride was insurmountable. I was not the one who would thaw.

I waited and waited and waited. Minnie and Puja came by for a little bit to talk to me but they left soon. I saw the watchman come by on an errand and we waved to each other. I settled down on to my belly and began tracing the grooves on the wooden floor. I thought about going for a ride on my bicycle but then Vivek might stop by and miss me. It was when I began to aimlessly sing lullabies that my mother used to sing to me as a child, from

various different languages: Telugu, Hindi, English, Kannada, Tamil – the woman’s gift for languages was simply prodigious – that I realized that dusk had set and that I had actually just spent a matter of hours sitting for some stupid boy on my stupid porch.

“I am pathetic!” I whispered. There was no response but the beginning chirps of the grasshoppers. My mind jumped from question to question: who was I becoming, what was I doing with my life, was the object of my affections even worthy, what would my mother say if she knew, where was my mother anyway, how did I get to be so self-centered, did Vivek even care, wasn’t Minnie having a field day about this, why was I so pathetic? It was a sad scene and I was acutely aware of it.

I got up in a fit of self-disgust. I paced around the porch. I obtained a small stone and pretended that I was skipping it when in reality, I flung it with all my might into the space between my house and the others. I flung it so hard, the muscles in my shoulder ached. But I was still angry.

If regret was the worst kind of emotion, then this was the worst kind of regret. The shame that comes with seeing how far you have strayed from the person that you thought you were and were now becoming is awful. Puja had called out on my closet prudishness the day before, and now I was calling myself out on the sheer pathos of my situation and aspirations. The fact that I had twisted my goals in life to revolve around a boy, and not just any boy, but one with whom I would probably never have a semblance of a future was ruinous.

That was it. I was pathetic, but at least I realized it. I was over Vivek. I had to be. I needed to return to becoming the serious person that I always was. My parents had always told me that I had a lot of potential.

And here I was squandering it away in a fanciful preoccupation.

But no more of that.

## Chapter 11

Anusha called me on our first beautiful weekend of vacation. My mother was home and sitting across from me on the couch, feet comfortably perched on a cushion, sipping coffee and reading the newspaper.

“Hello!” Anusha said gaily. “What are you up to? Missing me yet?”

“Terribly,” I said. “I just wish we didn’t have any vacations ever so that I can see your beautiful face every day!”

“I’ll pretend you’re being serious,” she said. “My family just got back from the temple, where we spent all morning singing *bhajans* and now I’m exhausted.”

“I’m surprised that you still have a functioning voice box then,” I said. “You don’t sound hoarse at all.”

“My mother made me drink warm milk and honey this morning. It seriously helped.”

“So what have you been doing this past week?” I asked.

“Been going to the temple every day, and we just went out to buy a box of fireworks. My brothers and I have formed a *kabaddi* team and we have been demolishing anyone who challenges us. We are so coordinated!”

“I’m glad that you are finding so much joy in such a violent sport,” I said glibly. “The last time I played kabaddi, someone knocked into my chest and I think a piece of my right lung detached itself from the mainland. And then I fell into my friend Puja and ending up smashing her glasses. It was not pretty, for her glasses or for my behind.”

Anusha laughed for a good minute. “That’s because you’re a wimp,” she said. “*Pathali!* If you weren’t that rail thin then perhaps you would be able to hold your own when the opposite team tries to drag you behind their lines.”

I smirked. "Don't start getting jealous because I have a naturally fast metabolism."

"You wish."

"Did I tell you that I scalded my tongue last night? It was so embarrassing."

"How?" she demanded.

"Sarita made this soup dish for dinner but by the time I got to it was incredibly lukewarm and bland. So I brought one of the *diyās* we positioned on the windowsill and heated the soup over it in my metal spoon - "

"Oh no, you didn't!"

"Yes. I actually put that flaming hot spoon in my mouth." I don't know if Anusha heard the rest of my words because she began choking on her own spit. "I'm really glad you can't see me right now because my entire jaw has swelled up and I resemble a walrus."

"The Walrus and the Carpenter were walking close at hand," she said.

"They wept like anything to see such quantities of sand!" I finished.

"You remember!"

"Of course I do."

Every spring semester, our English teachers had us memorize a poem and recite it to the class for no good reason. I chose the Walrus and the Carpenter and Anusha chose Macavity - the Mystery Cat. But we recited them so much to each other that we ended up learning both. It was especially hilarious because the rest of our boring class had apparently made a collective decision to memorize serious stuff like Wordsworth or Shakespeare's sonnets. We had never gotten that memo.

When we finally hung up, I turned to my mum.

"*Amma*, we need to get things rolling for Deepavali!"

She nodded because she had been listening in on my conversation and didn't need further explanation. I smiled. I loved this time of year. When we walked to the front gates a few minutes after and hailed a rickshaw, it was like taking a ride through a different city. Vijayawada wore multiple faces throughout the year and this one was its brightest. Every shop in the city transformed overnight. Streamers stretched between mud huts and trees, cows were decked red, green and gold face paint and small brass bells dangling from their ears, and every shop on the street sold clay *diyas* regardless of their normal fare.

The hospital had an autumn cleaning scheduled, and everyone sported new clothes and fresh flowers in their hair. Just like every year, my mother and I went down to the seasonal markets to buy our necessary supplies: marigolds and bellflowers, turmeric, kum kum, tamarind, fresh fruits – panasa, sapota, custard apple, and pomegranate, and a huge crate full of firecrackers.

I combed through the firecrackers box at the shop, my excitement building. Among others, there were fountain crackers, fire wheels or chakras, flower pots, regular sparklers, squibs, the deafening explosive patpatas, and little crackers that erupted in ashy snake shapes when lit. We oohed and aahed at the latest designs, and the promises that the labels made. LAXMI FIREWORKS ROCKSTAR QUALITY GUARANTEED! MAYUR SPINNERS 100%!

“Look *ma*,” I said. “These are 100% spinners, whatever that means.” She laughed.

After the rickshaw brought us back to our house, we dropped off our purchases and went by the chapel so that my mother could say hello to her missionary friends and we could see what the hospital was doing for the occasion. There was water flowing everywhere, an indication of the thorough cleaning going on in every ward.

“Sister Aloysius!” my mother called out. An elderly sister who was standing in a military relaxed posture, with her feet spread a foot apart and hands crossed behind her back, was busily talking with a number of young nurses. At the sound of my mother’s voice, she turned and a slow smile spread over her face.

“Well well well, look who we have here! I hardly ever see you two together like this!”

“Hi” I said shyly. “We just came back from shopping so that we can make merry next week. Are you going to celebrate Deepavali or anything?”

“Why of course!” she said. “I’ve already stocked up on all the sparklers I need. I’m afraid I am no longer young enough to appreciate bombs and rockets like you young people.”

“You sound like you’re eleventy-one,” I said. Mum punched me lightly.

“That’s enough from you,” she said, as Sister Aloysius laughed. “Go and fool around in those bushes or something and I’ll come and get you in a minute.”

I looked at her archly. “Why mother, I had no idea you were okay with me fooling around in the bushes mother. How progressive of you.”

While my mother and the sister talked, I twirled around to look at the place. Large white slabs of stone laced the entire place, beautiful creepers edged alongside the edge of every building and the fountain was filled with little water-lilies and dragon flies and beetles. A small bee had fallen into the water and was struggling to extricate itself, but was unsuccessful. I plucked a small sturdy leaf from the garden and sat by the fountain, dipping it the leaf into the water and allowing the bee to find its footing. I let go of the leaf with its insect cargo and let it float around in the water. It was delightful. This was my very own



recreation of Thumbelina. After a few moments of rafting around on the little leaf, the bee shook itself dry and took flight.

I pranced back to my mother, feeling on top of the world.

“Hey *ma*, how about we go to the temple this evening?” I asked, piously.

Sister Aloysius made a gurgling sound and I looked around at her, concerned. It was then that I realized that she was clearing her throat. My brow furrowed.

“Is there a problem, Sister?” I asked.

“No, no, not at all,” she said. But she looked at my mother, who in turn, looked bewildered.

My first thought was that Sister Aloysius had forgotten that we were Hindus. My second thought was that that was a stupid thing to think. Was she trying to remind us pagan Hindus of her holy presence or something? Were we supposed to pretend that we were something that we were not with her? What did my mother even do at the hospital? But the look on her face suggested that she had no clue why there was a new and sudden tension in the conversation.

“Would you like to come with us?” I asked.

Now Sister Aloysius really looked troubled. “Of course, I cannot do that, child!” she said. “You know that!”

“But why not? You celebrate Deepavali!”

“Yes, I light a few sparklers, I do, but that’s it. I do not do any of the *pujas* that Hindus conduct. I do not read Hindu scripture or sing your devotional songs. There has to be a limit!”

“Does there now?” I asked wonderingly. “You know, you sisters never had a problem whenever I came to the chapel to hear the mass. How come?”

Sister Aloysius looked sheepish.

“Does everything have to be grounded in evangelism? I promise not to convert you.”

My mother strangely enough, stayed silent. Sister Aloysius shook her head at her.

“Consider what you’re teaching your daughter. How can you keep quiet while she insults me like this?”

“She was insulting you?” my mother asked. “I’m sorry, I didn’t notice that.”

Sister Aloysius huffed and I smiled a secret smile. My mother was my rock.

“I just think, Sister that going to the temple with your friends isn’t going to count as a demerit in St. Peter’s eyes when he decides to let you through the pearly gates. But that’s just me. You are definitely not obliged to come with us, just as I am not obliged to come to mass sometimes. I do so anyway.”

My mother and I were already walking away when Sister Aloysius called out after us.

“Wait!” she exclaimed. “Let me just get some things from my flat and I will join you in a minute.”

Mission accomplished.

Going to the temple with the Sister was an eye-opening experience, in a good way. Leading her to all the various altars, explaining the idea of invoking the divine into the stone statues, and explaining that Hinduism was monotheistic but polymorphic was educational not only for her but for me too. There were so many things about the faith that I took for granted, but of which I was reminded of during my mother’s discourse. When I

tried looking at things anew, through the Sister's eyes, and participating in the *bhajans* and ritualistic motions with someone who was unfamiliar with them, it felt the way a mother rediscovering her childhood with her newborn feels. I learned to appreciate the complexity of what was being transmitted to the Sister, and in her wondrous excitement, I felt a thrill at doing things that were even ordinary and practiced to me.

It was brilliant.

"I hope you enjoyed that, Sister," I said to her sincerely, as we walked back with her to our house. "I do apologize for being abrupt with you earlier, but I hope that the experience made up for that."

She pinched my cheek affectionately. "I've known you too long to hold that against you, Leela," she said. "I feel so saturated with observations!"

As Sister Aloysius walked away, I turned to my mother.

"Was I really very rude?" I asked.

"Very much so," she replied with a twinkle in her eye. "But with you, Leela, that cannot be helped."

I looked askance at her until she continued. "I didn't want to intervene because you had good intentions and I would never want to cramp that. You'll probably mellow out and learn to speak persuasively, and not coercively, with time. Right now though, you tend to pick your battles indiscriminately and fight them bitterly to the death. That's just who you are."

I stared at her. "So you're saying that I have no sense of discretion, or filter, at all?"

"Yes. Exactly."

And we strolled back home.

\*

We would be doing a Dasara/Deepavali puja in the morning and going nuts with the firecrackers in the evening. My mother dug out our small figurines and photo frames of the necessary deities and set up a small shrine in our living room where our television used to stand. Incense sticks burned day and night and our house filled with the fragrances of the old world. It was gentle, natural and primordial. I felt energetic, alive and fresh.

“Lakshmi knows which houses to bless with prosperity by the lamps in the windows,” my mother said.

I nodded, scarfing down puff pastries that she had procured from a vendor on the street. They were so light and flaky and filled with spicy potatoes and peas. I could have subsisted on them forever.

“And during the next few days, I don’t want you to cut your nails,” she continued.

I had problems swallowing my puff and had to try and awkwardly beat my own back to help with the choking. After recovering from that ordeal, I laughed hysterically.

“That was out of left-wing, mum,” I managed to say. “Much like the five naked men in shades standing behind you.”

I managed to make her look.

“It’s bad luck,” she explained. “I know you scoff at every superstition that I have, but you’ll listen to me anyway because you depend on me for your meals.”

“Firstly, I depend on Sarita, not you.” – “ha!” – “Secondly, I only scoff because it’s *you*. Don’t you see the irony here? You, the progressive, sarcastic intellectual...”

“Snob.”

I went to find Sarita to tell her the joke. This was very reminiscent of mum's hysterics during the solar eclipse. Sarita would appreciate such irony just as well as I.

I combed through the entire house, from the kitchen and foyer, to her bedroom, my bedroom, the bathrooms, the terrace and the backyard. After concluding that she was not actually in the house, I went back up to the terrace and this time walked to the edge. The vantage view let me scan for hundreds of meters all around. I saw the new quarters rising out of the ground like a mythical oliphaunt. The skeleton was all there, and now they would fashion the meat and blood in just like an archeologist reimagining the animal. She was not in the courtyard in front of my house. She was not near the canal fence on the right. My neck began to burn from the heavy sun overhead. I rubbed it and came down the stairs again.

How unusual but how interesting! I ran outside and got my bicycle out. This was a case for my detective face.

I cycled through the entire hospital, relishing the exercise, but getting frustrated too. I couldn't locate her anywhere! It was so curious. Whenever Minnie, Puja and I played hide-and-seek, I always loathed being the seeker. It was always too complicated and Minnie and Puja would aggravate me even further by furtively changing their positions to places that I had already checked. Finally, I would exact my revenge on them by going home for dinner and letting them continue to suffer under the impression that I was still in the game. Their muscles would be sore from cramping all the while.

But this was different. Sarita and I were playing a game, but it seemed as though the stakes had been raised somehow. There was more riding on this, and that energized me. Sarita brought a level of seriousness and reality to everything, and she always reminded me

that there was a world outside of St. Clare's or my school. It was frightening but refreshing. I needed to find her.

I came back to the house and now my mother had gone missing. But this mystery was short-lived: I rang up the hospital and got one of the nurses to tell me that she was seeing an emergency case up at in the wards. The nurse told me that she would get my mother to call me back. An entire hour passed. I sat around restlessly, going to the window at times to peek out and coming back to stare at the phone the rest of the time.

Finally the phone rang.

"Did you send Sarita to the market or anything?" I blurted into the receiver, making the question sound like a statement.

"No," my mother answered with a lilting tilt at the end, making the answer seem more like a question. But I had no time for that.

I hung up abruptly and paced around. Sarita was not in the house, was not running an errand for my mother, and was apparently not on the hospital campus. There was only one possibility left. She was off doing something for herself.

I sat down on the couch. Sarita never spoke of her family, and as far as I knew, never spoke *to* her family either. Even though she had said that she was working for us to earn a dowry, she never really seemed to care about the money. I thought about biking back to the hospital gates and going round the corner to check the STD-ISD phone booth and shelved that idea for revisiting later. Perhaps Sarita had made friends in the community whom she was visiting at the moment? But that was impossible. She never left the house unless my mother asked her to, and never for very long. Where had she the opportunity to make any friends anyway? None of the other doctors in the compound had children or workers of

Sarita's age. I doubted that she socialized with any of the sisters or nurses. Then, the only group of people left in the vicinity who could offer a realistic relationship with her was that of the construction workers.

A brilliant idea occurred to me. I could ask Vivek if Sarita had made friends with any of his fellow construction workers! It was entirely plausible that Sarita would have met and chatted with any of the dozen or so women in the camp and thus befriended them. I smacked my forehead. Of course! I couldn't believe that this hadn't occurred to me before. And since the workers always took their lunch a ways up north, outside the hospital perimeter and closer to the canal banks, I wouldn't have been able to spot Sarita on my usual route anyway. I needed to doubly apologize to my nanny for having assumed that my mother and I were the only people she ever talked to. Could anyone subsist on such few relations? All that time during the day when my mother was at the hospital and I was at school, did I really expect that Sarita just sat in her room waiting for us to come home?

I didn't know the exact route to the specific lunch spot, but I managed. I waded through swathes of gnarly bushes, mossy rocks and low hanging trees, scraping myself in the process. There had to be a better path but I would ask about it on my way back. It was after a few minutes of such evading and ducking that I heard human voices again and the entire crew came into view. Men and women were sitting down on the rocks, and enjoying rice or chapattis with curry and pickle. The children and babies had formed a circle off to the right, and were enjoying each other's company in the shade of a leafy balboa tree.

I waved as people began to notice me walking up to them, and walked straight to Afshan, the woman that I had first met and given medicines to for her sick boy, Adil. She recognized me immediately.

“How are you doing?” she asked. “Have you come to eat lunch with us?”

I was about to refuse and explain my real purpose when I stopped and reconsidered. I hadn’t had lunch and with Sarita gone, it wasn’t like a plate was going to magically appear anytime soon. Besides I liked Afshan, and her open, friendly face.

“That would be great,” I said, laughing lightly. “You are always so hospitable.”

She dismissed that and handed me a steel *thali*. The plate looked clean and was filled with rice and fried okra, heavily coated with salt and chilli powder. I had a bite and swooned. My health nut mother would so rarely allow this kind of fried deliciousness in the house. This was too good. I began gobbling it in right away.

“Wow the only way it’ll go any faster is if we put a feeding tube in you,” she observed.

“Clearly I’m not well-fed enough,” I said. “You should tell that to my friend, Sarita.”

“Friend?” Afshan said, peeling an orange. “Is that a euphemism or something? I thought your family treated her as some sort of servant of yours.”

I paused in my eating. “And where did you get that impression?”

Afshan didn’t say anything.

“Tell me?” I insisted, more serious now. “Even if that were true, where would you have had the opportunity to draw conclusions?”

She put the orange down and looked at me. “Maybe I didn’t have to draw any conclusions. Maybe I was informed of that as a fact.”

I put my plate down too. “Well that brings me to the purpose of my visit, doesn’t it? I came here looking for Sarita and it appears that you know her, rather well. So tell me, do you know where she is?”



Afshan resumed eating. "So you don't deny it?"

"Deny what?"

"That Sarita is your servant, not your friend?"

I threw my hands up in the air. "Has it ever occurred to you, miss, that one person can fulfill more than one role in her life? Can I ask you to choose between being a mother to Adil and working at a construction site? How would you feed him at nights?"

"Call an apple an apple already!"

I was bewildered. "What the hell is your damn problem? Sarita is paid to be our help! My mother and I don't have to apologize for that. This isn't slavery, for gods' sakes, and we definitely do not abuse her services."

Afshan finally nodded. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that Sarita sees herself differently from how you and your mother apparently see her. And considering that I know Sarita better, I automatically sympathized with her side of the story. That's all."

I looked at her curiously. "Wait a minute. What exactly has she been telling you guys?"

\*

"If you want to talk to Sarita, you'll find her further upstream," Afshan was saying. "I'm sorry that you found out that she was complaining about your family behind your back, but she was probably just venting. It most likely meant nothing. In fact, I am sure of it. You understand, right? Don't be mad at her, Leela."

Afshan was wringing her hands in dismay. I had a lost expression on my face because I had just heard this woman suggest things that she wished she could take back. I suddenly smiled at her and she looked momentarily alarmed.

“You have no reason to worry,” I said, bluffing. “Thanks so much for the lunch and for... that.”

I put my palms together in a spontaneous *namaste* and walked to the edge of the canal. Afshan wasn't Hindu and I probably should have said “Assalaamu alaykum” but I was too preoccupied to notice this social faux pas. I dipped my right hand in the water and rubbed the sticky rice off of it. Then I set my heels and began to walk again. Boy did Sarita and I need a talk!

As I walked on, I began to think about what I would say to her. How did one confront a friend in these kinds of sticky situations? Should I just come right out and say it? Should I stick simply to the facts, or did my feelings have a role in the conversation? Or perhaps it was best that I just insinuate it as best as I could and have her come out and admit the mistake herself? And there was the other thing: should I allow her free speech to be treated as a mistake or a calculated move against my mum and me, fraught with ill wishes?

I paused for a few moments and wondered whether I wasn't being too rash trying to deal with this all on my own. My mother still had no clue that Sarita felt a certain way about us, and she had a right to be in the know. Moreover, Sarita was significantly older than me, and the last time we had had a major fight, she was doubly offended by this age difference as she was about feeling slighted.

I was just about to turn around and call it quits when I heard her voice. She was laughing quietly, in a way that I had never heard before. I couldn't see her face but she was probably less than ten meters away. She was laughing quietly and happily, and then came some murmuring that I couldn't place. She was with someone. I was intruding. She was with someone who I didn't know and couldn't place.

My voyeuristic side emerged and warred with the prudent, well-mannered half that wanted to turn around and give her privacy. *She doesn't deserve this dignity that you are keen to afford her*, said the former. But it took only a few beats of pained introspection to decide that as much as I hated giving her allowances in that moment, I couldn't ruin this for her.

She saved my life. She was there when my father abandoned me and she pulled me out of a raging river. She saved my life twice, and made me a twice-born. In some ancient Hindu traditions, a twice-born was the appellation given to a worshipper of the first three classes – the *kshatriyas* or warrior class, the *brahmins* or religious officials, and the *vaishyas* or the merchant community. In these traditions, it was only the twice-born who were true members of the Hindu faith. Some pigs were more equal than the rest of the farm animals. Those who belonged to the fourth and final class, the *sudras*, weren't even given the privilege of listening to the Vedas, the holy scriptures.

I didn't know where Sarita placed herself in this system of social hierarchy. It was outdated, and in this modern, progressive India, fifty-two years since independence, I was not in the mood to reinforce it any longer. But if I had to guess, I would think that she came from class number four. It was historically the *sudras* who, because of artificial prejudice and missed opportunities, had limited scope for leaving the world of blue-collar jobs, jobs that no one else wanted. Jobs like those of nannies, servants...

It was ironic that Sarita would be the one to whom I would owe my continual rebirths.

I was angry with her at the moment. But a civil conversation was what was needed, and I owed her that at least.

\*

My mother was back home by the time I returned to civilization. She looked grim.

“Are you okay?” I asked, concerned.

“I really think you should be looking out for your own well-being,” she retorted.

“Because by the end of this night, I think you won’t be this chipper.”

I was taken aback. Mum was never so direct with me when she was angry unless she was really very angry. This could not be good.

Before I could prompt her to clue me in, she began pacing. Her hands were clutching each other behind her back and she looked hunched over, and in the light, very old. The grace and posture that her years of dance had lent her were temporarily missing. But there was a dark miasma in the water, and it was clouding the remaining sunshine left in our lives. Winter had arrived, literally and figuratively.

“Help me understand why Shilpa aunty thinks that Sarita had something to do with Puja’s nervous breakdown,” she said, finally. “I tried to reason with her, but for some reason, that made her even more adamant. We had a very long argument, when finally she ended it by pulling out a trump card that even I couldn’t protest. Can you guess what that was?”

By the manner in which she was making me feel like a David cowering in front of Goliath, I thought I had a good idea.

“You,” she spat, and I sank. “She said that *you* explicitly told her that Sarita was responsible. You!”

I began to gurgle out some form of primitive speech. *She had got it all wrong, mother. She jumped to conclusions as I was thinking aloud. I tried to correct her assumption, but she wouldn't let me!*

But all that came out was silence, because my mother had resumed her furious oration. "What I can't understand isn't why you did it, because I am sure that there may have been a hundred petty reasons for you to incriminate your own nanny, but rather *how* you could have done it. This girl, Sarita, left her family behind and travelled from home to be here. For you. For me and for you. She is alone here, far from her loved ones and supportive family, and she depends on us not just for her livelihood and income, but for family. No one can survive as an island, and with this, you have essentially forced her to live as one. Do you not see how she has withdrawn from us these past few weeks? Do you not see how reclusive she's becoming? Is this all because of you? Because I am starting to get a very bad feeling about what's going on here!"

I wanted to shout back. I wanted to make accusations myself. *I am not my sister's keeper. Why do you assume the worst of me?* But I stayed silent. I was dumbstruck. My mother's basest assumptions struck me where it hurt most. Ten minutes ago, I thought I was being generous for both Sarita's and my mother's sakes. Now I realized that I had no selling points. Sarita's withdrawal from the family was noticeable but not everything was my fault. I knew the real reason: she was spending all her free time with the construction workers less than a hundred yards away. But I also knew that it *was* my fault that Shilpa aunty had jumped to conclusions. I didn't make a large enough effort to correct her. I thought that by forgetting, the incident would be put behind me. Shilpa aunty had not

breathed a word for over a month; why would I suspect that she would eventually get around to it?

I hung my head, silent, and the lack of any response was a confirmation of my guilt to my mother. She stopped pacing and just stared at me. I could feel her gaze as tangibly as I felt the marble tiles under my feet. When I was younger, I used to suffer from the impression that my parents could read my mind. Whenever I was near them, I strived to think only the purest thoughts and about how much I loved them. It was so stressful that I began to withdraw from them, leaving the room every time one of them walked in. Finally, my mother caught on to what was going on and had to have a talk with me to clear the misconception. She laughed as she explained the truth and admitted that she wouldn't have minded having a daughter who thought that her thoughts could be read by her parents. But perfection was too large a burden to bear, and she didn't wish that on anyone.

But now, it felt like it *was* what she demanded of me. Even if I had made the mistake of implicating Sarita in a ridiculous crime, my mother wasn't about to let me off the hook for simply being young and foolish. She wasn't even hearing me out.

"What's going on?" Sarita asked, walking in so quietly she took us both by surprise. "What did she do? I heard my name in the fray."

I sighed. Sarita was never going to forgive me. My mother looked at me expectantly. Even Scheherazade had not faced such a terrifying audience. I took a deep breath and told my story.

Sarita stayed silent through the whole thing – a remarkable feat, considering that if our roles had been reversed, I would have imploded a short way into the narration. But she stayed silent throughout and when I was done, she looked up at me blankly.

“So why don’t we just tell her that?” she said. “Seems like it should be cleared up easily, right?”

My mother sighed. “Puja’s laughing attack, the moodiness, the bruises on her body – Shilpa cannot find a source for all of this and she’s going to blame it on you, reason be damned. My bet is that she’s already contacted the hospital administrators about it and after the stunt that you –” she looked at me, “pulled with Sister Aloysius the other day, you can see why we have reasons to be concerned.”

At this, I spoke up. “What stunt? You were right there and you could have stopped me at any time, but you didn’t! Don’t say such things when you know you enjoyed that entire situation fully and went along with it eyes wide open!”

“Like I have any control over you!”

“Well if you’re going to give it up, then let go! Stop feeling personally offended every time I make a mistake!”

We were both standing three feet from each other, chests heaving, my mother’s ringlets scattered all over her shoulder. My face was probably florid red because it hurt all over, whether from the shouting or the blood rushing to my face and heating it up. Sarita stood on the outside, watching us battle it out. She seemed to realize that it wasn’t even about her anymore. This was the extension of an issue that my mother and I had been having for weeks now, and the Sarita affair was our latest excuse.

“Sarita,” my mother said quietly. “Do you mind giving us some privacy? There are some things that I need to speak about with my daughter alone.”

Sarita nodded and walked outside again. I followed her with my eyes. Who was she going to confide in now? Were any of our secrets safe with her?

My mother was looking at me. “Leela,” she said softly. “Lately it seems like all we ever do is argue, and I cannot be content with that. You’re my child, not my enemy. Let’s figure this out, please?”

I bit my lip. “How about we talk about the fact that we have never discussed father’s death to its full extent, *ma*?”

She looked genuinely flabbergasted. “What does that have to do with anything that’s been going on here? I thought we were past that.”

I shook my head. “I thought we were too. But the dead never truly leave us, do they? He thought he could leave his problems behind when he died, but instead, he’s just foisted them upon us. This fight is his legacy.”

My mother looked shocked. Anger was seeping back into her face. “How dare you abuse his memory like that?” she whispered. “How could you?”

I kept quiet, and sealed my eyes shut. That was the only way I could gather the courage to say what I had to say to my mother, beloved parent.

“If you think that I do that because I don’t continue to love or respect him, then you don’t know me anymore.”

I began to cry. I hated myself for feeling so weak and vulnerable, but my face locked up and the only sounds I could now manage were incoherent. I wasn’t just crying, I was violently sobbing. It was like my body and my mind were two separate entities and when the former realized that the latter was going to say something that I would regret, it seized up and disabled my voice box. I hated my body.

My mother made a guilty, sad sound and scooped me up in her arms. We sank to the floor, tied together in a confusing bundle, and stayed there for what felt like hours. I kept



crying, kept crying. I could feel my mother's tears falling into my scalp. Tears were contagious, and this was cathartic. She kissed the edge of my forehead. I burrowed into her bosom.

"I'm sorry," we both said at the same time. Then, "jinx."

We laughed, a sound so distorted that it reminded me of water draining into a narrow pipe. Nary a hiccup that ever sounded so pleasant in my ear.

"Are we done?" I mumbled.

"We're done," she replied. "We're one, again."

## Chapter 12

The Sarita affair, as I was now referring to the situation in my head, was a multifaceted one. On the one hand, I was furious with her for her careless conversations with the construction crew. I had imagined and reimagined what she must have said to them so many times that I was now supposing the most fantastic things. Did Sarita tell them about the time I forgot to close the bathroom door while I showered? Did she say anything about my radish allergy?

But on the other, I wanted to dig a deep hole in the ground and throw myself and my guilt into it for putting her in a situation where our neighbors believed that she was some sort of sexual predator. That was such a serious threat to her reputation that she had every right to want to hate me. And so because of it, I had lost all ground to be mad at her for her own gift of the gab. We were both victims of indiscretion, but my transgression was far more unamusing than hers.

The final fall-out of this whole episode was the disintegration and simultaneous patching up of my tenuous relationship with my mother. I thought that by pushing our previous verbal assaults on the terrace under the rug, I was doing us both a favor. Instead, I realized, in hindsight, that that was just the starting point. I wasn't able to close Pandora's box. My mum and I had not had a single viable conversation since then. I had attributed that to her busy schedule and my midterms, but really, it all began with that argument. My presumption that my mother was entertaining suicidal thoughts while she stood at the edge of the terrace had opened a whole can of worms and I hadn't been interested in widening the hole. But being taciturn on the issue hadn't fixed anything. My mother now mistrusted me and didn't think that I was capable of any kind of common sense. I had fallen

in her eyes. The only way to regain my standing was to tell her the truth, but the truth was so horrible that I didn't know if it was worth it.

"How about I go downstairs and talk to Shilpa aunty myself?" I suggested the next day. "There is a possibility that she will listen since I was the one who launched the whole confusion."

"Well you know what they say," said my mother. "Sticks and stones can build a house but words are like a diamond bikini. Useless."

I stared at her. "Are you even paying attention to me? Put your newspaper down and think about my idea!"

My mother was sipping on her morning coffee and skimming the feature pages of our Telugu daily. The newspaper had been devoting its center spread to Deepavali since the past week, offering *rangoli* designs, tips for having a safe Deepavali, memos to housewives everywhere about various little traditions that they may have forgotten, and ideas about how to entertain the large number of family members that the editors automatically assumed would be visiting. However, they had gotten it wrong with us. My grandparents were staying secure in their old, capacious mansion in the next town, and had issued an invitation to us, like they did every year. My mother's siblings were nowhere near our house, since almost all of them had emigrated to Dubai, London, and the fabulous Amreeka. Our family was scattered and this Deepavali would actually feature one fewer member in our own nuclear unit. Wonderful.

"Hmm?" she wondered. "You want to go talk to Shilpa aunty, is it? Well go. What further harm could you possibly do now?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I'll pretend that that was a case of misplaced humor."

“Oh stop being so pretentious.”

I laughed. “I learn from the best.”

I finished my breakfast and went over to Puja’s house. I was wearing an old cotton skirt and a new magenta shirt with embroidery on the sleeves. It was a beautiful day. I hoped Shilpa aunty was in a good mood.

Knock knock. I stared at the door for a minute, circled the house, and knocked again. I told myself that I was going to pressure shilpa aunty into coming out by using my mind. If I stared at the door long enough, something ould happen. The observer effect, as quantum physicists would say. But I stood there for far too long. Shadows flitted between the drapes. Ghosts padded across the floor. No one answered the door. This was frustrating.

I knocked again. “Puja? Shilpa aunty!” I called. “I have something rather important to discuss with you. Believe me, it’s important!”

It felt like there was more than the truth at the stake here. There was also my pride and my reputation. It was my responsibility to fix the mess that I created. I pursed my lips. If Shilpa aunty was going to be so unavailable, then I was going to look for a bypass. If Mohammad wouldn’t go to the mountain, then the mountain would come to him.

I went back to the house, and flitted right past my smirking mother. I cracked open all my drawers until I found a pad of writing paper and composed a decent letter. It was not a request for a meeting but rather, a detailed explanation of the truth. Shilpa aunty was never going to face me because she was ashamed. She probably knew the extent of her extrapolation as well as I did, but looking for a scapegoat, she didn’t want to be confronted by me. So I put down exactly what would have transpired in a conversation between us, and went back outside to slide it underneath her door.

After doing that, I stood there limply, as though I had been expecting the door to burst open any second, evidence of my vindication. But nothing happened. How would I know if I had had any effect? My mother was right. Words were useless at this point.

I moseyed around the area for a bit, refusing to go back inside my house until something happened. Naturally, Vivek walked into view with his impeccable timing and chatted me up.

“Hello *rani!*” he said. My father used to call me that: his little princess. I studied Vivek, his tall and lanky frame held together in loose cargo pants and a dirty shirt with the sleeves rolled up. When I didn’t respond for a moment too long, he snapped his fingers in front of my face. “Hello? Anyone home? Or are we going to stare at my beautiful body all day?”

I laughed. “Did you just call your own body ‘beautiful’?”

“I aim for honesty.”

“You could teach me a thing or two,” I muttered. If only Shilpa aunty would hear me out!

“What’s that?” he asked, grinning and leaning in. I clapped a hand to my mouth.

“Don’t get any ideas,” I reprimanded. “I was talking about something else. I didn’t mean to affirm your stupid statement.”

“Yeah whatever. We both know that you secretly desire me.” He winked, slowly. I wanted to laugh at his outrageousness, but I was also secretly mortified. What if he was picking up on something there? Shit.

Not two days ago, I had made a resolution to forget all about him. This thing between us was never going to crystallize, not in a million years, and this crush was utter

folly. I was setting myself up for disappointment. No, I had made a smart decision two days back, and I would stick with it.

“Won’t you get rebuked for whiling your work hours away from the construction site?” I asked. “You should probably scram. Get back to business.”

“Excuse you.”

“What?” I thought I had heard incorrectly.

He lifted an eyebrow. “If I want to spend my working hours in the company of a beautiful girl and the foreman has a problem with it, well then screw him! I don’t give a damn.”

I was dazed. My very own Rhett Butler, right here in Vijayawada.

“How pleasant! Well it is really hot today, isn’t it? I think I better be getting back indoors. See you!”

But as I turned to walk away, he held me back. “Why are you trying to run away?”

“Who’s running?” I looked left and right, and then shook my head.

He gave me a curious look but let go of my sleeve. I nodded like he had answered a question and practically jogged to my front door. When I reached the house, I was faced with a different kind of terrifying audience.

Sarita was staring at me, from her position in front of the entrance. Inside, my mother was still sitting at the dining table, probably reading the same center page of her newspaper.

Their silence at my arrival was deafening.

“I am not a miracle worker, you know,” I said tightly.

Sarita had a stony look carved into her face. No response. She hadn't even looked this upset yesterday, when the problem first materialized. It was as though she was civil with me then only because of the initial shock, but now that that had worn off and she had been able to think on it all night, she had decided that her appropriate response would be to shut me out.

But what she didn't know was that I was carrying my own secret about her. If only she knew; there would be no room for this posing then.

\*

Sarita knocked on my door later that evening. She was holding her Telugu practice journal in her hand. I smiled at the sight. After those first baby steps where I held her hand, we hadn't reviewed anything together in months. It was like she had removed her practice wheels herself and flew into the wind. She wordlessly sat next to me on the floor where I was making origami swans and opened it to her current page. It was full of carefully annotated block letters, but she was way past the alphabet by that point. I looked over and saw full sentences blossoming on every line, albeit with their fair share of grammatical errors.

"Read this for me," she said. She passed me a piece of paper that was folded up. I took it a little apprehensively. Was this the final missive, the one where she dissolved our friendship for the lies that I had spread about her?

"Are you sure you want me to?" I asked before unfolding it. She nodded, and picked up one of my origami swans in turn. I sighed and opened it.

*There's a Telugu proverb that says that there cant be any kept sercets when they're spoken on top of a montain. The valleys echo to much, the wind carries every word. When*

*you're standing at the peek, you realize that even the birds understand your language. But that's to be expected. I'm not mad at you. The truth is I'm not even worried. What happens will happen. I know you're sorry. And now we have to let the future unwind as it is meant to do.*

I put the letter down and looked up at her. She was engrossed in unfolding the crane. As she unraveled the mystery of the various folds, the paper became limp, like hot air fizzing out of a balloon or a flower hanging from dehydration. But this wasn't the correct metaphor anymore. I took the paper from her and showed her nimble fingers how to work it, where to bend, where to smooth. Ultimately, it wasn't the difficulty that was the trick. It was just about compliance.

It was about whether we were willing to put our differences aside, and work on creating something beautiful. She had the zeal, and I was willing, too.

I didn't see Minnie or Puja at all for the rest of the week. Deepavali was only two days away and after that, I would be back to the grind at school. And with only two days left, I was not in the mood for hanging out with them so much as I was interested in lazing about the house and the porch, reading, writing, and reflecting. But I was disappointed in them. Puja was covering for her mother and that was only marginally understandable. But Minnie? Minnie had no reason to side with Puja on this issue. I knew that it couldn't be about anything else. Minnie would have invaded my house with the ferocity of Genghis Khan every day if she wanted to. Her staying away was her nonverbal admission that she sympathized with Shilpa aunty's madness, even though I knew that she couldn't possibly have even known the full story. It wasn't like she was Shilpa aunty's confidante. And that meant that she had made a decision based on the scraps that Puja had allowed her, which couldn't have been much. Minnie was letting her natural prejudice against a *maid* rule her



judgment. And Puja was wallowing in a pool of lies, because despite all of Shilpa aunty's fanaticism, Puja and I knew the truth. I just couldn't believe that she would fall in with this horrid accusation.

But my mother and I hadn't heard anything from the hospital administrators yet. Whether a formal complaint had been lodged with Sister Aloysius or not wasn't much of a mystery: it was obvious that one had been made from Shilpa aunty's smug silence. But something was holding the good Sister back. And whatever it was, I was thankful for it.

So I stayed away from my neighbors, and worked from home.

My mother always believed in buying something new for the house during the Deepavali holidays. Though she said that it was because it was auspicious, the real reason was that all the shops in town offered huge festival sales. Last year, she bought a teapoy for our living room, and the year before that, a new set of chinaware. Even our dusty television set traced its origins to a Deepavali many musty years back. On the penultimate day of this vacation, my mother purchased a sofa swing and had the handymen set it up on our porch. When I first laid eyes on it, my eyes bulged. The swing elevated the concept of laziness to a whole new plateau. Now I could stretch out and relax in comfort *and* spend the day outside. I no longer had to resort to sitting on the steps! Mum and I inaugurated it by spending the whole day reading on it. It was cloudy outside, and so there wasn't even a need for hats and sunglasses. We didn't talk much. We just read.

Sarita filtered all of the phone calls in the house for my mother first to minimize the number of times mum would have to get up. Later, when we both wanted to droop into a reclining position, I laid my head near my mother's feet while she massaged my shoulders with her toes. No one bothered us since we weren't the recipients of universally warm,

friendly vibes in the neighborhood anymore. The construction workers didn't wander over during their breaks because my mother acted as a deterrent. Sarita stayed put at home, and only came out to see us when it was time for meals.

When I finally actually lifted myself out of the sofa, it was dusk, and I hadn't even used the bathroom all day. My every muscle was cramped and stiff and probably atrophied. Both my knees popped when I extended and then transferred my weight on to them.

"I think I've aged thirty years in one day," I said to my mother.

She smiled. "You've always been older than your years," she said.

I was alarmed. What did she mean by that? "No wrinkles, no gray hair, yes creaky bones but that's only because I haven't moved all day," I began saying seriously.

"Oh shut up," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Well I was kidding."

"No you weren't. It's so amazing how suddenly insecure you can get. All I mean is that you've always been the serious child around here. You were the grandma of the family since you could talk. When we played Marco Polo, you were more worried that we would bump into things than you were about not getting caught."

"Oh stop it, you're making me blush."

"And you've always been so responsible and thoughtful and now I see you scribbling into your diary all the time. It's a little unnerving."

"It's not a diary! It's a thought journal."

"It just adds to your persona, I guess. I don't think I've ever really thought of you as a child. I think I've always treated you as though you were an adult, and sometimes that's led me to accuse you unfairly of things that are bigger than you." She paused.

My eyes were wide. Was she burying the hatchet? But I didn't like the reasoning behind this treaty. "I like that you treat me as an adult," I said quietly. "I hate being spoken down to, like I'm not smart enough to understand things."

She smiled softly. "But you have to know that that's not always possible, right?"

"Why not?"

"Because everyone has secrets. I know you do, and I definitely do, and I'm sure Sarita does too. You can't set the standard of friendship and trust to be full and open access, all the time!"

"I thought we were talking about treating me as an adult, not treating me as your therapist."

My mother paused again. "Oh," she said. Then she cocked her head. "Isn't it the same thing?"

I stared at her. "No, of course not. I don't expect you to share all of your secrets with me, and vice versa. I just don't want you to think that the only reason you should withhold something from me is because of my age."

"How did we get to talking about this again?" she wondered.

"You called me ancient."

"Leela, it's just that having a gifted child is such a mind trick, sometimes. You won't know what I'm talking about until you have children of your own, I think."

I reached over and hugged her around her waist. "What's complicated about this?" I murmured.

Even though I couldn't see her face, I knew she was smiling.

\*

I woke up on the morning of Deepavali to the sound of ringing bells and the smell of incense. It took me a moment to realize that it was the last day of my holidays and that recognition made me sad. I allowed myself to sink into the bed, letting the cool sunshine wash over me and the anticipation in my heart build. If I had a dog, it would be cuddled right at my feet, all fur and skin, and he and I would spend the whole day in bed. Ah, I could at least let myself dream. But I had to swing myself up, do a quick little prayer before I got out of bed, and pad to the bathroom, where the cold water would inevitably wake me up to the harsh realities of the last day before school.

No matter how turbulent my holidays had been, they had still been a welcome break from the monotony of classes. And today would be the day of resolution. I had decided that the moment my feet had touched the floor. I wasn't going back to school with any remaining issues. I couldn't even imagine how I would juggle the stress of my classes alongside everything else. But I wasn't even going to try. My mother, Sarita and I had been through a whirlwind of emotion in the past few weeks, and I was going to try and ensure that the coming months would be steady as the noontide.

I skipped downstairs, ready for some breakfast. My mother was sitting on the floor in the living room in front of the shrine that we had constructed over the past few days. I sat down beside her.

"Repeat after me, *Oooooommmmm*," said my mother, intoning her Om over a period of fifteen seconds. She hummed as she breathed out, and the syllable sounded like it was echoing from a very deep cave. I joined her and our voices formed a beautiful harmony, cascading over our skins like eels in a coral reef. I shivered.

“Om is the most powerful sound in the universe,” my mother said. She always liked explicating it on every major religious holiday, as though the number of times she repeated it was directly correlated with my spiritual cleansing. But I never stopped her. It felt good to hear it from her. “It’s the symbol of the Brahman, the omnipotent, the omnipresent, and the source of all manifest existence. Every vowel in the alphabet is contained in this sound. You can think of it as the sound that unites all the other sounds, contains them and fleshes each individual one, simultaneously. Since we cannot comprehend Brahman fully, we need this symbol to guide us.”

“That’s why it’s called *pranava*,” I finished for her, “because it pervades life and runs through our *prana* or breath.”

She pinched my cheek. “Exactly,” she said. “You know, when you were a baby, this was the first sound I spoke to you. And then we, your father and I, wrote it in honey on your tongue.”

“You did? You never told me that before.”

She nodded. “Your father said that if we gave you that sound, then you would give us an entire language.” She looked at me as though expecting me to finish this thought as well. When I didn’t answer, she said, “You taught us to speak the language of parenthood, of love and happiness, of fights and reconciliation, of patience, of joy. You taught me to be a mother, completely and unconsciously. Everything that I read from books, or learnt through college or gained from my parents’ and friends’ advice was thrown out the window the first time I saw your little smile. It was enough. You made me your mother; it never was the other way around.”

I gulped. “This is awfully sentimental so early in the morning,” I said.

“Our conversations never have end stops,” my mother said. I swatted her hand. We rose up together and moved to the dining table.

“So what’s on the agenda today?” I asked.

“Well you are free to do whatever you want all day and then we will blast the firecrackers at night.”

“Is it really going to be that sequential?” I was disappointed. Every year, my parents used to plan some big expedition in town and make the most of our holiday together. Last year, we had gone to my maternal grandparents’ home by bus, and had a huge family reunion there. I got to play caroms and Super Mario Brothers with all my cousins, and badminton with my grandfather, and eat so many delicious foods throughout the day that I gained a belly. It was one of my very best memories.

But now my mother was offering no such fantastic option, so I nodded and finished my food. I would find something to do.

Sarita and I occupied the sofa swing immediately after breakfast. She sat next to me and stretched her limbs so far I had to put my hand on her leg to ensure she stayed secure on the sofa.

“Thanks for that,” she said. “The day has barely started and I’m already exhausted.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I think I’ve been getting less sleep than I’m used to these days,” she said. “It’s not very healthy for me, clearly.”

I surveyed her face as she leaned back, eyes closed. There were deep circles under her eyes, and her skin looked a little patchy. I squinted and looked closer. There were blossoming patches of purple right under the thin veneer of her skin. They trailed up her

arm and under her sleeve. I pushed up the fabric to see how far they went but the cloth was snatched right out of my hand and Sarita was sitting up again, looking irritated.

“I think there’s something more to this exhaustion of yours,” I said. “Look, I think you need to get *amma* to look at this. It almost looks like you’re bleeding internally.”

“Whatever.” She pushed herself off the sofa and stood up. “I think I should probably get back to the kitchen. I haven’t even asked your mother about tonight’s dinner menu.”

“Wait.” I tugged at her sleeve and got her to sit back down. “Don’t leave. It’s so comfortable here, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said grumpily. “But less questions please, or else I’ll get a migraine.”

We sat there silent for a moment.

“Okay just one question? One little question?”

She sighed. “Make it worth it.”

I chose my words carefully. “Do you have friends here that you spend time with? Like among the construction workers or anything?”

She sat up again and twisted to look at me. “Why do you ask?”

I shrugged. “Just curious. I guess I finally got to thinking that it was reasonable that you would, and that you just never got around to telling me about. I mean, we haven’t talked, like really had a conversation about anything in a long time.”

Since our last conversation was one in which Sarita revealed that she didn’t trust that I could talk without having an ulterior motive, I had been purposefully keeping it light and airy. I could chatter for the sake of chattering just as well as the next fool in town.

“Well... I suppose you could say that,” she said vaguely, playing with her fingers.

“That we haven’t had a conversation in light years?”

“Yes,” she turned to me fervently. “But do you remember when we knocked those mangoes off this very tree? It seems like we’ve known each other since forever but in reality that was only about five months back.”

“You’re right,” I said. But I was confused. Her sudden earnestness said one thing but she was reminding me that we weren’t the bosom friends that I was making us out to be. What gives?

“Well what about yourself?” she said suddenly. “How come your school friends never come to visit?”

“Is that a question or an accusation?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t get defensive. I’d been thinking about that before too and never found an opportunity to ask. That’s all.”

My eyebrow was still raised. It really helped when I wanted to look pretentious and big-nosed. Not everyone I knew could arch just one eyebrow as efficiently as I could.

Sarita made an exasperated whooshing sound. “Mind that it doesn’t get stuck up there.”

I laughed. “I’m sorry. It was fun. Anusha has wanted to visit me for some time now, but I just wasn’t really into the idea. But I’m careful never to bring it up because I think she resents me for it.”

“Why don’t you want her to visit you? Are you ashamed of us or something?” She had a twinkle in her eye.

It was hard spelling out the truth. But I was tired of beating around the bush when it came to sensitive matters like this.



“She used to visit a lot before you came to stay with us. I just didn’t want her to come and see the emptiness that my father left behind.”

After a moment, “Thank you for telling me that,” Sarita said softly. “That was startlingly honest.”

I shrugged detachedly. “I gave you what I expect from you in return.”

She cleared her throat. I ruffled and then smoothed out my skirt. It was made from this periwinkle fabric that my mother had found in an alley store a while back. She liked the material so much that she bought a whole three yards of it and gave it to our family tailor, and left it to him to figure out what to make with it. I liked knowing the history of my possessions. The thought reminded me of those Disney movies that I watched when I was younger, where every stone or tree that Pocahontas touched glowed ethereally with animated significance. If objects could talk, I would gladly fill up reams of paper as their scribe.

“Have you ever had the feeling that this world is too small, or that you’re feeling boxed in?” Sarita asked. “I’m feeling like that more and more these days. I’m feeling rather reckless, and I’m not sure that that’s a good thing.”

“Are you thinking about working for a new family?” I asked with concern. “Tell me!”

She laughed hollowly. “I think that’s hardly possible,” she said. She turned to flash me a wan smile. “Like it or not, I think we’re stuck with each other for a long, long time.”

“Stuck? You’re not stuck here, Sarita. You’re a free bird. If there’s one thing I know about you, it’s that. If you don’t want to be here, nothing, not even I can stop you from leaving.”

She looked terribly unhappy. I touched her shoulder in cheap consolation. "If it means anything to you, I like that you're here. You're definitely not unwanted."

"The truth is that yes, I have made some new friends," she said. "But even they are temporary, no? They'll finish building those dorms and when their contract expires, they'll be gone. But I'll still be here. It makes me sick to think of it."

I furrowed my brow. Sarita had quite belatedly answered my opening question but it was infected with such dejection that I had a hard time digesting it.

"Oh stop it with the melodrama already!" I cried. "We've all got expiration dates hanging over our heads. Did you think I, of all people, am still unaware of that fact?"

It was a fact: Sarita inspired solemnity in me. Everyone who knew me outside of this relationship would attest to my usual cheer and nonchalance. She forced me to constantly reflect and reexamine. It was like she was sent to me by Socrates himself.

"I didn't mean it like that," she muttered finally.

"But didn't you?" I retorted, not finished. "It's just the nature of life, for God's sake! Put yourself in someone else's shoes for once. Think about your parents, for instance. For twenty-some years, you were with them every single day, and suddenly, you're gone. How do you think they're feeling at the moment?"

She jumped up, eyes blazing. "Don't you ever bring them up so casually like that!" she shouted.

I actually physically withdrew a little. I had never seen her so angry. But there was something missing here.

"You're not angry with me," I said, astonished. "No, I just hit a tender spot, didn't I? No, you're definitely not angry with me. You're angry with them. But for what?"

She sucked in a deep breath and seemed to want to hold it in until her face turned an ugly shade of pumice. But instead, she turned on her heel and fled. Not into the house, but around it, and all of a sudden, I realized that she must have gone to the same place that she went the other day, when I disastrously encountered Afshan and her tattling ways. I thought about chasing after her and demanding an explanation but as soon as I stood up myself, an epiphany dawned on me with the force of an angry elephant.

“Shit!” I swore. Sarita told me this, hadn’t she? The confession had come in the aftermath of our first big fight. *My father... he abused me*, she had said. *It’s the reason I chose you*. And my family. Of course she would react so strongly to my callous accusations. I cringed. There were so many things that I did on a daily basis that I wished I could wipe away with a chalk eraser and rewrite, anew.

Just as I made the decision to run after her and apologize, my mother came out onto the porch herself.

“You’ll never believe who just called,” she said, a little breathless. “Sister Aloysius!” My heart thudded in its niche, a little worn for wear. “Do you think...?”

“I don’t know what to think. She asked that we meet her in her quarters as soon as possible, so we need to get going.”

I put on my slippers and ran a comb through my hair. It was as frizzy as the warm, humid climate would allow, but thick enough to hold together when I let it frame my face. I sighed, and a couple strands flew out of my face. That was as good as it was going to get.

As my mother and I hurried along the *kachcha* street to the Sister’s apartment, I thought about the things I needed to say to defend Sarita. Listing them made me feel calm. It made me feel more in control and my breathing rate slowly steadied.

Sister Aloysius was sitting in a wicker chair by a window hung with gossamer drapes. She was reading an English newspaper, which immediately attracted my attention. The headline read something about the chief minister's Deepavali resolutions for the state. A picture of his shining face, complete with a sanctimonious hand wave, accompanied the article. If my mother were at her leisure, she would be handing out her opinion, shamelessly loud and clear.

"Well hello," said the Sister. "Thank you for coming. Please sit down."

My mother and I took our seats nervously. I immediately began swinging my legs.

"Would you like anything to drink?" Sister Aloysius asked us. "I just put on a pot of jasmine tea, and the fragrance should be spreading through this apartment in just a minute."

"That would be lovely, thanks," said my mother. I shook my head politely, declining it.

"You know, I have had a lot to consider in the past few days," Sister Aloysius said, getting up to mind the kettle. "My thoughts have been weighing me down, and I finally figured that it was best to summon you and discuss them with you."

My back was so rigid; it felt like the spinal tissue had been replaced with an iron rod. "You did right," I interrupted. "Thank you for not putting all your trust in misguided opinion and instead going directly to the source."

My mother gave me *the* look but Sister Aloysius continued to stir the pot equanimously.

"Well I figured that that would be the best method for going about this. I didn't want to ruffle any feathers the wrong way, you know what I mean?"

“Thanks again for being so discreet about this,” my mother said. I nodded fervently.

“Discreet?” Sister Aloysius twittered. “There’s going to be nothing discreet about this, or so I hope!”

“You hope?” I cried. “What good can come out of making a spectacle out of this?”

Sister Aloysius looked confused. “But isn’t that the point?”

I cocked my head and made a clicking sound. “I thought you were better than this, Sister.” I folded my hands stubbornly and crossed my legs. “Where’s your Christian spirit now?”

“Unavailable at the moment, since the whole point is put my faith aside for the evening and celebrate yours!”

Mum sat up. “Wait, what?”

“The administrators want to put on a Deepavali show tonight, of course! You two are being extraordinarily contrary when only days ago, *you* chastised me for not skipping with joy about going to the temple!”

My mother and I must have looked like a pair of dolls with their eyes stitched permanently open. That was certainly unexpected.

“This conversation was about Deepavali?” my mother asked in amazement.

“Well of course, what else could it be about?” the old nun huffed. “I have half a mind to annul the plans entirely right this moment!”

Mum began laughing. “So you don’t want to talk about Sarita?” I asked, still wide-eyed.

“Who is Sarita?”

“No one,” I said immediately. She didn’t need to know. My mother gave me a meaningful glance. Shilpa aunty had lied to us. She had never contacted the hospital administrators about Sarita. She was bluffing in the hope that we would just fire Sarita and eject her from the premises ourselves. She knew that she had no proof and she probably didn’t even believe her own conjectures fully, so she hedged her bet and waited for us to conclude the episode on her terms. I was amazed. How could anyone have such a limited imagination? Instead of doing anything constructive, Shilpa aunty had used slander and idle threats against Sarita to show something for herself. What a colossal waste of time and energy, on her part and on ours! I began to seethe with anger. She had put me in such dire states of mind through this emotional manipulation only for me to find out that it was all a bluff.

My mother put a hand on my arm. Now was not the time to deal with that.

“So you wanted us to help you with your Deepavali celebrations?” she clarified.

“How?”

Sister Aloysius still looked a little bothered but it looked like she would get over it just fine. “Well we have purchased a large frame of Lakshmi and if you give me a shopping list, I can get a compounder to go out and get things like marigold flowers and incense. I was hoping that you would lead the *bhajans* tonight.”

“You want me to sing devotional songs in front of an audience?” my mother seemed hesitant.

I prodded her with a finger. “Ooh *amma*, I think you should do it. You would be so great!”

“But I haven’t practiced those songs in years! And you’re asking me to do it tonight. Her father was the one who always lead them in our house, you see. I haven’t had to do this, ever,” my mother appealed.

“I know, it’s very late notice,” said the Sister. “I do apologize for that. This was a rather spontaneous decision on my part as well. And it was only after I cleared it with the other sisters that I realized that I needed someone, like you, to lead the prayers. I mean, everyone does the fireworks anyway; this new addition is what I hope distinguishes us this year.”

My mother still looked worried. “I’m very flattered, Sister. But I just don’t know if I can. Have you talked to any of your Hindu nurses or anything?”

Sister Aloysius wrung her hands. “I would but there just isn’t time!”

I jumped into the fray. “*Ma*, I really think you should do this. And what’s more, Sister is that my mother can probably put on a classical Kuchipudi dance performance as well.” My mother jolted forward and glared at me. “Dancing is her true passion and she has done it before as a form of worship too.”

The Sister looked delighted, and she clapped her hands. “That would be simply wonderful!” she cried.

“What have you gotten me into?” my mother breathed, but a smile was appearing on her face, and I grinned cheekily.

“Nothing that you didn’t want for yourself.”

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Sarita didn’t come back home for the remainder of the day. My mother was so distracted trying to prepare for her big performance that she barely noticed.

“Where’s Sarita when you need her?” she muttered when she was trying to find the prayer books. But then she found them in the chest in her bedroom and that was that.

I was a little more worried. I felt so guilty about everything that had transpired between us that morning but I was also so thrilled from finding out the truth about Shilpa aunty’s blackmail that I was doubly interested in finding Sarita. I had so much to tell her! But my mother hardly let me out of her sight all day. She needed me to both criticize and correct her and reassure her that the evening would be a success.

I helped her into her colorful sequined sari, and helped her put on all the gold jewelry she needed. I rehearsed the *bhajans* with her. I put rice in the cooker and made an egg stir-fry for lunch. I picked out my own clothes for the evening – a purple and green combination *salwaar-kameez*. I was kept busy– a blessing in disguise, probably. Working my hands left my mind blissfully clear.

Six o’clock arrived way too soon and my mother and I found ourselves hurrying to the chapel in our shimmering sandals. I could already hear the patpatta sounds of fireworks beginning to be lit up in our surrounding neighborhoods. I was so excited. I rubbed my hands for warmth and from sheer delight. When we rounded the corner, we saw Minnie’s family coming out of their house. I stared at Minnie. She averted her eyes. But uncomfortably enough for the both of us, her family began following us to the chapel as well. Apparently, Sister Aloysius had alerted all the residents on campus about the night’s program.

A small crowd had gathered in front of the chapel. The portrait of Lakshmi was hung on the chapel’s closed doors. I frowned, but I understood what it meant. Sister Aloysius was willing to make concessions but she wouldn’t go all the way. We would stand outside. My



mother didn't seem to mind. Some nurses had already hung garlands of marigold flowers and roses on the portrait, and incense sticks had been stuck in small jars filled with rice. Other jars held cool, purified water, milk, oil, kumkum, turmeric and camphor. Everyone in attendance was wearing their best traditional clothes, with hair neatly tied back and adorned with jasmine flowers. I was very impressed.

My mother nodded to me and I turned our portable music player on. The slow strums of the sitar and accordion began to sound and my mother took her cue. She began to sing, in her deep, melodious voice, and the crowd hushed in awe. I stood to the side, so proud of her, as she let her voice ripple up and down, and enunciated every Sanskrit syllable to perfection. Patients and families who had migrated from the wards to attend the *puja* looked stunned to see their doctor lead the prayer so beautifully. My mother's eyes were closed and her face, serene.

"Doctorji! That was beautiful!" exclaimed a man when she finished singing. "Simply outstanding."

He began to clap and soon the entire crowd was clapping. My mother blushed and waved them down. "I'm not done yet, *babu!*"

I put a different cassette into the stereo and pressed play. A familiar tabla beat began to sound – the simple *dun dunak nak dun dun dunak nak* of my own youthful dance lessons. She drew a deep breath to compensate for the breathlessness to follow. I fixed her with watchful eyes. She was now truly in her element. The crowd widened into a larger scale, as she gracefully put her hands together with fingers arrayed like a peacock's fan and began to dip and glide gracefully through the space. Sister Aloysius's face was all marvel and admiration, and my mother's happiness radiated even through the rehearsed dramatic

expressions she was making. I smiled but sighed as well. This was her stage, and when she was on it, she didn't need me, or my father, or Sarita or her job, or anyone at all. She was pure bliss. She danced nonstop for more than half an hour, but her energy and consistent enthusiasm forbade any fatigue from seeping into her audience members' limbs.

When the music stopped, it felt as though she had finished too soon. I could have watched her dance for hours more. The entire crowd, which had now swelled to more than a hundred people, had been completely mesmerized, and had to take a moment to quit staring and begin applauding. But when they started, they barely stopped. Whistles and whoops were heard as well, and one girl picked up the brass bells used for the prayers to Lakshmi and began waving them about.

Amidst this applause, my mother did something entirely unexpected. She came over to me, took my hand, and pulled me into the center of the circle.

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

She put her arms around me and said, "Can someone put the third cassette in?" before turning to me and whispering, "I know you were sad that we didn't do anything spectacular for Deepavali this year but *this* is your present."

With a smile, she began leading me around the floor like we were a pair of Western ballroom dancers. The music started up a moment later, and it was a tune from *Kachche Daage*, the Hindi film that I had been obsessed with for the first half of summer. After a dazed moment, members from the audience began to join in. The religious part of the night was clearly over, and the revelry was about to start. My mother had her hands around my back and mine were around her neck. I laughed.

"Oh mother."

“Oh my sweet, sweet daughter.”

“I love you,” I said. I didn’t care that anyone was watching us. We waltzed in place, tilting left and right like wrong-footed ducks.

“We are being so sappy right now,” she replied. “Are you okay with that? We both know how much you hate mushiness.”

I didn’t say anything. No response was really needed. I kept waltzing with her, happy to be included, feeling her heartbeat so close to my ear, knowing that she meant it when she tried to reconcile with me. No matter how much distance I thought there was between us, it had always been temporary. She was here and I mattered to her and at the end of the day, we had over a hundred witnesses to attest to that fact.

We were learning to be enough for each other.

Now the only question was whether I could return the gesture and trust her as much as she did with me.

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We opened our crate of fireworks with much excitement and squealing. The entire neighborhood was out on the streets now, with their own supplies and buckets of water standing readily nearby.

“Seriously, where is Sarita?” my mother asked. “I’m just realizing that I haven’t seen her since this morning. This is worrisome.”

I was brimming with too much vim to care. “Well it’s her loss, isn’t it? We’ll manage for now and launch the search party later.”

My mother and I were having so much fun that I wanted to push the whole sordid Sarita business to the side. I couldn't always be the one fretting over our relationship. She could take over for a little bit, wherever she was.

Mum laughed. "As you wish."

"Do you want to start slow with these sparklers or with a bang and light the crackers?"

"The sparklers."

"Oh you are so geriatric right now."

"Excuse me?" My mother pretended to brandish her sparkler at me before I squealed and admonished her about sparkler safety.

She whistled obnoxiously. "Guess *I'm* not the geriatric one here."

I rolled my eyes and twirled the sparkler in the air, trying to spell my name out.

"Hey try to do that really fast and let me see if I can't catch it on camera," my mother said. We tried but failed miserably. Our camera didn't have a long enough exposure setting and we didn't know how to change it.

We had an incident where I thought I burnt my toe because of some flying embers and when I leaned down to check it, my *kameez* caught on fire.

"I told you not to wear this chiffon thing today!" mum yelled as she threw a bucket of water on me.

"The entire bucket was unnecessary, mother!" I exclaimed as I sputtered in its wake. I was completely drenched.

I was upstairs changing in my bedroom when I thought I saw Sarita outside the window. She was a moving glimmer in the dark landscape of our backyard and no matter

how much I squinted, I couldn't make out what she was doing. It looked like she was with someone but that person was even darker than she, so any sort of identification was impossible. I gave up and ran downstairs again.

"I think Sarita's back there, so you don't have to worry about her anymore," I said. "She's obviously hale and healthy."

"I'm going to have some words with her later," my mother muttered.

I chanced a glance at her and she looked more worried than angry. The glow from her sparkler illuminated her face and simultaneously lent a shine to her pale face just as it sunk her wrinkles deep into her skin. I was suddenly reminded by how old my mother was. I was a late pregnancy; my mother always said that I was a delightful surprise but that she wasn't going to try for a sibling for me. It was too late in the game for her.

"You know, I think we should try lighting those little ashy snake things that you are always so fascinated with," my mother said.

I agreed and pulled them out from the crate. They were these simple grainy pellets that when lit with the tip of a sparkler, burned into long cylinders of ash. Each pellet gave birth to a long snake erupting as though arising from a snake charmer's basket. All it needed was the requisite flute music.

"Hey *ma*, I think you'll need to press play on that stereo for this," I said. She complied.

A sudden eruption of fireworks caught our attention and from the plumage of the trees, five brilliant crackers shot into the sky and spread their wings in the clouds.

I thought about the raucous crowds who were making merry outside the hospital gates.

“You know, Adi’s probably drunk by now,” I observed. “He’s always looking for an excuse to get drunk. Although, with his wife...”

I lit a spinner, which lived up to its name and lit up the entire ground like the discus of justice. When I was younger, my father insisted on bypassing all the spinners, fountains and sparklers and going straight to the testosterone-filled, ear-splitting bombs. He would always howl with pretentious frustration whenever we blocked this move.

“You know, you are so lucky to be experiencing this day,” my mother said.

I jerked my face up to her, confused. “Unless you’re counting yourself among the rocks and trees, I’d say you’re experiencing this as well,” I said.

“It’s just that, you know, it’s 1999, and most Hindus think of this day as their New Year celebrations. That means that we are witnessing the birth of a new millennium, right now.”

“You’re here with me too, *amma*,” I repeated. I looked at her blankly and she laughed and told me to forget it. *You don’t understand, but no matter. Not important.* I moved to light the snake pellets.

“You’re the torchbearer for our family now,” my mother said. “Even literally. There’s nothing left for me to create anymore.”

A sudden chill wrapped around my heart as I abruptly realized her import but I continued to pretend like I didn’t understand. The sparkler burst into flame, the snakes finally crawled out and our faces were engulfed in a thick, black smoke that made me burst into stinging tears, and through the haze and mist, I saw my mother fade in and out of my vision, a bright strong face that was furrowed with worry at my plight, the lines in her forehead pronounced more than usual, the tenderness of her skin gleaming in the dancing

lights. Later in my nightmares, the image would reappear like a faded sepia photograph, a time where my mother had passed her prime and hoped that her daughter would remember her, as she was, on that beautiful night.

“Oh Leela, you always do this,” my mother complained, as she fetched a mug of water to pour on my eyes. “You always lean in too close and get hurt in the process. It’s becoming bad tradition.”

I smiled weakly.

“How about we call it a night?” she continued. “We don’t have to exhaust all our fireworks today. There’s still the regular New Years in a month and I know you’d love to light some more then. What do you say?”

“Sure.”

We decided to leave the remnants of all our fireworks on the ground until the next day so that they would be cool to touch, but gathered the water, blankets, stereo and the crate to bring indoors. I kissed my mother good night and made my way to my room. My first impulse was to just fall into bed and lie there in a daze, but instead, I shut off the lights and crawled next to the window. Deepavali may have ended for my mother and me but it would be a sleepless night for most of my town, and I wanted to watch the fireworks for a bit longer.

I pulled out my journal and began sketching in it. I wanted to record this day for so many reasons. My mind flashed over my mother and her portentous statements, Sarita and her disappearance, the beautiful *puja* at the chapel, Sarita’s exoneration with Sister Aloysius, the mother-daughter dance that seemed to last all of eternity... Yet, when I began sketching, all I could see in the paper was my father’s face. It was as though the ups and

downs of the day had reaffirmed something for me. Life was short and unpredictable, and I was wasting it constantly reflecting and sermonizing to myself. I drew in broad strokes, outlining his face before meshing it with the surroundings. His eyes became stars, his chin the river outside my window, his nose the beginnings of a firework display. He was present in everything I saw. I stopped drawing and hugged the journal to my heart.

There were so many colors brightening up the sky that it didn't even feel like it was approaching midnight. As the fireworks formed a spectacular arabesque in the sky, I wondered what would happen if the ambers fell into the trees lining the canal. Would they add to the display with their own raging forest fire? I crossed my fingers that that wouldn't happen.

A sudden flash in the sky brightened my entire backyard for a moment and I caught sight of a pair hidden under the leafy canopy. I leaned forward and angled my head to get a better look. A second flash and the woman jumped a little. Her face brightened in the dim light as she laughed in delight. It was definitely Sarita. I recognized her clothes from earlier, and no one boasted hair as curly as hers. Now who was her companion? He or she was completely covered by branches however, and I couldn't get a good look.

I must have fallen asleep there. One minute I was mesmerized by the display of lights, and the next, I was waking up to find myself squished onto a window ledge with a throbbing red mark on my cheek from the panes. A cold draft was blowing at the edges, and the entire glass was freezing. I shivered, and turned to find my way to the bed. After I had brushed my hair at the mirror, washed my face and changed into a cotton nightgown, I came back to the window to catch one more firework before I embraced my sleepy dreams. This one was beautiful. It looked like a giant butterfly had spread its wings in the sky, and



when it broke up, each individual sparkle looked like an individual Lepidoptera. I was just about to pull the curtains shut when the couple in the shrubbery moved into view.

Sarita looked tired and her face blotchy. Leaning in for a kiss was a very giddy and disheveled Vivek.

## Chapter 13

In an interview that appeared in *The Paris Review*, 1967, Vladimir Nabokov was posed the question: *Are there temptations for you in the sin of poshlust? Have you ever fallen?*

What could have been worse to Nabokov than an accusation of poshlust? He practically wrote the book on the subject, and not just speaking figuratively.

Poshlust, a subject that much of his work *Nikolai Gogol* discusses, is an untranslatable word. Often rendered as ‘banality,’ it indicates that something is in bad taste, or trashy and cheap. But poshlust often disguises itself as something great, true or beautiful. So poshlust is not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely attractive, and the falsely beautiful.

“Brutes, bores, class-conscious Philistines, Freud, Marx, fake thinkers, puffed up poets, frauds and sharks,” Nabokov listed as examples of poshlust in *Pale Fire*.

I knew about the term from my mother when she went through her Russian literature phase. She started off with *Anna Karenina*, and quickly moved to reading *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Lolita*, *Crime and Punishment* and everything and anything Pushkin. When she discovered Nabokov, she latched on to the idea of poshlust and began to apply it widely. *The RSS party is nothing but poshlust. Bollywood films these days are poshlust! Your shirt is the epitome of poshlust.* And so on and so forth.

Sometimes, when confronted with a situation so inexplicable that you are rendered speechless, it is not just an effect of the magnitude of the situation itself but also of the limitations of your language. I already knew some of the benefits of multilingualism: whenever an occasion for slapstick comedy presented itself, I would narrate the incident in Telugu because of its potential for bawdiness. The staccato notes of English were useful for

the clarity that they lent in a serious situation. When I was younger, my parents would switch to Hindi to share secrets that needed to be kept from me.

But my inability to search for the right word – one pithy word to sum up this insane situation, felt like I was stripped of the power to set it right. I was impotent Brahma without his voice. If I couldn't identify the bits of language to address it, then I wouldn't be able to redress it.

Sarita had always been a bit of a mystery. She had always lent an air of gravitas to any situation. Her stability and assurance provided their own forms of beauty to a world rocked by chaos. And now I was realizing for the first time that I never knew her well enough. She was nothing like she had appeared. She was duplicit: a facsimile of a certain type, a void of ipseity, *poshlust*.

She knew that I had feelings for Vivek. It was blatantly obvious to anyone who had seen me with him. I was embarrassed to admit it but it was true. I had been obvious. She never knew that I had been battling my impulse to be with him because I had never confided in her. Knowing what she knew, her actions were a statement of betrayal. I already knew that she had been talking about my family to her new friends. But that was a lone sesame seed in the proverbial camel's mouth compared to this.

I didn't know what to think.

\*

The next morning, the hot water was already in the bucket, my uniforms were clean, starched, pressed and laid out in my room, my shoes were shined and sitting outside the door, breakfast was on the table – leftover rice mixed with cool yogurt and turmeric, and my tiffin box was packed and already placed inside my lunch basket alongside a canteen of

water and a small napkin. I got ready for school very suspiciously and sleepily: I hadn't been able to rest all night. I had been tossing and turning, mulling over various possibilities: why had she done this? did she secretly hate me? appropriate reactions: do I stop talking to her? do I pretend like I'd seen nothing? do I confront her? people that I could confide in: telling my mother about my crush on Vivek was out, Minnie and Puja were no longer those kinds of friends – which left only Anusha.

But Sarita had eliminated the possibility of any sort of confrontation or awkwardness entirely by removing herself from the picture. She was nowhere in sight. It brought back memories of when I had first met her and thought that she was not human, but a wraith. She was never fully present. My lucky mother didn't have to go to the clinics until it was time for her afternoon rounds so she was still sleeping in. The house was entirely empty, and yet everything felt recently arranged for my benefit. The water in the bucket was still scalding hot, and I had to fill it up to the top with ice cold water before I could dip a mug in and pour it over myself.

Adi came to pick me up.

"Hello!" I said, smiling. "I wasn't expecting to see you. You just made my morning so much better. How was your Deepavali?"

"It was, you know, good for me and the children," he said noncommittally. "They really needed a chance to get out and quit moping."

"Oh..." The inevitable must have happened.

"Pree passed away a month ago," he said gruffly. "I thought you knew."

I shook my head dumbly. And *that* was her name!

“Well in the end, she went quietly,” he said, in a detached voice. “No wasting away, no pain.”

“Well that’s good,” I said urgently. “At least she had that.”

He inclined his head. “Not if we had let nature take its natural course.”

I let him take my book bag from me and throw it into the net in the back. I held on to my lunch basket and climbed into the seats. I didn’t need to ask any more questions. Pree’s secrets had afforded her dignity in death. Prying them from Adi wasn’t going to serve her or me any good.

Anusha looked bright and thrilled to see me. I sighed with happiness. No matter how much I wanted to cling to the remnants of my holidays, it felt good to be back at school, a familiar but different environment. Anusha was removed from all the drama at home, and I could choose to frame the information I was about to give her according to my wishes. Anusha, my ideal audience, would be the one who would get to hear it all from me, from the beginning to the end, without gleaning any facts from other sources, other *biased* sources. I waited until lunch to say anything though.

“So what you’re telling me is that this woman whom you thought you knew has turned out to be a complete stranger,” Anusha summed up as she mulled over tomato rice. “You never really knew her at all.”

“I just don’t know what I can even say to her,” I said, looking down. “I don’t know whether I am even truly angry with her or just in complete shock.”

“Well I think it’s okay to be a bit of both.”

“Hmm.”

“There’s two ways of looking at this,” she said. “You can consider the principle of the situation or you can consider the reality. Sarita flouted the principle of staying away from the man her friend, that is, you, were interested in. But ultimately, the reality is that you stopped caring about him anyway, so there isn’t a real conflict here.”

“Yeah.”

“My suggestion is to have a conversation with her about it and explain your emotions to her. I guess you would also have to decide if you are okay with them continuing whatever relationship they have or if you want to ask her to break it off with him for your sake.”

“Can I actually do that?”

Anusha stopped chewing for a moment. “Of course you can!”

I bit my lip. Anusha had never met Sarita. If she had, she would know that if I requested something like that of her, she would react by simply never speaking to me again. She had a price for every compromise.

“That’s what true friends would do,” Anusha continued. “In fact, I think you *should* ask her to do that for you. This is the barometer of your friendship with her.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I am not!”

“Yes you are,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I’m not going to ask her to do something like that for the sake of measuring our friendship. That would be only justifiable if I was in love with Vivek or something. So I need to figure out what I actually want.”

“I’m telling you...” Anusha drawled.

“Nothing measurable matters,” I snapped. “E.E. Cummings.”

She put her palms up defensively. "Well how can I argue with *that*?"

"Let's refocus. Aside from holding her to some impossible standard, what would you do if you were in my situation?"

She sighed and looked at me seriously. "You and I aren't the same person, *yaar*. I hold my friends to higher standards and you... well you seem to let anything really pass."

I stared at her. "That's not exactly a compliment to you," I observed.

She shrugged. "Well I think of myself as the big exception."

"But I don't hold my friends to a lower standard," I cried.

"You do. From everything you've told me, you've let Sarita, your mom, and Puja get away with an awful lot. I don't know if I would have stood for that."

I frowned. Anusha was breaking it down so simply, but I knew that I deserved more credit. "Maybe I just pick my battles differently," I said.

We left it at that.

\*

When I got back home, I discovered my mother bending backward like a broken helix. She was arched in a perfect half-circle, and her hair was splayed all across her face like burlap grass grown awry.

"Hey *ma*, are you okay?" I asked, setting my bags down.

"Just getting a kink out," her muffled voice replied.

"I'm going to hover over you, okay?" I said. "I don't feel like this is safe."

My mother sucked in a huge breath, and slowly extended herself to the floor. Then she just lay on the tiles, panting. The tension coursed out of her body and she twisted her neck left and right, clearly unsatisfied with the results.

“Were you planning on dancing today?”

“Planning is the keyword.” She got up and massaged her neck. “Where *is* Sarita? I need to lie down on my bed and have her massage me with her feet or something.”

She looked at me expectantly as though I had all the answers but I was empty. Not willing to let that spoil anything, however, I came up with a suggestion: “how about you lie down anyway, and I massage you?”

Soon I was walking up and down her back, careful not to slide off her skin because that would provoke visions of red as I knew from experience, when we heard the front door open and close shut. I paused and hopped off.

“Where are you going?” mum whispered but I shushed her. The bedroom was dark and silent so there was a chance that Sarita wouldn’t notice that we were home as well. I tiptoed over to the nook above the staircase and waited to spy on her.

She looked distressed. She was evidently pacing since she regularly came into view, before doing a jittery, myotonic motion with her shoulders and going in the opposite direction. Her hair was all flustered and she kept scratching her neck.

“You okay down there?” I called, before I had even fully formulated a plan of action.

Sarita jumped and looked at me. We held gazes for a moment, mine cold and unreadable, hers confused and intent.

“Sarita’s back?” mum asked, perking up. She began to pick herself up.

“What are you doing up there?” Sarita asked. “Are you watching me or something?”

“My eyes are feasting since I see you so rarely.”

She laughed, but it sounded forced, with a dash of discomfiture. Would I have noticed that in the beforemath? Before the loose talk and the easy fling?



“What are you up to?” she asked. “Is your mother in?”

I clucked my tongue in admiration. She had always been so good at avoiding confrontations, always deferring to me, finding the exit.

“You missed Deepavali.”

She frowned. “You seem hot and bothered. What’s with this tone?”

I laughed hollowly. “Trust me, *I’m* not the one in heat.”

Mum joined me at the top of the staircase and butted in before Sarita could coherently respond.

“Sarita! Where have you been? Do you know how worried we’ve been?”

“It was an emergency,” Sarita said lamely. “And I have been having some breathing problems, so I figured I would stay away from all the fireworks and smoke.”

My mother looked somewhat satisfied but I wasn’t. “You’ve never mentioned that before. I don’t think I’ve ever even seen an inhaler on you, for instance.”

My mother turned on me. “Quit it,” she said. “You’re a little too young to be leading an interrogation, no?”

I was instantly furious. “You can’t be serious!” I cried. Was I really being denied this chance for reparations?

A wary look replaced the irritated one on my mother’s face. “Excuse me?” she said softly.

“If you only knew the truth!”

“What truth?” Sarita interjected. “What truth is this?”

I opened and shut my mouth like a dying goldfish and stared at the two of them. I wasn’t ready to assemble a roundtable just yet. But there was an odd wariness that both

women seemed to be sharing. I raised an eyebrow. Could I really negotiate outing Sarita's infidelity at this time? Mum was already irked by my outburst and she was clueless about my past infatuation with Vivek. It would be a hard sell.

"Nothing," I sighed. "And you don't have to say it; I'll go and reflect on my life in my room."

"At least you're good at that," my mother said. I turned to go and chanced another look at Sarita.

She looked fearful and cagey. I smiled inwardly. Perhaps I would extract my retribution entirely through mind games. It wasn't a bad idea.

I stayed in my room all evening. My mother didn't seem to realize that this wasn't really a punishment for me. I was very comfortable with solitude, and alternated between taking naps, writing in my journal and playing chess with myself.

"Should I win or *I* win?" I asked aloud. I had a vision of two fat potato men sitting in my skull battling with each other from their respective twin beds on the opposite sides of the capacious room. I sat back for a moment and rubbed my eyes. I wasn't entirely sure that this was a good thing.

When I was younger, my grandmother used to visit often, and stay with us for a week or two at a time to look after me and take the sting out of my mother's long work hours. I was still young enough to need looking after, and my parents were workaholics. It was with my grandmother that I learnt my multiplication tables and the rules of backgammon. I was dealing cards before I could even speak. The one thing that my grandmother disapproved of was my fondness for reading books. She would sigh worriedly whenever she saw me crawl into my favorite space near the top of the stairs with a copy of

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* or *Grimm's Fairytales*. Years later, mum let it slip that my grandmother had confided her fears in her that my excessive reading would lead to mental disorders

"What do you think is the root of schizophrenia?" my grandmother had apparently rhetorically asked. "Imagination!"

Mum had had a hearty laugh and reassured my grandmother that she was comfortable with my bad habits. But that never completely assuaged my grandmother's fears. Even to this day, she would call my mother and try to have her sign me up for different extracurricular endeavors that would limit my time with my novels. She was old, lovable, but absolutely silly, as far as I was concerned.

But now, as I vainly tried to dismiss the images of these cantankerous potato men in my head, I began to reassess that stance.

"Maybe she had a point," I murmured. More than ever, I was realizing that real life could actually be more fantastical and violent than fiction. A knock sounded on my door and Sarita was sitting in front of me within a second.

"At your leisure, please," I said sarcastically.

She bit her lip. "What do you know?"

"How many secrets are you in charge of? You know that this is a sleepy Indian town, not the Central Intelligence Agency, right?"

"You have to tell me," she said urgently. In the dim lights of my room and those coming through the window, she looked absolutely ghastly. Her face was pale and skin pulled taut in every direction, and huge purple bags formed little cushions under her eyes in case they ever decided to roll out.

“You look crazy,” I said, shuffling backwards. “You *are* crazy.”

She paused and sat back on her heels. We surveyed each other seriously. I don’t know what she saw, but all I saw was a deranged woman who lived like her actions had no consequences.

“I thought I had your unconditional love,” she said finally. “We’re supposed to be sisters and all that.”

“Sisters don’t lie,” I said. “But what am I saying? You are definitely my father’s daughter. He kept his fair share of secrets too. His entire life was summed up in one secret.”

She looked confused and leaned forward, waiting to hear more but I rolled my eyes. She wasn’t really expecting full disclosure from *me* at this time, was she?

“Are you mad at me for what you found out or because I didn’t tell you myself?” she asked softly. I reeled.

Here was a question that Anusha hadn’t asked me. I floundered in a sea of possible retorts, but kept silent. I was surprised to realize that I hadn’t even considered that her secrecy might be the real reason for my rage.

When I didn’t answer, she asked another one. “May I at least ask you about how you found out?”

“Why, do you need to research better methods of stealth for the future?”

She threw her hands in the air. “I can’t believe you are being this heartless!” she cried. “I never imagined that you, of all people, would react this way!”

I cocked my head questioningly. “What is it about me that convinced you that I would react any other way?”

“Are you fishing for compliments?”

“I may not be your average girl but I’m no monk either. Should I apologize for having emotions at all?”

“I guess I just thought I might have had your empathy.”

I was amazed. Sarita had just crossed the line, asking me to understand her behavior. But she couldn’t even say his name, could she? She was the one who had committed the fault, and was now trying to salvage the situation by acting surprised.

“As far as I know, you were a willing participant,” I said. Her eyes flashed. “Please, just leave.”

## Chapter 14

Something had transpired between us during that conversation because Sarita was now declining to even acknowledge me. She left every room I entered, during her limited stays inside the parameters of the house. My mother had not commented on it yet, but she had never been too observant of my relationship with Sarita. The girl was no longer trying to make inroads; in fact, she looked at me these days with clear distaste, as though she had disowned me. I felt a righteous anger when I thought about that. She was clearly projecting: she was treating me the way I thought I had a right to treat her. But I was too proud to dissect the situation down to its roots.

After seven days of silence, I decided to retaliate. This was my house, my household, and my rules. Sarita affronting me at every turn was not part of the deal that we signed with her when she first arrived. She was supposed to be my caretaker, wasn't she? If she was flouting these basic requirements, then I had a case with my mother.

I waited until Sarita left the house one cold Saturday morning, before I went up to my mother. She was sitting at the sewing machine, pedaling it furiously as she worked to get a straight line of stitches on her skirt. Her glasses were hovering precariously at the tip of her nose, and her face was sweaty.

"Hi," she said, when she saw me in the doorway, "I hate these flimsy skirts that have only one line of thread holding the entire thing together. What if I was wearing this under my sari and something tore? You know how the sari is only one long piece of tucked in cloth; the entire thing would unravel and I would die. These cheap tailors force me to do half their work, don't they?"

I nodded. "Why don't you get Sarita to do that for you?"

“Oh dear. I feel bad for the girl. We already have her do so much around here; I figured I needed to stop piling on ever more work on her thin shoulders.”

The conversation had precipitated to my itching outburst so quickly.

“Do you really think she’s overworked?” I asked. “If anything, I sometimes feel like she has too much free time. She’s never here anymore, and probably off canoodling with some new boyfriend or whoever.”

My mother got to the end of her line and stopped. “What did you come here to say anyway?” she asked.

I sighed. “I’m just so tired of everyone thinking that Sarita is some sort of holy martyr. She has her fair share of faults too.”

“By ‘everyone,’ do you just mean me?”

“Do you even know where she is right now? Out back in the woods somewhere. Aren’t you even curious to know what she’s doing out there?”

“To be fair, it’s a valid question,” my mother conceded. “But she’s allowed to have a semblance of a personal life, isn’t she? And I don’t think she’s meeting up with any men, dear. I know Sarita, and she wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh you *know* her. Oh okay. Never mind then.”

“You know you’re not going to achieve anything by being so snarky, right?”

I flopped to my knees. “*Ma*, there’s something wrong about her. I don’t feel the kind of confidence that I should with someone I am living with. She’s so dark and moody, and she’s hiding a ridiculous number of secrets.”

“What secrets?” My mother cupped my cheek with her palm. She was finally looking concerned.

I hesitated. There was only one secret that I was sure of, and it wasn't one that I was comfortable telling my mother about it to its full extent.

"You may think that she doesn't have a man in her life, but that's not true. I saw her with someone on Deepavali."

"What? But we didn't know where she was that day."

I looked at her. "Isn't that a cause for concern in and of itself?"

"So you're assuming?"

"No, I saw her. She was with a man behind our house, in the midst of the trees. I saw them from my bedroom window. I take it from your expression that you were unaware of this development."

Mum fixed her face instantly. "Listen, don't get involved in things that are bigger than you. I'll have a talk with her, soon, but *you* are going to stay out of it, are we clear?"

I nodded mutely, but was feeling slightly elated nonetheless. Something had been set in motion, and that at least, was better than my twiddling my thumbs and feeling frustrated all day.

\*

Two years ago, my parents and my grandparents colluded together and took me to the beach. We had travelled to Vishakhapatnam, more affectionately known as Vizag, for a wedding, and by five o'clock, the salty sea breeze that had been calling our names all day in the wedding tents was finally paid a personal visit. The beach was rather dirty from the residue of the high tide but nonetheless, we put on our Bermuda pants and shorts and walked toward the water. It was my first time seeing the ocean. I had seen it in pictures, and in movies, but never realized that it could be so expansive. That this huge body of



infinite nothingness could be so close, literally tangible, that I could stand in the shoals and sinking sand, and be brought closer and closer to the water with each wave. For the first time, I doubted that the earth was a globe. I could see the horizon, how the sky blue of the top meshed with the purple blue of the bottom in a gray area. I felt my utter smallness in the world, and felt terrified. I relished the experience for its physicality, but was absolutely and unconditionally terrified.

It was as though someone had finally revealed the true nature of things to me. But what that was, I couldn't fully articulate. It was as though my metaphors had run ahead before me, and I wouldn't be able to fully understand my own awe and epiphanies until much, much later.

I was okay with that, at the time.

\*

It had started with the silencing of speech. Language was dead in our house, a three-way stagnation. Sarita wasn't speaking to me and I was returning the favor. To be fair, my mother wasn't contributing to the dialogue only because of her workload. Since she resumed working at the hospital after Deepavali, she was contending with an increased volume of patients. The floodgates had opened, and the patients had begun pouring in again, as though making up for lost time. She was away from home often, and consequentially was too tired to think, let alone talk, when she got back at night.

I felt like I was in solitary confinement, in a prison with whitewashed walls and no windows. After a few days of incessant buzzing silence in my ear, I got up and went over to Minnie's house. I had ceased talking with the girls out of solidarity with Sarita, but now I decided that the latter no longer deserved this allegiance. Minnie and Puja were idiots, for

sure, but someone had to break the ice sooner or later, and I decided that the time was ripe to pull out the hammer.

“Hello!” I said, when Minnie appeared at the door. She was alone.

“Hi,” she said uncertainly.

We stood in place and looked at each other like strangers. It felt so surreal. Minnie was so guarded; normally, she would have launched herself at me and hugged me until I batted her off.

“What did you want?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head. “Just a few hours of good company, I think.”

She fidgeted in place. “Seriously?”

“Listen, I know things have been tense between us lately, but this can’t have become a permanent thing, can it? We’ve been friends for so long!”

“Well it doesn’t seem like it,” she sniffed.

“That’s because you made it clear whose side you were on!”

“Sides? It’s not about sides,” she said, looking astonished. “It was never about taking sides.”

I scrunched my face in confusion. “What else was it ever about? Shilpa aunty was accusing an innocent person, someone connected to me, of a hideous crime, and you and Puja apparently decided to keep your traps shut. What did you think you were? Switzerland? Unfortunately, staying silent meant your complicit approval. It seems pretty black and white to me.”

Minnie walked forward onto the porch until she was just a foot away from me.

“If we’re talking about hard evidence, where’s yours?”

“I think it’s innocent until found guilty, not guilty until proven innocent.”

“Did you ever candidly talk to her? Did you ever get any admission of innocence from her? Or did you base this entirely on your own assumptions?”

“Of course I –” I began, but then I faltered. *I hadn’t actually ever confronted Sarita about it. I had immediately begun apologizing for my blunder.* But underneath the recent layer of pent up dislike, I still knew that Sarita was a good person, incapable of real evil. I still knew that.

“Listen, don’t feel like I’m criticizing you here,” Minnie said. “Like I said, your maid was hardly the person I was worried about through the whole ordeal.”

“Did you think that finding someone to heap the blame on would better Puja’s life?”

She looked so stubborn. “You can’t blame me just the same way I’m not pointing fingers at you,” she said. “This is *not* about us. In the face of the evidence that we had, Sarita was the most likely suspect. Puja wasn’t saying anything. In fact, she’s hardly talking anymore. With all that, what did you expect me to do?”

I shook my head disbelievingly. “What you don’t seem to understand is that there was no way that I could not get involved, just like you couldn’t either! Sarita is a real person too. Just because you don’t know her as well doesn’t mean you don’t have to care what happens to her!”

“Perhaps we can agree to forever disagree?” Minnie asked. I wanted to further protest and appeal to her reason but I remembered my end goal and the silent specter of a former friend back in my own house.

“Fine,” I said heavily. “Fine. Let’s just be friends again, please.”

Minnie smiled. “I want nothing else.”

So it was that, in the face of unsmiling family members, I began to escape to Minnie's house every day after school. I hadn't decided how to approach Puja yet, but I figured that the opportunity would present itself soon. Sarita quickly figured out where I was going every single day, but I never knew how she felt about it. She hardly breathed a word, and she was always looking for an opportunity to escape. If my mother were home a little more, she would have wondered whether we thought that the house contained some deadly poison.

In the original Grimm's Snow White, the evil stepmother met her end not by falling off a cliff into a vortex but rather by being forced to wear enchanted heels that continually burnt her feet like hot coals. She danced and leapt around so much in absolute pain that she met her end through sheer exhaustion. My mother used to read me one story every day from a massive tome of fairytales when I was very young. I remember her complete shock at this depiction of cruelty and her guilty glance my way when reached the end because she felt responsible for having introduced such ideas into my world. But she had underestimated me, just as anyone else in her place would have done too. It was as though adults so quickly forgot what it was like to be a child as soon as they crossed the threshold that society determined separated them from their younger selves. They seemed to want to deny their recognition that children were very capable of fathoming darkness as well. I was actually far from being horrified; instead, I was thrilled by every bit of the dramatic details in the story. In fact, when I saw the Disney adaptation in the theatres not long after, I was incredibly disappointed by how clean and whitewashed it seemed. The gore and cleverness had been removed, and I felt utterly patronized. No I didn't think that my mother would die of dancing either.

My mother couldn't possibly understand the dark undertones that now suffused every bit of our living in that house, because she thought us mostly incapable of such thoughts. Even if she were informed of the seven deadly sins rampaging through our household, she would have pointed a finger at Sarita, if forced, simply because Sarita was older. For once in my life, my young age served me well, and I did not try and influence my mother otherwise.

\*

I came home from one of my expeditions abroad around eight o'clock, in time for a late dinner. I was feeling a little on edge because I had gone to visit Minnie out of habit and not out of common sense: I had so much homework that night and had been foolish to squander away my evening like that.

"I've completely forgotten my priorities, haven't I?" I murmured as I walked back to my house.

My beautiful house, with its vanilla paint and stucco edges, stood tall and grand in the creeping moonlight. Allamanda vines spiraled out of control across the western wall, the side facing the canal. They weren't blooming in this season. December was days away, and even this part of the world could get chilly for a month or two. My house felt awfully big for three little women. I walked over to the side of the canal and leaned against the metal fence. There were all sorts of barbed leaves and thorny branches sticking through the gaps, and I was careful to avoid them. My skin was erupting in thousands of little goose bumps, like a cold finger trailing up and down my spine. A toad croaked at me near my feet. I squealed and wagged a finger at it.

“Go back to your banks, Kenneth!” The wind was whispering so loudly that my skirt was being lifted dangerously high.

It was then that I heard the murmuring emitting through the lattice framework one floor up, and I quietly walked back closer to the house. I could barely hear what was being said but I knew the players: my mother and Sarita, in a heated argument.

“You’re being so rash!” my mother said.

“Have you been walking on veils?” Sarita replied. I frowned. Everything that I deciphered from afar was questionable.

“... not good for you!” my mother was saying. *Oh*. I suddenly realized what this was about. My mother was finally confronting Sarita about Vivek. I felt a momentary frisson at the implications of meeting.

“What do you know? You don’t know what I’ve been going through!” I heard this fragment clearly because Sarita had practically yelled it. “... feeling lonely.”

“Is it safe? Are you being safe?” My eyes bulged at that. Was I reading too much into it or was my mom offering sex counseling to Sarita?

“...need to know that there’s a life beyond this.”

“You can’t....!”

I sighed. I knew that they would abruptly end this argument if I walked in, but my reception was so poor out here.

“There’s a need for honesty, Sarita,” my mom said. “Whatever you do, don’t lie.”

I smiled. Mum could extract any kind of information from even the most doggedly secretive people.

But there was only silence after that last injunction. Apparently that was the end of the argument. I finally entered the house, amidst the whistling among the trees. It looked deserted. Everyone was back in their respective rooms.

I went up to my mother's bedroom where she was sitting in front of the vanity with a forlorn expression. I came up behind her and kissed her on the cheek. Her skin was soft but thin, as though it could easily tear apart in heavy winds and heat.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I was just thinking." After a moment she asked, "Do you think I'm getting to be too old?"

"Of course not. You're still in your forties. You haven't even hit the halfway point." I remembered the awful conversation that we had had just before the denouement of our Deepavali celebrations in which she had insinuated that she was past being worthy of new experiences. "Why, are you looking to get remarried?"

She jolted back from me, as though my skin were an anathema. "What?"

"Well it's not healthy to be alone like this..." I trailed off.

She swiveled in her seat to look at me. "Come, sit on my lap. You don't think it's too soon? Your father died less than a year ago."

"If you think bringing someone new into our lives would be like replacing father then you're wrong," I said simply. "It wouldn't be like that at all."

My mother stared at me. "When did you get to be so smart?"

"In the womb."

“You didn’t happen to overhear my conversation with Sarita, did you?” she asked suddenly. “I had a very serious talk with her about some of the things you brought up earlier.”

“No,” I said semi-truthfully. The wind had distorted everything, so I really didn’t hear anything. “Did she take it well?”

My mother bit her lip. “She took it just fine,” she said. “Now get out of here and do your homework.”

“Thanks for reminding me!” I raced out of there.

I shut the door to my room and pulled out my book bag. I had a mind-boggling quantity of work. Aside from having to complete over fifty math problems on percentages, write a book report for Hindi class, and read the opening three scenes of *Julius Caesar*, we now had to practice our penmanship every night as part of a program that our headmistress had instituted. I needed to take the evidence of my diligence in mastering cursive lettering to my first period teacher the next day. It was dreadful.

I was in the midst of writing out the phrase “an empty vessel makes more noise” for the nineteenth time when the door opened without warning.

I chomped down on my tongue before the traitorous thing could wish Sarita hello.

“So,” she said, standing in the doorway like a menacing old aunt. “I have figured it out.”

“Brilliant,” I said. The mind games were defenestrated but at least she knew why I was so mad at her.

“And instead of coming directly to me, you went to your mother.”

“I have an obligation to do right by you.” I stared at her just as composedly.



She laughed. "You thought blabbing to your mother was doing right be me?"

"Do you really want to berate me on my tattling?" I asked. "If there's one thing I cannot stand, it's hypocrisy."

"Same here."

"But yours is in theory only."

We looked at each other for a full minute without talking, before I felt a visceral need to break the silence.

"So you know then why I'm mad at you," I said.

"Wait!" she said, eyes widening. "This is too good. *You're* mad at me?"

"Of course I'm mad at you, Sarita!" I was practically seething. "You knew that I was mad about Vivek! How can you even pretend to be oblivious? What did I ever do to you? What you did was so, so low. I couldn't believe my own eyes when I saw you two together like that! Even if there was no chance in hell for the two of us, the least you could do was ask my permission, or give me some sort of forewarning about it. You make me sick."

Sarita's eyes were wide like saucers. "Really?" she said

I wanted to strangle her. "Yes really! Do you want me to emphasize how nauseated you make me feel?"

"Oh my god," she said, and she slumped to the floor. "Oh we have all been such fools."

"Leave me out of your blanket statements."

She just sat there, bobbing her head in the same motion that a head makes after the body drowns, floating dumbly in the sea of her thoughts.

\*

“You look so rigid,” Anusha said. “I almost think that if I scream at a high enough pitch, you’ll shatter.”

“Then do me a favor and whisper?”

Our classroom was in disarray. We had pushed and piled all the desks to the sides and were now busy on the floor, working on creating poster board-sized representations of India. My group was to focus on the geographical terrain of the different regions, from the Malabar Hills and coastal regions of the south to the Deccan Plateau of the center to the Himalayan mountain range and high altitudes of the north. Other groups made maps of cities, or cultures and languages, or population diversity. It was definitely an interesting project and I was glad to be out of my seat and far from stories about Chitti.

“Do you think that the plateau ends at this latitude?” I asked Meera, the third member of our group.

“Maybe a little higher,” she said and pulled my hand up a little further north. “Good. There.”

Anusha was bunching up green paper to glue in the north-east corner of the map, to represent the Gangetic plains and equatorial forests of the region. Meera was sifting sand slowly on to the north-west, looking to create the illusion of the Thar desert of Rajasthan.

“Did I ever tell you that my parents do yoga in the mornings?” Anusha asked. “They’ve been trying for ages to get me to join them, but I value my sleep. You, however, could use something like that.”

“No thank you.”

“*Bandar kya jaane adarak ka swad?*” she said, with dramatic gestures. *What does a monkey know of the taste of ginger?*

I rolled my eyes.

“No seriously, what’s the matter with you?” she asked. “Did your funny bone break this morning?”

“You are aware that that’s not why it’s called the funny bone, right?”

“Humph.”

“It’s just... Sarita,” I said. “I haven’t been able to make peace with the idea of her and Vivek.”

“You’ve forgiven all her other peccadilloes,” Anusha observed. “Our friend here had a huge thing for this boy named Vivek only to realize that he had been covertly dating her maid, Sarita,” she said to Meera. Meera made a tiny *oh* and went back to gluing sand. I couldn’t blame her. What could anyone really say to that?

“It’s just that instead of apologizing, she’s been asking me to *empathize* with her, in her exact words. Isn’t that a bit much?”

“Just a little,” Anusha said. “Did you threaten to cut off her hair while she sleeps?”

Meera looked alarmed.

I gave Anusha a very sardonic look. “Only you,” I muttered, shaking my head.

“Well let’s focus on something positive,” she said. “Even though your situation at home is super volatile, at least you’ve got a firm handle on your school work. I mean, you’re acing all your classes without much effort whereas I struggle like the mediocre student that I am.”

“She doesn’t,” I said to Meera. “She is a pathological liar.”

Anusha made a face that looked like a simian’s before exclaiming, “Let’s just say that I have to memorize an entire play in the next two weeks and muster the courage to play a

part on stage while also prepping for our finals, which will slay me. I'm not going to name any names but one of us three will only be working *behind* the scenes." She coughed.

"Don't underestimate the stage crew," I said. "I might just leave a prop lying out in a calculated spot and laugh when you trip and break your face in front of everyone."

Anusha looked at Meera. "Do you want to be my new best friend? I think the old one's got some software problems, one being that she is completely evil."

Meera laughed. "You guys are ridiculous."

We went back to working on the map. I had filled a spare fountain pen with brown ink, and by placing my finger in a strategic spot on the nib and blowing hard on the ink that pooled around it, I could create even splatters of brown earth on the Deccan plateau.

Meera was so excited about the Annual Day that she had relatives driving in from nearby towns to come and watch her in her lead role. They were going to turn the occasion into a huge family gala, and Meera had invited me to the party that her parents were throwing that evening for her. I smiled. It was nice to see her that excited. Meera was a natural thespian, and this was going to shine the spotlight in more than one way on a deserving face. But I was content with working with the crew. I didn't belong on the stage. I was a critic, not a doer.

But we all knew that.

I wasn't going to reproach myself for it though. Critics were just as valuable in this world, weren't they? I had learnt the art-form from my own mother, who as a political and cultural pundit had me understand the devastating importance of observation. It was criticism that had birthed almost all modern-day religions, and criticism that lent us democracy. I was in good company.

“I’ll give you the same advice that Krishna gave Arjuna on the precipice of the great war,” I said. “Don’t be biased on account of family or obligation. Fight for me. Know that you are on the side of righteousness.”

I was met with blank stares. Life, as usual.

## Chapter 15

Etiquette in Japanese society is of such importance that the Japanese devised words about strained relationships that were just perfect in thinking about my quarrel with Sarita: *honne* and *tatema*.

*Tatema*, my public behavior and opinions: I didn't care anymore. Sarita could whore herself among all the construction workers if she was so inclined and it would scarcely bother me. We weren't really friends anymore. We had begun drifting apart ages ago, and she was a stranger to me now.

*Honne*, my true feelings and desires: I missed her. I wanted her to meet me halfway.

I was still thinking about Sarita when Adi picked me up from school, with a grin on his face for the first time in months. He was wearing a new striped shirt and looked like he had finally gotten a haircut that was long due. He was smoking a cheap *beedi* and I told him about the science of cancer as he cycled us home. It was when he dropped all of the other children off at the apartments next to the hospital that he looked at me.

"I know all about cancer," he said. "Pree had those *arbudh* or uh, tumors? in her breasts. That's what caused her passing."

I stared at him, and at his nonchalant manner of talking about it. "I had no idea that it was cancer," I said. "I'm so sorry. I think I must have been very callous. You should have stopped me."

"No, I didn't want to," he said, with a slight smile. "You're young and energetic and you have strong opinions. Don't rein yourself in."

"Fine," I said. "But I promise to provide other reasons for quitting smoking."

“You don’t have to do that,” he insisted. “No, if anyone should be thinking about being respectful, it’s me. You’re right, smoking does lead to cancer, and no one knows that more than me.”

He put his hand on my shoulder and very seriously said, “The appropriate reaction to loss isn’t respect. It’s honesty. Continuing to live lives full of humor and epiphanies and I-can’t-believe-I-just-did-that moments are what really honor the dead. Don’t give anything the power to wipe out discourse. It doesn’t deserve it.”

I looked at Adi and thought about what he used to be like before Pree’s diagnosis and death. He used to be so wild, so reckless, so very drunk all the time. He lived life hedonistically as though unaware of a possible end. Death didn’t exist at all in his realm then. He was always silly, and if I were to be truthful, I sometimes patronized him for it. I had always thought of him as a man wearing his heart on the sleeve, and by all counts, most likely disdainful of intellectual conversations. He just wasn’t the type.

That’s why I now expected Adi to be full of rage. I expected him to be feeling the burden of sheer helplessness, perhaps seeking consolation by wrecking havoc on his own body. The predictable recourse after a tragedy for a man who had always enjoyed alcohol would be to turn alcoholic. I would have been unsurprised if he had turned cynical at the pointlessness and undemocratic manner in which his wife had suffered unwarranted abuse. But he was none of that.

“You’re like a refurbished car,” I said. “Sturdier.”

He patted my head and hopped back onto his triangle seat. We cycled to my house in quiet contemplation.

In the three minutes that it took for us to sweep past the entire hospital and reach my house, I had achieved my own version of reconciliation. If Adi could negotiate with death itself and stop treating it as an enemy, then I could do the same on a much smaller scale. I had been thinking about this for a while but Adi had precipitated the path for me and made the decision clear. It was time to settle things with Sarita.

“You are quite the spiritual guru,” I said, as he helped unload my bags from the back. “Perhaps you should quit the rickshaw business and think about that as a career.”

He laughed. “Let’s not go overboard with the appreciation,” he said.

“I’m only being slightly whimsical,” I said, laughing. “Think about it.”

He tipped his hat to me, winked, and left. I watched the dust billow in his slipstream and recited a small prayer under my breath. It was an impulse that I couldn’t fully explain, but it felt right.

The sky was calamitous. Hundreds upon hundreds of crows were blackening the clouds overhead and I remembered an old wives tale that I had heard when I was very young. My cousin Smitha had sat me on her lap in the garden outside my grandparents’ house, pointed out a crow on the rafters, and said that if a crow caws on the roof or threshold of a house at dawn, it was a sign that someone very dear would visit the house. I checked and there were no crows on the rafters of my house. Besides these crows were flying about during the diametric opposite of dawn. It was almost twilight. I shrugged. All I got for trying to look into omens was an empty psalm.

I went inside and searched the entire house. As usual, Sarita was nowhere to be found. But the kitchen looked like she had visited it recently: there was flour on the counters, and lukewarm oil on the stove. I went up to my bedroom and peeked out of the



window. I didn't see her or Vivek anywhere but there was a possibility that she was farther up the stream as usual.

I sat on my bed with a grim expression on my face. This was the moment of reckoning. All kinds of thoughts and strategies floated through my mind but before I could fully articulate my intentions, my body language took over. It was as though there was a part of me that very viscerally knew what to do and it didn't want to wait for my consciousness to agonize over a decision that was inevitable anyway.

I didn't even pause to change out of my black loafers and pinafore, or pull the checkered tie out of my tight collar as I raced out of the house. I only focused on where my next rushed step was going to land as I hurtled through the back and began whacking away at the hanging branches. My loafers made disgusting squishing sounds as they trampled over moist earth and decomposing compost, but I didn't lose momentum. On and on and on. I sloshed through the damp air as it began to consolidate on my skin, on my neck, my forehead, my breast bone.

Now I was at the edge of the canal, now I was almost five hundred meters from my house. It was a heady feeling. I slowed down and began to take long, achy, muddy steps forward. I kept going for almost ten more minutes before I heard their voices. Bingo.

As I approached them though, I realized that they were having a heated argument. *Oh.* I suffered a moment of indecision where I realized that I didn't want to be overhearing this but that if I moved either forward or back, they would most certainly hear me. Sarita and I were not on good enough terms yet for her to rationalize what she would see as an indiscretion on my part.

"You're not being very forthright here," Vivek was saying.

"I don't think I need to explain myself to you at all," Sarita said frostily.

"No, I think you do," Vivek said. "I've been so patient with you for weeks, no, months."

"Patient?" she said in a pitched voice. "Should I be grateful?"

"Oh, come on, Sarita," he said, exasperated. "I love you. Why can't you let me love you?"

I wanted to be anywhere but there. I considered plugging my fingers in my ears but my fingers were too dirty and gross.

She cupped his hands in her own and kissed them. "Isn't this enough?" she asked pleadingly.

He took her gesture to be an opening statement, and encircled his hands around her waist. "Not when there's so much more to explore," he said, in his usual teasing voice.

I had had that voice directed at me before. I used to think that I was so special. Now it felt foul.

"Vivek!" she said. "You don't understand. This isn't that simple."

For a moment, I sympathized with Vivek. Sarita used that line with me all the time and now Vivek was the unhappy recipient of it as well.

"How so?"

She sighed. My eyes bulged. Was she going to tell him about me and my damned crush on him? I felt like Matilda channeling brain waves at her. *No...*

"Sit down," she said, and they perched themselves on a tree stump. "Please be calm. Please know that I didn't ever expect to meet someone like you here."

"I'm getting nervous," he said, as he looked at her sideways.

She didn't respond for a moment. I leaned forward. *He should be nervous. This isn't right.* It all happened very quickly.

"I have HIV," she said.

I fell forward onto a large, crackling pile of shed leaves. Sarita leaped up, her face blanched. Vivek was a mixture of confusion and shock. I was just shame.

"Leela!" she screamed, baptizing me in the tide pools of her anger.

"I'm so sorry," I gasped, as I scrambled up, and then turned and ran.

*Oh God.* Oh God, oh gods, what was wrong here, was there any logic to this? If a crow lands on your head, does that mean that someone dear will enter it? This was a reason, this was a crime, I reached up and pulled the ribbons from my hair, twisting them in my hands, looking down and seeing the noose I had just formed... I could have hung myself. I wanted to hurt myself. I had been awful to her, simply awful. I imagined her tears that so easily erupted everytime she cut onions. She would bawl like a blind, drunk sailor, and in the mornings, her eyes would be puffy from her lack of sleep, and in the bright lights, I saw blossoming pools of blood under her skin.

I ran in retrograde. Through the front doors, up to my room and under my covers – if I hid, it would be erased. I avoided looking into mirrors. I would be repulsed by the person I would see in them. I shivered under my quilt. I shivered, and cried and cried until I fell asleep.

In my dreams, I was swimming in the canal, dicing through piles of sea weeds and alternating piles of caviar between my hands. There were bubbles everywhere, bubbles instead of rain drops, floating gently down from the clouds. Sarita was with me. We were both naked, but I was the clothed maja. The bubbles were working in arrays; they

descended down and settled on me like glistening butterflies. No matter how many times I beat against the current, they refused to burst. I laughed with happiness and looked over at Sarita. The bubbles were floating around her too like a second skin. But through the pale of soap and shimmer, she was not herself. No matter how much the soap and water worked concertedly to cleanse, the resulting effect was only distortion. Her nose in one circular lens, her chin far removed, her neck missing in action. She was one of the demoiselles d'avignon; she was Duchamp's wet dream.

In another dream, I was more adventurous. We were on the terrace, in the middle of the night. Drum beats were rising up from the earth, and Sarita lit a fire. I cried tears that crystallized into black embers on my palms. Sarita threw scraps of wood into the fire, cackling and spinning in the air as she did it. It was art, it was dance. *Throw things in*, she screamed at me, and I obliged her. I fished around in my knapsack and found old report cards and notebooks to feed the fire. *More, more!* I scrambled for more, a horrified feeling in the pit of my belly, as my fingers discovered a familiar binding. My journal. *Perfect! Throw it in!* Anything for you, Sarita. I closed my eyes and flung it into the fire with great force. The bonfire shrieked, and flames lurched up in ecstasy. I felt like I could do anything. I could be invisible, I could fly. *Sarita, watch me fly!* I clambered to the edge of the terrace and arched my body out like a beautiful kite. I fell like a kite swooping down for its prey. I couldn't fly, but I didn't break either. My body bounced, like a limber piece of flesh-ball, and I was back on the terrace. *How it should have happened.*

This was the third dream, the final dream, the one that came to me in the wee hours of the morning. They say that dreams that are acquired just before waking are not dreams at all, but prophecies. I was walking lazily, my white habit cloaked around my face. I

fingering a thread of beads in my pocket. Leela, Leela, Sister Annabel. The chapel was cool and inviting, and I walked in, *et ne nos inducas in tentationem...* Forgive me father, but I have sinned. Clichés have their uses. The scene shudders as I blink back tears. Are you alone? The house is empty, emerald voices echo. This is of my own doing. Semolina paper and blood ink. *Gloria patri...* my voice breaks. The paternoster is husk against my tongue. My wind pipe jerks and closes, and I vomit. Vomiting closes the scene.

\*

“Leela, wake up, honey,” my mother leaned over me, and patted my cheek. “Come on, wake up, you’ve been sleeping for over fifteen hours. It’s too much!”

“Go away, *ma*,” I mumbled into my pillow.

Her cool palm on my neck was like the freezing hand of death. “This is torture,” I continued, sleepily. “Can I just skip school today?”

“It’s a Saturday. I think the decision’s been made for you.”

I blinked and opened my eyes. The room swam. “I have a fever,” I said.

“Just slightly,” she conceded. “I can get Sarita to get you some ice. She’ll have to make a trip to the hospital pharmacy, but that’s okay.”

Sarita. *ohhhh*.

“Shit,” I said. “Shit.”

“Lovely.”

“Mum, did you know about Sarita’s secret?” I was looking at her closely. Her face instantly assumed a look of wariness.

“She told me about the boy, yes,” she said guardedly.

“Don’t patronize me,” I said, sitting up. “I overheard them talking yesterday.” I watched her reaction. She was holding herself so tightly that I knew she knew. “You knew all along, didn’t you?”

She sighed. “I can’t pretend anymore,” she said, yielding. “Yes, of course I knew. Why else do you think she was here?”

I froze. “What do you mean? She was here to take care of me, of course. After father died.”

My mother peered at me. “Is that what you thought?” she said, astonishment lacing every word. “Oh sweet, sweet child!”

She hugged me but I wrestled against her. “What do you mean?” I demanded. “You told me that yourself!”

“Oh Leela,” she said, seriously. “Sarita’s here at the hospital for a reason.” The way she said the words ‘at the hospital’ made me distinctly uneasy.

“She’s getting treatment?” I asked. My mother’s nod was like a punch in the gut.

I sucked in a gallon of air as I began deep breathing. So many assumptions that I had carefully threaded into creating a basket of a life these past few months had just snapped and I was left reeling. My supposition that Sarita had been hired as *my* caretaker, Sarita telling me that she chose me for a very particular reason, questions about unconditional love, her defensiveness, my class-consciousness and the resulting guilt, my deep sense of betrayal, discussions of God and ritual and cleansing... it was too much. Everything that I had assumed about our relationship had been undermined.

“Tell me this,” I croaked. “How did she come to live with us?”

“Sister Aloysius found her,” my mother said. “Sarita had come in for treatments, and told the Sister that she couldn’t afford them anymore, and asked if there was anything she could do in exchange for them.”

“So the Sister sent her here,” I whispered, “because she knew, of course, about father.”

“Yes.”

I continued to focus on my breathing. At least there was that. Sarita *had* come to us because of the vacancy in the household. Though the reasons were murkier than that, there was some truth in there, somewhere. And Sister Aloysius! Tolerating my bad manners even after covertly doing so much for me!

“So she’s a Vijayawada native then,” I said, seeing another piece of the puzzle. “She wasn’t from some far-off town.”

“Where’d you get that idea?” my mother asked quizzically. I shrugged. I had felt so smart for thinking that I had deciphered her accent. It was just one more item in a long list of things that I had been wrong about.

“Was she ever even molested by her father?”

At this, my mother straightened up. “Did she tell you that?” she asked.

“Yes.” Was this a lie too?

My mother looked contemplative. “Well, that could be true for all I know,” she said. “She’s never told me that herself. But I guess the HIV had to come from somebody.”

The walls suddenly closed in: I had been feeling betrayed by my father for so long for his untimely departure when I still needed him in my life... I had been getting angrier and angrier at him for the terrible legacies that he had left in his wake. But when viewed

under the scope of relativity, his mistakes seemed so benign. *Stop telling me these things, mum. I'm not mature enough to deal with these truths.* The world was revealing itself to be bigger and more horrific than anything I had ever imagined.

"I guess it could be a good thing that you know now," my mother mused. "It'll clear up some of the fog in this household. You know what they say, honesty is the best policy."

My mother's words felt like the edge of a cliff of letters. The second she stopped talking was the second I fell back into my self-loathing and misery. I had been atrocious to Sarita, when I should've forgiven anything and everything.

"I feel like I was too harsh on her sometimes," I said to my mother. "Do you think she'll ever forgive me? Even now, I'm quarreling with her over something stupid. Knowing what I know now, I would have behaved very differently."

"You can't think about it like that," my mother said. "You couldn't have known."

"But maybe I need to rethink how I behave in general," I insisted. "Everyone must be fragile in some way, in different ways. I need to be respectful."

"But that wouldn't be any fun."

I looked at her with a beady eye. "Seriously?"

"Yes! Sarita didn't tell you for a reason. People are tougher than you think! And I think no one likes to be the recipient of too much pity, at any rate. At the end of the day, if we can't fight and make fun of each other, then life isn't worth living. We may as well just unplug ourselves from the utopian matrix and be done with it."

"Are you tough enough?" I asked. My mother looked confused. "Tough enough for the truth?"



"I'd like to think so, yes," she said slowly. "You're still warm," she said. "I think we should get the ice and stomp the fever out before it worsens."

"I need to tell you something," I said, and now my heart was hammering in my chest so hard that I wanted to vomit. This was me, trusting her.

My mother took a deep breath like a fish gasping for air. If I hadn't known better, I would have said that she had been expecting this, that somewhere in the recesses of her mind she had always doubted the version of the story that I had presented to her, six months ago.

I felt utterly naked. I remembered a time when I thought that this would be liberating, and would render me invisible. But all I felt was the constricting sensation of my throat. My mother with those elegant fingers of a surgeon, observing me like a fascinating but repulsive specimen laid bare under the harsh lights of the dissecting table.

"I lied to you once," I said. My head was bowed down as I began thumbing my own knobby knuckles. "It wasn't an accident. I stumbled upon him just as he jumped off. I couldn't tell you the truth. I thought I was protecting you."

I expected tears, bawling and wailing even, but nothing happened. I looked up at my mother and she was staring at me, or perhaps she was staring at the space between us, where my words still hung, insultingly.

"Is that so?" she said, in the voice that one would use to ask about interesting objects in a museum. "There's something. And the story about the kite?"

"A bad one."

I watched her apprehensively, because my mother's reaction could very well be experiencing stage one of the seven stages of grief: shock and denial. But I didn't think that her emotional armor was thick enough to shield her from *this*.

"I'm going to get Sarita and send her for some ice," she said. She pinched my arm and went to the door. "You can walk with me, you know," she said, in a tone that harbored no refusal. I got up as well.

"Are you okay?" I was asking as we walked down the stairs. My mother was a tough cookie. She was apparently going to stay in the bout. We stopped in synchrony at the foot of the staircase.

The hall and dining table were dark and dusty. The windows were still drawn. The kitchen was silent. And the front door was slightly ajar.

My mother looked at me and I crept to Sarita's room. Her sheets were folded and placed at the foot of her cot. Her gunny sack was gone. She was gone.

## Chapter 16

Sister Aloysius was notified, the watchmen had been sent on patrol duty, and a pot of chai set on the stove. Mum and I sat in opposing chairs at the dining table, our elbows on the wood, and dumbfounded expressions on our faces. The implications of Sarita running away were so great that we didn't even know where to begin.

"You think she ran away because I found out?" I asked. "It can't have been just that, can it?"

Mum was puffing on a cigar. The last time she had done that was when my father died. She kept her cigars in a silver box in her boudoir under lock and key. A close friend had given them to her many years ago.

"I don't know what to think," she said.

"Did she think that I would despise her because of it? Did she really think so little of me?" My voice was hushed.

We didn't say anything for a full minute.

"Maybe she decided to leave after she saw your reaction," my mother noted. When I jerked up and looked at her face, she was avoiding my eyes.

"What do you mean? I was distressed because I had been kept in the dark about something so serious! And because I was so ashamed of my attitude towards her."

"She couldn't know that. All she saw was a child running as quickly away from her as she physically could and running upstairs and locking her bedroom door."

"Oh my goodness! What have I done?"

I reeled from the blows of these aftershocks of the earthquake, reducing me even as I tried to rebuild.

“You are filled with self-loathing, aren’t you?” my mother said. “You look for the slightest opportunity to blame yourself, and decide that everything is your fault.”

“Mum, don’t make this about me. This discussion can’t turn on its heel like that.”

“It is about you. How can it not be? You think Sarita abruptly left like she did for your sake. I think we need to examine her reasons.”

I stared at her. “But you’re the one who just said...”

“Yes! I said that Sarita misinterpreted your behavior. But any other rational adult would have tried to talk to you, figure out your perspective on the matter. Sarita didn’t do that. She scampered. Yet you look at her infantile actions and blame yourself. Why is that?”

“Because I’ve been so mean to her these past few weeks.”

“Oh who gives two figs? Oh don’t look so horrified. I know you think you are the most important individual in everybody’s lives but I hate to inform you that that is a falsehood. Sarita was here to get treatments, not to wage her health and happiness on your love.”

“Are you saying that my friendship with her never mattered?”

“It shouldn’t have mattered this much, is what I’m saying.”

My mother was clearly feeling very critical of Sarita and her supposed lack of common sense. But I saw things more poignantly. What my mother was saying was that Sarita invested so much into our relationship that when she thought it was irreparable, she couldn’t bear to stay. That wasn’t something that I could ever mock. It was something that I could only think about with awe. The idea that Sarita traded her very life on the altar of our friendship was something so high, so hallowed...

“So stupid,” my mother was saying. “I cannot stand it when people treat their lives as something frivolous. To think that she was so ashamed of her condition that she had to take such a drastic step. Absolutely preposterous! If I could see her now, I would stride up to her and give her a very sharp slap on the cheek. Some people just need such a wake-up call.”

I wasn't fully sure if my mother was even talking about Sarita anymore. If not, then my mother had already progressed to stage three: anger and bargaining. The doorbell rang. I slid off my chair and went to go get it. Perhaps it was the watchmen with good tidings?

It was Vivek. He was tall and scruffy as usual, but today he was also looking miffed and forlorn.

“Hi Leela,” he said with a wan smile. “Can you please send Sarita out? I need to talk to her.”

I stiffened. Of course, he didn't know yet. I glanced back at my mother who was still at the dining room table before I stepped outside and closed the door behind me.

“You know, I never even knew that you guys were together until very recently,” I said. “Why did you keep it a secret?”

He looked genuinely surprised. “I didn't think it was a secret. I thought that Sarita would have told you for sure.”

I sighed. “There are a lot of things she kept from me,” I said. I unfolded my hands in the air in a gesture that said *as you can see*. “She ran away sometime last night.”

I felt almost detached saying it aloud for the first time. It seemed almost like an unamusing joke, as if the truth really was that she was just down the street, at the chapel, the pharmacy, or the grocery store.

“She what?” He leaned forward as though he had misunderstood.

“You heard me right,” I said. “She left. Her room is empty. In fact, I wanted to ask you if you had any idea about where she might be.”

Vivek’s eyes were wide and red, as though he hadn’t had a wink of sleep all night. I imagined him pacing by the moonlit canal, at the site where Sarita had told him the truth.

“Do you want to sit down?” I asked. “I can get you some water. You look dead.”

“No,” he said. His eyes were staring over my head, not seeing anything. “No, I don’t want anything.”

He turned and jogged away. That was the last that I ever heard from him again.

I was still standing there when I saw Minnie and Puja out of the corner of my eye. They were walking together in the courtyard to the side of Puja’s home. I impulsively ran over to them.

“Hey,” I said. Minnie smiled but Puja looked fearful. “You,” I said, looking at Puja. “How are you?”

Puja didn’t answer. She turned and ran inside. We looked after her.

“Well that was awkward,” Minnie said finally. “I thought she was doing better.”

Puja’s mother came out. “Oh I see,” she said with a nod.

“Hi Shilpa aunty,” I said. “You know, you really should get your daughter to a therapist. She’s been assaulted by somebody, I don’t know who. She’s obviously refusing to speak, but I suspect that it was one of her cousins. She began acting weird over the summer holidays when they were here.”

Aunty’s hands were balled up into fists. “How dare you?” she whispered angrily. “You have absolutely no right...”

I was unmoved. “You can either go on pretending that it was Sarita or you can actually do something constructive and find the real culprit. At the very least, get Puja some help.”

“I was never pretending!” she shrieked.

“Please stop. Sarita ran away this morning. Honing in on her will not work in your scheme of scapegoating. It’s useless.”

Shilpa aunty smirked. “If that isn’t a confirmation of her guilt, I don’t know what is.”

I stepped closer to her. Minnie was looking at us cautiously. “You want confirmation?” I breathed in her face. *Sarita had HIV. She was terminally ill. Molesting your daughter was the last thing on her mind.*

But I didn’t say it. I wasn’t that impetuous child anymore. I would honor Sarita’s secrets no matter how difficult it would be.

“Ask Puja,” I said finally. “Ask your daughter.” Shilpa aunty’s eyes widened. “You haven’t done that, have you? You’re too afraid of the truth. But let’s not meander around it anymore. It’s not going to change.”

With that I turned and stalked back to my house. Shilpa aunty’s face was fixed like marble. Our naked dancer statues had comparatively more life in them. When I turned round the bend, my mother was leaning in the doorway.

“Come,” she said. “I made *chaat*. We need to eat. Life can’t come skidding to a stop.”

\*

This is what is left: a small slate on which Sarita used to trace the letters of the Telugu alphabet, cobwebbed ceilings, a fistful of empty air. She’s not there when I call her name. In the mornings, I have to wake up half an hour earlier than normal to turn on the

hot water geyser: she's not there to do it for me anymore. I iron my own uniforms, polish my own shoes, pack my own lunch. Sometimes my mother will mix the rice and put it in the tiffin box for me, but only sometimes. We're back to being a twosome, my mother and I. No one waits with me when I sit outside on the porch, waiting for Adi to come get me in the mornings, and no one awaits my return in the evenings. I don't get to fill in anyone on the details of my day unless I remember to do it when my mother gets home three hours after me. No one knocks on my door and sits next to me at night when I do my homework. I fill my journal with entries about school and about the books that I read, but I have no one to vociferously argue with and record about later. There is no tension in the air these days. There's just a vacuum.

"Can you believe that we only knew Sarita for half a year?" I ask my mother over breakfast. "Doesn't it seem like she'd been here forever?"

"No?" my mother replies. She hasn't been as affected by Sarita's departure as I have been.

The part in her forehead is like a golden leaf. I can't see her face. She has been extremely guarded since Sarita's leaving our house, and I know that she is remembering my father's own permanent exit, knowing what she knows about it now. It feels like *déjà-vu*, history repeating itself, a broken tape recorder, a book with the same lettering on every page.

These are the legacies that Sarita has left us: wounded memories, self-doubt, loneliness, unbroken silence. I am beginning to wonder if the sequence of people wanting out is some kind of judgment on me: my character or my personality. Maybe I am just not charming enough to make people want to stay. Maybe I shouldn't be so serious all the time.



Maybe I need to laugh more, be a little girl, play outside in the sun until my browned face resembles a burnt chapatti.

Here's the question I continue to ponder: did she tell Vivek about the HIV because my mother advised her to, or had she done it for my sake?

\*

I was thoroughly unexcited by the last leg of Annual Day at school. All pretense of having academic classes in the morning had been thrown out the window and for this last week before the big show, all of the eight school hours were being dedicated to rehearsal. We were hosting the play through and through without pause to imitate the conditions of the show night. But though the frenzy had even the crew members up and moving for our tasks, the sum effect was still one of monotony. Only this time, I was stuck in the inertia of motion, working busily with my hands but still feeling those oppressive thoughts clamoring for attention inside my head.

Anusha knew what had happened and was wisely keeping her distance. Besides, she was a constant fixture on the stage, and her time out of view was spent rehearsing lines for her next scene. I was feeling too moody to engage her in conversation over lunch or during breaks.

*Everything happens for a reason, my mother often said to me. We don't always understand why the universe unfolds as it does, but we have to learn to trust it.*

Sarita had left. She had been the one to teach me to value my life, stop mourning my father, respect my opportunities, and my education, dignify my companions with the benefit of the doubt, and imagine better worlds. But now she was gone. And yet, perhaps I

could still learn a lesson from this partition. Sarita's failures would serve to inform me as much as anything else. Her departure was going to finish what my father's had started.

I used to think that keeping secrets was a way of asserting identity. I kept my fair share of them, and apparently so did everyone else. But perhaps what we thought were secrets were just the doppelgangers of denial. I had been denying that the circumstances of my father's death were suspect, or that I had stopped having feelings for Vivek. Shilpa aunty had blamed Sarita of sexual assault because she couldn't imagine that a member of her own extended family could be so heinously culpable. And Sarita had hid the most devastating secret of all, one that when discovered, caused her to disastrously gamble her life away. It was denial, all of it. Sarita had never fully reconciled herself to her own condition, and therefore immediately assumed the worst when I ran away. After all, if she couldn't love herself, how could she expect me to be capable of loving her, despite everything?

I snuck out of rehearsal and found Shailaja ma'am. She was reading from a clipboard, going over the final sequence of events for Friday's program.

"Madam, can I ask for a favor?"

\*

This was it. Showtime. Friday had come up on all of us with the stealth of a speedy eel. The entire school was abuzz with excitement. Scores of students were milling through the corridors, getting costumes ready, joining the rest of their choral groups, or fruitlessly trying to find a certain classmate. There were at least a thousand people in the audience, as everyone's mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle, and second cousin once removed had been invited. The crowd had swelled so much that the school grounds had

been transformed into a small town. All the chairs had filled, and yet people were continuing to arrive and find seating on the grassy floor. Vendors were walking around, selling small packets of samosas, cotton candy and Cadbury chocolate bars. It was six in the evening, and while the sun hadn't completely set, it was cool and bearable to be in the midst of such a crowded scene.

A large stage had been constructed right in front of the main school building, and speakers installed on both sides. This was the last day before the Christmas and New Years break, which was going to extend to mid January to account for the Sankranti harvest festival in January. Everybody was thrilled. This was truly the season for vacations.

I knew exactly where my mother was seated: fifth row from the stage, in a bright green sari, twenty seats to the right. I had peeked out through the curtains half an hour before the program was to start and located her with precision. It was important that I know where she sat.

Shailaja ma'am had been exceedingly kind when she had heard me out and acquiesced to my request. It hadn't been a small one. I had gone up to the teacher carrels and left a small indoor hibiscus plant on her desk earlier that afternoon. She would see it later and know who it was from. I was grateful.

Our headmistress began the program with a short address thanking the audience for showing up and supporting their children. She talked at length about the school's mission statement and with each passing minute, I became more fidgety. Then the Telugu choir went up and sang a few folk songs. The second group danced to songs from the movie *Hum Dil de Chuke Sanam*, which elicited much applause and whistles from the audience. The third item on the evening's agenda was the play.

“Break a leg!” I whispered to Anusha. She giggled nervously and gave me a thumbs up. I smiled fondly. Anusha would appreciate what I was about to do. I was already anticipating the visits over the holidays; I hadn’t invited her over since before the summer, and I knew that she resented it. But that would change.

I worked frantically with the crew arranging and rearranging the set with the finesse of a surgical team. We had practiced it so much that I could have done it blindfolded and relied entirely on muscle memory. And then finally, the roar of applause. My heart thudded violently in my chest. I was about to grab my worst fear by the tail, swing it around, and watch it perish in the distance.

Shailaja ma’am pointed a finger at me. She was standing to the left of the stage, maintaining the momentum of the evening by getting the next performance ready before the current one ended.

“Leela,” she mouthed. “Get ready.”

I nodded and quickly walked over to her. Anusha looked at me after she finished taking her bow with the rest of the cast and saw me standing alert by Shailaja ma’am.

“What’s this?” she whispered.

“Watch.”

When the last actor had exited the stage, I began my walk of destiny. I could see confusion on the faces of the audience. My name wasn’t listed on the program. Step. Step. Step. Each forward step felt like an anthem. I was taking hold of this life, this adventure. No more sitting by the sidelines, a silent spectator. I focused on my mother’s curious eyes.

When people say that everything happens for our own good, they’re keeping a secret from you. They haven’t told you the whole truth. But I will. Here it is: every proverb

is a self-fulfilling prophecy with one condition: that you subscribe to it. The universe will continue, as chaotic and unordered as ever, and it is up to you to see the patterns and lessons along the way.

“Hello,” I said, my voice stunningly clear. “My name is Leela. This past summer, I lost my father. He died at the wrong time. He died too soon.” I opened the journal that I clutched in my hand to an entry that I had been revisiting for months now. The audience was hushed. “Kali, the Hindu goddess of eternal energy, whose name variously means black, time, and death among others, is the goddess of annihilation. In most of the stories and legends that surround her, she destroys her enemies by sucking the blood out of their bodies and dancing on the field of the battle in a destructive frenzy. It’s an intense image isn’t it?”

I looked out at the crowd and saw emotions ranging from simple curiosity to outright distaste at the contents of my narration splayed across the multitudinous faces. I knew that every single person there wanted to know why I was up there, and what I meant by the things that I was reading. I shook my head slightly. That was the thing about death. It didn’t mean anything.

“In one particular myth, Kali was dancing completely out of control, drunk on the blood of the slain. To calm her down and protect the stability of the world, Shiva appeared on the battlefield in the form of a crying infant. When Kali saw the distress of the child, she ceased dancing immediately to take care of him. She picked him up, kissed his head and breastfed the helpless infant. That’s how the world was saved that day.”

A small sound stopped me in my reading and I looked up again. My mother was sobbing softly, but in the complete silence, her sounds were magnified a hundred times over. Up there in my lonely spot on the stage, tears began rolling down my face as well.

“There is no answer but love,” I said, choking slightly. “There never was. I’ve been trying to make sense of my father’s death for months now, but it was always a doomed effort. It took the loss of another dear friend to make me realize that I had been focusing on the wrong abstraction. Love, not death. Sarita taught me to love again, to love my life, to love the memory of my father, and to love my mother and friends unconditionally. Love is the only synonym, the only antonym, the only tense, and the only goal worth fighting for. I know that now.” I smiled at my mother. She blew me a watery kiss.

“I know that now.”