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Vermilion-Stained Offerings

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Vermilion-Stained Offerings

A Thesis Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
The College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English
Georgia College & State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

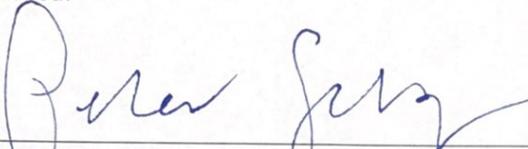
Pooja M. Desai
April 2019

Vermilion-Stained Offerings

by

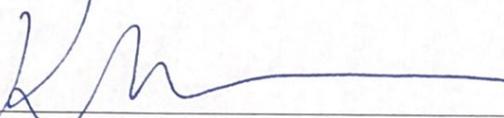
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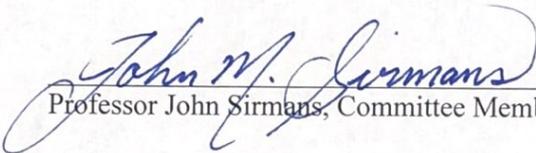
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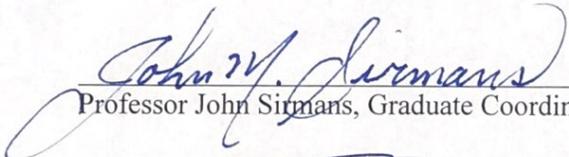
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for the grandmother who came across the ocean for me

for the mother who sacrificed for me

for the father who loves me

for the brother who supports me

for the partner who inspires me with his ceaseless passion

VERMILION-STAINED OFFERINGS

POOJA M. DESAI

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PART ONE: BODIES

I VOW TO NOURISH YOU

Scheherazade

I.

When Hira walked out of her bedroom in the morning at 8:00 A.M., her visiting cousin from India, Sherry, was still asleep on the pull-out couch. The night before, Hira had waited all evening at the airport. Sherry's flight was delayed. By the time they got back to Hira's apartment in Dallas, it was past midnight. Now Hira, tired and not wanting to go to work, was annoyed that Sherry was able to sleep in.

Sherry would not be staying with her in Dallas for long. The final destination for her young, 23-year-old cousin was Houston, where Hira's parents lived. Hira's mother, who had convinced Sherry to come to America to recover from the attack, would drive up and collect Sherry any day now.

Hira was glad for this. The drive back to her apartment from the airport had been disastrous. Embarrassing.

Hira had said to Sherry, "You look great! The doctors did a good job."

Sherry, in a deadpan voice, replied, "Stop fucking lying."

Since then, they hadn't spoken to each other. Hira's mother couldn't come soon enough. Hira wasn't sure how much more silence she could endure.

Her heart went out to Sherry. It really did. She had even bought Sherry's plane ticket, though she opted to buy one to Dallas instead of Houston because it was cheaper. Watching her sleep, Hira saw the raised ridges on Sherry's face, the lines like cantaloupe skin. It covered the left side of her nose, under eyes, and cheeks. On her brow bone, there was a red-pink scar that curved around the eye lid. Hira really hadn't lied to her cousin. The doctors had done good

work. Her friend, Olive, had a doctor who completely botched up a simple rhinoplasty procedure. Olive's nose was so flat now Hira wondered how she could breathe.

It could have been much worse for Sherry. Hira just knew it.

Besides, she always believed a little make-up could do wonders.

*

The engineering firm Hira worked for was on the fourth floor of the Winona State University administrative building. The CEO, Dr. Reddy, was a graduate professor in the Briar School of Engineering, so he felt comfortable running his company, Terrain Tech, from his university office. The administrative building was only a 15-minute walk from Hira's apartment. She left at 8:15 A.M, walked along 1st street, passing the Howard Lofts leasing office and the new Taco Bell Cantina pop-up, crossed the busiest intersection in all of Winona, stopped at the 7-11 on the other side of that intersection to pick up her breakfast and then stopped at an up-scale coffee shop called Flightrisk, next to the administrative building. Once out of the terrible coffee line, she entered the double glass doors of her workplace, nodded at the security guard who forever stared out the window rubbing his stomach pooch. Hira stepped into her office at 9 A.M., never once late, with a sugary, dense doughnut in one hand and small cup of French-pressed coffee in the other.

The only thing that bothered her about Terrain Tech's location was the students who congregated on the fourth floor as if it were a student union center. Since Hira's office was right next to Dr. Reddy's, students would often pester often pestered her about the professor's whereabouts, as if she were Dr. Reddy's secretary and not his editorial consultant for a top engineering firm.

Hira was no longer affiliated with the university. After graduating a year before, she'd replied to Dr. Reddy's Craigslist job listing. It had been the only job that did not demand three years of experience. Dr. Reddy, a middle-aged Indian man, replied to her email with improper email formatting and sentence fragments that when deciphered made Hira realize 1) he had offered her an interview and 2) had indeed need of an editor. She later discovered Dr. Reddy to be quite eloquent. He struggled only with the written word. Hira had edited his scholarly articles for publication in the company's "Pavement Sustainability" journal. Now she was editing the doctor's 200-page book on thin asphalt overlays, her biggest project to date. It wasn't an exciting job – no one truly cared about thin asphalt overlays – but Hira took pride in her work. On-site outings with engineers from the Department of Transportation convinced her they were doing big things, that road care was a big deal. They were changing the world one lab report at a time.

Texas October's were warm. A calming heat settled in the air, brushing up against people leaving their homes and offices. The heat in October, unlike the heat in the summer months, felt comfortable. October heat wrapped around trees and under creek bridges and around pedestrians. Safety. It cradled, it cuddled, it said goodbye before the winter chill arrived in November.

It was, for all intents and purposes, nice.

Not many students were on the fourth floor. Hira learned Dr. Reddy wasn't coming in at all, which meant she could take her time getting started on her work. Instead of heading straight to her office as she normally did when stepping off the elevator, she made a detour to the ladies' room. She put her doughnut and coffee down by the sink, grabbed a flat iron out of her bag, along with a comb, and did her hair. After spending too much time making sure Sherry had everything she may need she left her apartment in a rush.

Hira parted her hair in sections, working slowly. The smell of burning strands filled the room. She didn't mind. At that hour, few women worked on the fourth floor. She'd be alone for a while.

Her hair pin-straight, Hira arrived at her office to find five missed calls from her mother, who had been calling her since she'd gotten out of the shower that morning. Hira phoned her back.

"Why haven't you answered my calls?"

"I was getting ready for work."

"When did Sherry arrive?"

Hira took a bite out of her doughnut. With a long fingernail she wiped a crumb from her lips. "We got home late. Eleven or so."

"How is she?"

"We've barely spoken, Mummy." Hira sipped her coffee. She turned her computer on. "I wasn't feeling very talkative."

"You left her alone in the apartment?"

"I couldn't bring her with me to work. Don't start being unreasonable, Mummy."

"After all she's been through. I told her mother we'd look out for her."

"I left her food in the freezer and my phone number." Hira scrolled through her emails. The engineering library had yet to send the documents she needed for Dr. Reddy's next article.

"You think everyone from India is so helpless. You were never helpless."

"My situation was very different."

"What do you want me to do? Go home and rock her until she's okay?"

“The doctors in Agra said her sight was nearly lost. Poor thing. Living in India all her life and she’s never seen the Taj Mahal!”

“How many New Yorkers have seen the Statue of Liberty?”

“For something like this to happen to Sherry while she’s on vacation? It’s terrible.”

“I wouldn’t be able to stand vacationing in that sort of heat alone. Pants? I wouldn’t dare. I’d have worn a dress like she did. Goodness Mummy, men always have something to say, don’t they? But they tell you the dangers of the dresses, don’t they?” Hira ran a palm down the hem of her red Calvin Klein dress, elegantly cut at the knees. “Sherry was more adventurous than either of us. From what I’ve heard.”

She finished her coffee and threw the container into the waste bin under her desk.

“She should have been more cautious. When are you picking her up?”

“Baa expects her room to be ready on Saturday. I suppose I can come up then.”

“Fantastic.”

“How’s Zahin? Are you two getting along okay?”

“He’s overbearing. Checks in on me all the time.”

“But that’s nice. You know, all I’ve ever wanted for you was to have someone care enough to check in on you.”

“You and Daddy check in on me all the time. I don’t need to add another person to that list.”

“People just worry, is all.”

“People worry too much. Look, I have to go now. A few things need to get done.”

“Alright, but just promise me you’ll look out Sherry until I get there. She hasn’t been herself.”

“Yes, sure, fine,” Hira said, taking the final bite of her doughnut. Half of it was left because she never managed to finish the whole thing. “Love you, Mummy. Bye.”

II.

Sherry sat on her cousin’s pink, upholstered arm chair in her pristine living room, with photos on the wall of her cousin’s active social life (work parties, beach parties, parties abroad, parties, parties, parties), a large, flat screen television nestled between two bookcases filled with books about concrete and pavement experiments, and a grey shag rug that felt like heaven when toes wrestled with strands, she watched the wall and thought about blue dresses.

Sherry often stared off into a void. Her therapist in Mumbai told her she should try and accomplish a goal for the day – no matter how little – whenever she caught herself doing this.

That morning, she had no goals.

With her knees up to her chest, and arms that wrapped themselves around her shins, her left forearm carefully avoiding the gauze that was stuck firmly on her injured – no, monstrous – upper left thigh, she thought about a cotton blue dress, with subtle bell sleeves and a neckline that was embroidered in glorious, white thread.

This was a dress meant to be worn when telling stories.

It was magnificent.

The first time Sherry wore it, she had volunteered to read storybooks at a local library in small, rural community outside of Navsari.

The second time she wore the dress to deliver the *Gujarati Samachar* newspaper to Mr. Patel at Happyness Chinese Restaurant because he called her up and knew she’d go buy one at one of the stands and bring it to him before he got his dinner. She stayed and read him an article

about how Prime Minister Modi had decided to visit Arunachal Pradesh, a much-disputed territory between China and India. Mr. Patel ate his fried rice, intently listening to Sherry as she herself became enthralled with the story, crossing her legs, the blue dress lying beautifully against her knees, and resting her chin on her palm.

The third time she wore the dress, Sherry was telling her best friend, Priti, the story of how Ashok proposed to her. The bell sleeves swayed with each, animated hand gesture.

Here is the ring.

Sway.

There were this many flowers.

Sway.

His beard was doing this thing, he should have gone to the groomers.

Sway.

But now there is no more Ashok. No more Ashok because of what happened the final time Sherry wore the dress. The wedding cancelled, Sherry scarred.

It happened just a few weeks prior to this—as she thinks of it—“pathetic” moment of sitting alone on a hideous pink thing with a throbbing thigh.

She had decided to go see the Taj Mahal for the first time. She wore the blue dress. It was deadly hot outside. Walking a couple of hundred yards without water had the tendency to make people faint. Women in their salwars and saris used any piece of their scarfs to wipe the sweat off their faces and arms. Sherry couldn't stand the thought of wearing something so constricting, especially since the car park was far away from the actual attraction. She wore her dress with golden sandals and put her long, black hair back into a ponytail because the heat was bound to make it frizzy no matter what she wanted to do with it.

A carriage led by a camel brought her to the ticket gate. The camel smelled like shit, and laughed with the other riders about it. All along the route, she spotted vendors selling Taj Mahal key chains and snow globes, which she thought too funny not to buy once she was finished visiting the grounds. Under the broiling sun, men and women collected rupees in tin plates, money for food and water, the cost of another day of survival in Agra.

When Sherry arrived at the grounds, it was everything beyond her expectations. She had learned about the Taj Mahal in school, but never having visited it always made it a figment of her imagination. Non-existent, and something that would be non-existent until she stepped past the ticket booth and stepped onto the property stones. The stark contrast of having something so beautiful in the middle of an impoverished community didn't go unnoticed by her. Her sandals were already covered in dirt from the outside vendor grounds, so stepping into such pureness was jarring. Just outside the walls, one of the most polluted rivers in the world flowed – Yamuna.

It was difficult to be in such niceness, it was difficult to wear the rose-colored glasses and be amazed when the journey it took to get to a place so gorgeously designed was more eye opening to the realities of Indian cities that host a countless number of tourists. Through her visit, all Sherry could think about was going back home to write a think piece. Something to share with her friends, her family, and maybe even her neighborhood in Surat. The story was itching to leave her body.

As she walked away from the grounds and towards the snow globe table, a middle-aged man with softly brushed black hair and a buttoned up maroon shirt eyed her. She smiled at him, but kept walking.

“Hey yaar,” he shouted.

“Yes?” Sherry turned around.

He spoke to her in fast, staccato Hindi.

“Nice clothes, but you should dress better around here.”

Sherry was well aware of the stigma of wearing revealing clothing in some places, especially Agra which was known to be a human trafficking hub. Still, it was the Taj Mahal. French schoolgirls visited in powder blue skirt uniforms and Americans in equally fashionable dresses. Sherry hardly stood out in the crowd.

“Thank you, but I’m fine,” Sherry replied, turning around.

“Legs. Nice girls cover them,” he said. “Get married.”

“Bhai, baas,” Sherry said. *Enough*. “You’re out of line and I’m not interested.”

The man stared at her hard, wounded even, and walked away. Sherry wasn’t surprised. She’s had similar conversations with random strangers her entire life and in many ways had polished her confidence when handling such situations.

She approached the snow globe vendor, an old man in a light, tan shirt and cotton shorts. He had an impressive assortment. Green, white, and orange bases to represent the flag, as well as cartoon bases with Mickey Mouse and Disney princesses to attract the younger crowds. When Sherry found the perfect globe, one with a green base with “Agra, India” hand painted in white, she picked it up and shook. White flecks slowly descended onto the off-white plastic figurine. The marble masterpiece. Sherry used both hands to grasp onto it, her fingers curving around its circumference. A cooler Taj Mahal. A livable Taj Mahal.

“Hey yaar!”

Startled by the shout in her ear, Sherry barely had enough time to turn around before she felt hot, blistering pain on her thigh. Screaming, she dropped the snow globe back onto the table,

letting it clatter with all the other globes and reflexively moved her palm to her thigh, in a desperate attempt to halt the sizzling, the bubbling. To stop her skin from melting.

She looked down to her leg and couldn't see.

Was there something on her face too?

She couldn't see her skin curling into itself.

She couldn't see the destroyed hem of her dress.

The pain is still there, so fresh, and Sherry hadn't let anyone touch her since it happened. She got off the armchair and made her way to the kitchen. It was time for lunch and Hira had left her frozen pizza. She went to preheat the oven, turning the stainless steel knob to 350 degrees, but was met with nothing but a broken gadget. Sighing, she considered going to the neighbors who, according to Hira, were very nice. The only problem was that she had heard everyone in their small hallway leave in the early morning.

And of course they left.

It was such a nice day.

III.

Sunny thought it was such a nice day. He didn't want to go to school, so he stayed in his bedroom. He didn't even need to fake sick as he had with his other foster family, which was good because his other foster family never believed him. He simply told Mrs. Gregory that he didn't want to go just this once, pretty please, as Mrs. Gregory ushered everyone out of the apartment to get the day started. Mrs. Gregory relented, just this once she said, feeling indulgent since she'd be home earlier than usual anyway. She left some food on the counter for the eight-

year-old before heading off to work and leaving Sunny alone. Sunny was a little surprised, because even though he wanted to be left alone, he wasn't sure Mrs. Gregory should have actually done it. Grown-ups never say yes to him, probably because his ideas were never A-plus, great.

Sunny liked his new family. They weren't too bad and the older kids were good about sharing their video games, so Sunny never felt unwelcomed. He particularly liked how Mrs. Gregory didn't make him go to school today, that Mrs. Gregory understood it was too nice a day to go to school. Sunny wasn't going to go outside, though. That was one thing Mrs. Gregory said not to do, and Sunny didn't know what he would do out there alone. Instead, he decided to watch cartoons for most of the day.

It was around 1 o'clock when Sunny, who was in the kitchen eating ravioli out of a can, heard a clicking sound coming from the front door. He went to investigate, standing by the door, confused by who was having trouble with the keyhole and who was back at the apartment so soon. He was tempted to open the door, but Mrs. Gregory said to never open the door for strangers. Sunny couldn't even reach the peephole to see who it was.

The door finally opened and Sunny jumped back when he saw that it was a woman with a frozen pizza box. She looked equally surprised to see Sunny.

"Who are you?" Sunny demanded.

"Scheherazade," the woman said. "But you can call me Sherry."

The woman had a thick accent. Her hair was thick too; long, black strands that cascaded down her torso, all the way to her ribs. Sunny saw that it wasn't a key she used to open the door, but a credit card.

"Did you use that to open the door?" Sunny asked. "Like they do in the movies?"

“I did,” Sherry said. “Just like the movies.”

“Why are you here?”

“I’m visiting America, of course.”

“I mean, why are you in my apartment?”

“Oh. I didn’t know this was your apartment. I’m sorry. I would have planned this better if I had known you lived here alone.”

“I don’t live here alone, silly. Everyone’s gone away to work and school. I got to stay.”

“That must be nice for you,” Sherry said.

“It is nice. Super nice. Did you really think I lived here alone?”

“Oh yes.” Sherry nodded to him seriously. “It’s not very hard to believe. What’s your name?”

“Sunny. So why are you here?”

“I’ll be honest, Sunshine. I didn’t think anyone was going to be here. I saw all these people leave the apartment earlier, so I thought it was empty. But now that I see you standing here, I think you must have thrown a party last night and those people were your friends leaving.”

“You’re silly. They’re my foster family, not my friends.” Sunny laughed.

“Ah, I see,” Sherry said, alternating the pizza box to her other hand. “That’s wonderful, Sunshine.”

“What’s the pizza for?” Sunny asked, his stomach coming alive with interest. Canned ravioli never did much for him.

“Oh!” Sherry let out a ringing laugh. “My cousin’s oven was broken. I needed an oven to use, so I thought I’d come and use yours.”

“You can just ask next time, you know.” Sunny grabbed the Sherry’s hand and led her to the kitchen. “Right there. I don’t know how to use it.”

“My oh my. Neither do I. But we’ll figure it out, won’t we Sunshine?”

“Yeah! Mrs. Gregory never lets me touch things over here.”

“Mrs. Gregory sounds like she doesn’t want you to get hurt.”

Sunny shrugged. “I like her.”

Sunny watched as Sherry put the pizza in the oven and played with the dial to turn it on. He was on his tiptoes, so anxious to chow.

“Are you always so hungry?” Sherry asked.

“Always.”

“They don’t feed you here?”

“They do,” Sunny said, lifting up the canned ravioli. “I don’t like Chef B., though. Do you like Chef B.?”

“I hate Chef B. Who likes Chef B.?” Sherry scrunched up her face.

“Not me.”

“Me either. So. Why did you get to stay home from school today?”

“It’s too nice a day to be in school.”

“Are you going out?”

“I’m not allowed to go out alone. But at least I’m not in the smelly classroom. My teacher always leaves food in her desk.”

“You’re right. It’s too nice a day to be inside a smelly classroom.”

When the pizza was done, Sherry gave Sunny four slices and took four for herself.

“This is too many,” Sunny said.

“Save some for later,” Sherry said. “Have you ever been on an adventure, Sunshine?”

“I’ve been to Camelot before.”

“Oh, like King Arthur?”

“Yes. I’m Lancelot!”

“Have you ever been on an adventure in real life?”

“Sometimes we go to the museum, but that’s not as fun as Camelot.”

“I bet nothing is as fun as going to Camelot.”

Sunny nodded.

“Do I look like a dragon?” Sherry asked. “A dragon you would slay?”

Sunny tilted his head. “Kinda,” he said, pointing to the left side of Sherry’s face. “But only that part.”

“Hmm, I thought so.”

Sunny finished his first slice of pizza, and was dismayed to see that Sherry was *beating* him, already on her third slice

“But dragons are cool!” he said. “They breathe fire! And can fly! And they have those huge wings they can hit people with! I wish I was a dragon!”

“It’s not so fun,” Sherry said, finishing up and taking her plastic plate to the trash. “I better get going. Thanks for letting me use your oven. Maybe don’t tell Mrs. Gregory.”

“I won’t.”

Watching Sherry walk to the door, Sunny blurted, “Can I touch it?”

“Touch what?”

“Your dragon skin. I want to feel it.”

Sherry moved toward him, picked up his small forearm, and placed Sunny's tiny palm against her cheek. Sunny could feel felt the warmth coming off the skin, could hear Sherry hiss.

"Fire," he said with a gleam in his eye.

"Fire," Sherry agreed.

Lips

The actors shout for little Betty Parris to arise from her stupor under yellow lights, her lifeless body on the black tiled floor, entertainment for the silent, awe-stricken audience who occupy black benches and black chairs lined up against black painted walls in the black box theatre, and you are with me behind the black curtain by the black backdoor exit, and I'm not surprised anymore that I lost my first kiss in this darkness, wearing Puritan clothing to enter stage left as one of Miller's courtroom witches in a play where women are persecuted and male actors take their liberties dragging us on and off stage because they are "in character," but leaving real bruises on our arms and throwing us to the ground, that black tiled floor where Betty lies, and while Betty lies there, you tell me it's good luck to kiss actors on the cheek before they go on, pointing to your own cheek, and you are young and I am young so I think nothing of it as I lean forward because cheeks are harmless, cheeks are grandmothers, and mothers, and fathers, and brothers, and cousins, and babies, but in the last second you turn your face so my lips are on yours and all I feel is the wet of your mouth, your lips moving against mine and my lips frozen because I don't know what to do with this feeling, an unfamiliar sensation I didn't ask for, not yet, not with you, and one my Indian mother didn't sit down and tell me about, and when we break apart I look at you with wide eyes and saliva stuck lips while you look at me with achievement pinned into your eyes, something that can be seen even in the shadows, and all I do is run out the door and to the dressing room to tell the other girls what you did, but they laugh and say it's not a big deal, so I don't tell them I didn't like it because I would be weird and being the only Indian actress has done enough in that department, so I keep your lips as my first, except that you managed to take away all the first kiss fantasies I conjured up in my childhood, the boy at the school dance leaning in during the slow song, and let it go, which is a mistake, because a

month later your best friend will touch my bare right thigh on the school bus and go up up up despite my stop stop stop, and you will do the same thing before, along with the other theatre boys, you make a list of the girls you want to fuck, and two months after that I will find myself behind a stage curtain with you again during a production of *South Pacific*, and seconds before we go on and pretend to be comrades in war, you will lean in close, lips on my ear, and whisper: “Your legs are the smoothest I’ve ever felt, how do you do it?”

PART TWO: ISOLATION

I VOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR SOUL

Vile Parle Blues

On the white tiled floor of his apartment, in the Juhu area of Mumbai, Gaurav sorted his luggage. He was preparing for a trip to Surat, a city three hours north, where his new and heavily pregnant wife, Upi, was taking comfort in the arms of her mother. His baby girl was going to be born any day. Gaurav had finished up business with his accounting firm, taken his leave, and was now ready to join his family. As he packed away a box of chocolate cherries, Upi's favorite, there was a knock on the door.

“Mumbai police!”

Gaurav barely unlocked the door before two policemen grabbed his arm. He was dragged away, his suitcase splayed out and forgotten on the floor, his balcony door openly swinging, letting in the cool breeze from the sea.

At the police station, Gaurav sat with the lead investigator, Mr. Agarwal.

“You stole four packets of paan and a bag of kachori from the Koshla stall,” Mr. Agarwal said.

Gaurav recognized the name of the stall. It was located in Vile Parle, a Marathi neighborhood in West Mumbai. His sister, Asha, and brother-in-law, Mohit, lived there.

“No,” Gaurav said. “Do I look like someone who needs to steal?”

Gaurav was loud about his lifestyle, never really hiding his wealth. His yellow Versace polo and beige Givenchy slippers – clothes he wore to yoga – were dead giveaways.

“The stall is across from your sister's apartment. Her neighbors saw you do it,” Mr. Agarwal said.

“They're lying!”

“I don't think they are.”

“You don’t have any proof,” Gaurav said. “So what is it you want from me? Money? I can give you money.”

Gaurav watched Mr. Agarwal stand. The detective paced the length of his desk before stopping in front of Gaurav. He then slapped Gaurav’s face.

“Do you think we’re corrupt here?” Mr. Agarwal shouted.

Gaurav re-focused his eyes back to Mr. Agarwal, still shocked from the hit. He wanted to laugh at the question. This wasn’t the first time Gaurav had to pay Mumbai police for something he didn’t do. Just last year, he was pulled over on the highway. He had been on his way to the airport to drop off his American cousins who were visiting. His cousins’ bags were strapped onto the roof of the vehicle, and a police officer thought it was suspicious. Once all the bags were cleared, the police officer still demanded money knowing foreigners usually had it.

“I didn’t do it,” Gaurav said. “When did it happen?”

“This morning at 10:00,” Mr. Agarwal said. “The neighbors saw you.”

“I was in my apartment cleaning,” Gaurav said. “My wife is pregnant. I wanted the apartment ready for our new daughter. Please, I didn’t do this.”

“So you were alone?”

Gaurav stayed silent.

“I think you’re desperate,” Mr. Agarwal said. “No one saw you in your apartment, but several people saw you at the stall.”

“I need to call my wife,” Gaurav said. “I also want a lawyer.”

“Sure, sure. We’ll get you those things.”

*

Instead, he endured the belt at the hands of the police who wanted nothing more than for him to confess to stealing the paan and kachori no matter how many times Gaurav pleaded that he wasn't one to chew paan or eat kachori, that they didn't have enough proof, and that he lived too far from the stall to begin with.

He wanted to confess, not because the torture was unbearable, though it was, but because Upi was waiting for him. His daughter was waiting for him.

Gaurav's 6x8 cell at the police station was underground. The walls and floors of his room were plastered with conveyer belt material, making the entire room uncomfortably hot. There was no toilet. The guards would sometimes bang and knock on every cell door, making him curl up in the corner of his black hell as he anticipated their entrance – as he anticipated another round with the belt. When the guards would never come in, Gaurav began to think it was all in his head.

After 32 days of isolation and abuse, a guard banged on his door. Gaurav scooted himself up against the wall, and pulled his knees to his chest. The light from the hallway brightened the entire room.

“You're free to go,” the guard said. He stood at the door without emotion.

“What?” Gaurav's voice was nearly gone. He only received one glass of water a day, along with one chapatti. Gaurav's spine and hips – hips that used to be soft with fat but were now taut and bony – were covered with deep wounds and crisscrossing gashes.

The guard looked into Gaurav's eyes. “We caught the real thief.”

Gaurav clenched teeth, biting his inner cheek. He looked straight at the guard. The air between them was still. No noise. Then Gaurav collapsed forward onto his hands and knees. He screamed.

“Stop it!” the guard shouted. “Shut up!”

Gaurav continued to howl, even after the guard stepped into the cell and pulled him out of the cell by the arm.

“Stop it! Don’t you want to go home?” he shouted again. Gaurav cried and stumbled as he was led back upstairs to the station.

At the out-processing window, Gaurav was still crying. The guard gave up on getting him to stop. He leaned against the wall.

“You just need to sign a form. I will escort you out of the building,” he said.

The woman working the desk smiled at Gaurav, almost as if in congratulations of being released.

“It doesn’t seem like you had any personal items on you when you arrived,” she said.

“You took my beige slippers when I got here,” Gaurav said.

The woman went back to look for them, but returned empty handed.

“I don’t see them,” she said. She pushed over a release form. “Please sign this. Then you can leave.”

Gaurav never signed anything so quick. As the guard led him to the front door, Gaurav noticed Mr. Agarwal sitting at his desk. He didn’t even look at Gaurav.

“How did you realize it wasn’t me?” Gaurav asked the guard.

“The real thief went back to the old man’s food stall to steal more paan and kachori.”

Gaurav felt numb. They beat him for 32 days, and in those 32 days he didn’t confess. He couldn’t. Not when he was going to be the father of a girl he knew would be strong – a girl who would stand up for herself.

He needed to be the father of that girl. He needed to be the example.

Now he was.

*

Once out of the station, Gaurav walked six miles to Dr. Parul. He had no rupees for a rickshaw. He also wore the same, white linen pants he had been arrested in. Only now, they were ripped and soiled with sweat stains, blood, urine, and even a small amount of shit from when he'd had diarrhea during a fever. He couldn't get them off fast enough in the middle of the night. His yellow Versace polo wasn't in good shape either.

When Gaurav arrived, Dr. Parul told him infected wounds needed to be cleaned and Gaurav needed to be started on antibiotics. Dr. Parul wasn't the best with bedside manners, but Gaurav knew she cared. He knew because 30 minutes after he'd been admitted, Dr. Parul personally called his sister instead of letting the front desk do it.

Gaurav was resting on one of the clinic beds, when Asha came running in.

"Oh my god, Gaurav!" she said, embracing him.

Gaurav, touch-starved, hugged her back and began sobbing again.

"They never let me call Upi," Gaurav cried. "They never let me call her."

"She is fine, bhai," Asha said, crying now too. "Very healthy. You have a daughter named Vidya, bhai. You have a daughter."

Asha pulled out her cell phone, and held up a picture of Vidya. Gaurav grabbed the phone, looking at it closer. Kissing it.

"Vidya," Gaurav whispered to himself. "Where are they now? Home at the apartment?"

Asha squeezed Gaurav tighter. "She is still in Surat with her parents."

"I need to go right now," Gaurav said. "I'll get my bags and go."

“You’re hurt,” Asha said. “You’ll see them soon. But for now, come home with me and rest. Mohit and I insist.”

Gaurav reluctantly agreed. He didn’t want to scare Upi with his appearance, or let Vidya get to know the face he currently had – the one with bruises and cuts. He went back to his apartment, only to be greeted by wet clothes and wet furniture due to the balcony door that was left open. It had rained. Big mosquitos, palm sized ones with delicate features, nestled themselves inside anywhere they could. The whole apartment was windswept.

Gaurav closed the balcony door, packed up the suitcase he was in the middle of packing when he got arrested, and grabbed his phone – something that now held his most precious possession: a picture of his Vidya.

*

Living with Asha and Mohit was not as calming as Gaurav had hoped it would be. Despite Mohit working at the neighborhood school as a math tutor and Asha taking occasional catering jobs around the city, they somehow always found the time to pester him.

Did you manage to eat at all?

I don’t think you should go get a pint.

But did you eat, Gaurav?

Let me get those washed for you.

Gaurav, stop looking out the curtains.

Don’t go to bed so late tonight.

Did you eat?

Gaurav heard Asha whisper her concern to Mohit one night after dinner. Asha believed Gaurav was overly paranoid and horribly scarred because of the time he spent in police custody.

Gaurav tried very hard not to laugh when they both began to discuss ways to help him cope with his trauma. Gaurav was nearly thirty, not at all a child. It was maddening how much they talked about his issues behind his back all while thinking he was too stupid – too *disturbed* – to notice.

A few days after being released by the Mumbai police, Gaurav stopped by Tea Villa Café. It was here in Vile Parle where Gaurav first saw The Tourist.

The Tourist was sitting outside, two tables down from Gaurav, drinking steaming chai out of a large white mug and eating a samosa with poha. He wore a tan hat, a type being sold by a vendor a block away, and had a camera dangling around his neck. His camera bag, black and simple with a tiny, faded American flag sticker stuck on the corner, sat serenely on the table. Though it was July and the sky was overcast, he was wearing black sunglasses. Folks in town were preparing for the monsoon. The Tourist also held a map of Mumbai, most likely acquired from the same vendor who sold him the hat.

For a moment, Gaurav thought this man looked too much like a tourist to actually be one.

But he did have the NRI look about him. To be sure, this man was Indian, thought Gaurav, but not Indian born and raised. Gaurav watched how The Tourist wiped his fingers on a napkin after every bite from his samosa, how he politely sipped his chai without making the slurping noises. Gaurav's mother always told him the taste comes from the slurp – every bit of the cardamom and ginger pressed into the tongue that way, lingering for a while. Chai was not something meant to be choked down, it was not meant to casually pass over the tongue and into the throat as a means of being polite. Everyone knew this, but – apparently – not The Tourist.

The Tourist only looked at Gaurav once. Gaurav nodded to him out of awkwardness. With a small smile, The Tourist nodded back.

His mustache was thin. It looked like a dead, black worm on his lip.

The next day, Gaurav thought he saw The Tourist again. He had gone to the cinema to watch an Om Puri film and just knew that the man sat 1, 2, 3 rows behind him. The back of his neck, prickled with the growing hair he hadn't had time to groom, became wet with sweat. His palms became wet too, the sweat intermingling with the salt from the boiled peanuts he was eating. Gaurav couldn't enjoy the film, he was so uncomfortable. The second sighting made Gaurav certain that he was being followed.

*

A week passed since Gaurav had last seen The Tourist.

Every morning he jogged west, and one time he thought he saw the same man near a construction site. After that, he decided to run twice a day, west in the morning, and in the late afternoons, east toward the the Jaya He Museum to eliminate any chance of coincidence.

Monsoon season had started full force in Mumbai, but that didn't deter Gaurav from his routine. When he arrived at the shopping centre near the museum one afternoon, he pretended to take a break, pressing his clammy palms on his hips and curling his fingers painfully around his lower abdomen. Drops of rainwater were hanging onto the ends of his black hair and dripping onto his dull, brown skin and sticking onto his roughly kept beard. He looked at the people walking around him, a cursory glance for any spies or policemen, or The Tourist who may have been both.

Coming to this shopping centre now felt bittersweet. It was here that Gaurav and Upi had their first date at the Kabeela Kitchen and Bar. It was here where they had gotten Vidya her first set of baby clothes and shoes. It all felt like years ago. It all felt like another world.

*

When Gaurav arrived back at the apartment building, a few boys were kicking a ball around in the muddy car park. He stopped to watch them. One of the larger boys was hoarding the ball. When he missed the goal, his teammates groaned in frustration.

“Pass the ball next time!” Gaurav shouted to him.

The boy scowled at him.

Startled by a tap on his shoulder, with his hands instinctively raised, Gaurav turned to face Asha. She held two grocery bags, her cheeks flushed, her damp straw-like hair in a rigid bun, her lips straining to form words.

“They’re just kids. Let them play their way,” was all she could manage.

An apology failing on his lips, Gaurav trudged up the steps of the building ahead of Asha muttering about teamwork and fairness. He didn’t offer to carry the groceries.

Gaurav only then registered just how cold he was in his soaked clothes. The keys shook in his hand as he tried to get the door to the apartment open. Asha waited patiently, watching as Gaurav continually tried to turn the lock. Eventually it was Mohit who opened the door.

“What’s wrong with the key?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Gaurav replied, walking past his brother-in-law and into his bedroom.

He stripped out of his wet clothes, grabbed a towel that hung off his desk chair, and wiped himself dry. After warming up, he put on some clothes that were presentable for dinner.

When Mohit walked in without knocking, Gaurav clucked his tongue like someone half his age would.

“Here,” Mohit handed him a pair of scissors and a straight razor. “It’s about time, don’t you think?”

Gaurav didn’t say a word. He took the tools and went to the bathroom.

He looked at himself in the vanity above the sink. His black beard was already beginning to hang off his chin. Asha had begged him to shave, but he never got around to it. He combed his fingers through the length, untangling the knots. He trimmed the beard precisely using the scissors. The hairs scattered into the white sink below, sticking there like tea leaves at the bottom of a porcelain cup. It took Gaurav awhile, but when he was finished, he was able to lather on the velvety shaving cream he found in one of the bathroom cupboards. He turned the razor over in his hand, examining it. The weight of the blade was foreign. It had been too long since he held one.

He liked the beard for one reason and one reason only: it covered some of the scarring and some of the bruising. Without the hair, it was all visible. There was no hiding. There was no pretending he was normal. They appeared, quite literally, like dark scarlet labels etched onto his skin.

He looked into the mirror and then looked behind him. No one was watching. He brought the blade to his jaw, swallowed, and swiped downward.

*

When he walked into the kitchen, Asha and Mohit had already begun eating. Seeing Gaurav’s clean-shaven face, Asha choked. Gaurav turned to hide his scars.

“No!” Asha said. “It looks really really good.”

Gaurav noticed a bowl of sambar at his place setting. Then he smelled red Kashmiri chili peppers, along with the cumin and dal.

“Your favorite, right?” Asha asked. “Mohit made it.”

“I warmed it up,” Mohit said, laughing. “Asha had a catering gig at the temple earlier.”

“It is my favorite,” Gaurav said, picking up a soft, warm rice idli from the center of the table and slipping it into the sambar. “Thank you.”

With one hand, he scooped large spoonfuls of the red soup into his mouth, and with the other hand, held a piece of crunchy papad which he bit from after every two slurps. He counted.

“Are you feeling better?” Asha asked when Gaurav put his spoon down and sat back in his chair.

He wanted to argue that he had been fine all along, but he knew it would be easier to just say yes.

“When do you think would be the best time to go see Upi and Vidya?” Gaurav asked instead. “I can hire a driver early as tomorrow.”

Asha stared at him for awhile before looking down at her fingers.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea right now.”

“I know it’s not perfect. Not with the way I look. But I don’t know how much longer I can stay away from Vidya. Upi won’t even answer my calls.”

Asha frowned.

After examining her, Gaurav mirrored her frown.

“Do you know why she won’t pick up?”

“What happened to you was hard on all of us,” Mohit injected. “Give Upi some time.”

“What does she need time for? I need time! I need time back! I need— ”

“Try to be considerate!” Asha pleaded. “You need to be okay-okay before you see Vidya. We all think so.”

“So everyone is making decisions for me behind my back?” Gaurav said. “She’s my daughter, Asha.”

“Exactly,” Mohit said. “So stay here for a bit. Get better. Then go to Surat.”

“And if I don’t listen?” Gaurav challenged. “You’ll what? Force me to stay here?”

“If I have to watch you every second, then sure,” Mohit shot back.

Gaurav swallowed, the threat of being watched causing his skin to warm up in nervousness. He locked his jaw, stood from the table, and with a final look towards his sister and brother-in-law, walked away.

*

Except when interrogating him, the guards at the prison never communicated with Gaurav, and Gaurav never communicated with them either, especially not when he was being interrogated. As a result, he wasn’t kept updated on Asha’s pregnancy. There had been one day, though, when some information slipped out of Mr. Agarwal’s mouth. Gaurav had just completed his second week of imprisonment when Mr. Agarwal dragged him out of his cell and fastened him to a wall. He wanted a confession and tried to gather it with the belt again.

Gaurav struggled, his own weakness finally taking a toll. The earlier façade of bravery and strength was fading, but he knew he couldn’t say anything. He couldn’t risk incriminating himself.

When Mr. Agarwal realized his method wasn’t working, he brought up Upi.

“Your daughter’s been born, you know. I like to check up on her and her mother every once in a while since her father’s not around,” he smiled. “Poor little thing, really. Maybe I’ll grant you a visit. All I want is a confession.”

Gaurav knew he wouldn’t get a visit. He knew Mr. Agarwal was lying, so he continued to keep his mouth shut despite his desperation to get off the wall. He thought about his daughter to get through it, and he just hung there, content with the fact that Mr. Agarwal had given him the information in the first place.

His daughter was born.

The line between what was real and what was not quickly began to blur, but Gaurav grabbed onto the one thing in his brain that he knew was real.

Vidya was the reason Gaurav was still alive.

*

Early the next morning, Gaurav asked Asha to hire a driver to take him to Surat.

“She’s my daughter.” Gaurav’s voice was choked

Asha gave him a resigned look.

“Let Mohit take you.”

Mohit, who had just walked in, groaned at the idea of having to spend the morning driving Gaurav three hours away. “I thought we agreed this wasn’t a good idea.”

Gaurav ignored him.

“I don’t need to be watched,” he told Asha.

“Please,” Asha pleaded. “Do it for me.”

Within the hour, both men were ready to head out.

“Isn’t this neat?” Asha shoved a bulky camera bag into Gaurav’s arms. “Mohit got it for my birthday. Take some pictures for me.”

Gaurav studied the bag. His hands became damp with sweat and he let out shallow breaths. He tried to school his features so that no one would notice his distress. He looked back up at a smiling Asha and down to the black camera bag in his hands.

“Let’s go before it gets late,” Mohit muttered.

Gaurav jerked his head up and looked at his brother-in-law. He tried to imagine a mustache on that face. Above those lips. A dead, black worm.

Did Asha know? Was she in on it too?

Gaurav tasted bile in the back of his throat.

*

In the passenger seat, as Mohit drove north and out of Vile Parle, Gaurav chewed on his fingernails. Every so often he would spit air, releasing any liberated clippings onto the dashboard. It was a disgusting habit. He tried to keep his hand out of his mouth by wedging it beneath his thigh. But then he would glance at Mohit, just a glance, and barely half a minute would pass before he was chewing and spitting again.

The car slowed down into stopping traffic, and drivers began to honk their horns all around.

Mohit frowned. “There’s never this much traffic on this road.”

Gaurav put his head out the window to see if he could spot the obstruction. Instead, he saw a man frantically running in between cars toward Mohit’s truck. Before he could pass by, Gaurav extended his arm and grabbed him.

“Hey, do you know what’s going on?”

The man was short and plump. He had his trousers pulled up above his waist with a belt tightly fastened. His coat was jumbled on his figure with prominent wrinkles. His dark skin looked splotchy, and his nearly bald head was covered with sweat beads.

He looked at Gaurav for a moment, and then past Gaurav to Mohit. He tried hard to catch his breath before speaking up.

“The police closed down this road for a construction project.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Mohit said. “It’s the main highway out of Mumbai.”

“There are detours. Take the back roads,” the plump man said. “This might take awhile.”

Gaurav remained stoic at the news.

“We should go back to Vile Parle,” he told Mohit.

“Okay,” Mohit agreed. “It should clear up in a few days. No need to get lost on one of those dirt roads. It could lead to trouble.”

Gaurav didn’t respond. Of course the police were blocking his way out of town.

*

Hours later at Tosa restaurant bar, Gaurav sat alone at a table nursing a glass of Kingfisher. Mohit was probably around somewhere. Hiding in the back? Clicking his Nikon away with a fury? He knew release from prison didn’t mean escaping the watchful eyes of the police. He just didn’t think he would be living under the roof of one of their sympathizers.

And now the police had conveniently blocked the road he needed to get to his daughter. Maybe Vidya would be better off without him. Upi too. It was selfish for Gaurav to want to go to them both. Selfish to make them deal with him and the way he looked.

Gaurav downed the rest of his glass and ordered another. Behind him, a group of teenagers were whispering over their chapatti and eggplant curry.

“We all just have to leave slowly, one at a time,” one girl said. “The waitress won’t notice.”

Gaurav shook his head in disbelief. *Not a good idea*, he wanted to tell them.

They whispered on into the night, plotting and planning to leave their meal without paying. The kids were so passionate and so sure of themselves. Gaurav forgot how to feel like that. It made his heart hurt. He listened to them with rapt attention for the rest of the night. Or at least with as much focus as he could manage. He had already finished five glasses and his tolerance was unsurprisingly low, having gone without alcohol for so long.

When the first two of the group dispersed, Gaurav was close to passing out on the table. However, when he saw the last boy get up and walk past him, Gaurav grabbed onto his arm and looked into the boy’s hazel-brown eyes.

“Don’t,” Gaurav whispered to him, his breath bitter. “Don’t do it. Just pay for it.”

The boy jerked his arm out of Gaurav’s grasp and walked out the door.

*

Gaurav felt someone pulling him up to his feet and supporting his weight with their body. He opened his groggy eyes, briefly saw a few cars and motorbikes driving down the street, and closed them again.

“Come on, Gaurav. Help me out a bit. I can’t drag you all the way back.”

The voice was distant, and Gaurav couldn’t make it out. He opened his eyes once more and saw that it was Mohit holding him up.

“Let go of me,” Gaurav slurred. “Get off me.”

“I let go of you, and you fall flat on your face. I understand that you’re upset about not seeing Upi and Vidya today, but do you really think drinking yourself into a stupor is the answer to your problem?”

“Don’t you dare talk about Vidya,” Gaurav spoke with renewed energy.

He jerked himself out of Mohit’s grasp and stumbled backwards, falling on the pavement. Mohit moved to help him back up, but Gaurav shot his arm out in warning. Mohit put his hands up in a surrendering gesture and stepped back.

“Don’t talk to me about my daughter,” Gaurav said. “Not you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re him, aren’t you?” Gaurav accused, standing up. “You’re The Tourist, the one who keeps following me. You work for *them!*”

Mohit narrowed his eyes and stepped forward, putting his hands on Gaurav’s shoulders.

“What are you accusing me of?” Mohit kept his voice quiet. “Are you okay?”

“I saw the camera bag. It doesn’t have the American flag sticker but you could have taken it off. It’s you, isn’t it?” Gaurav was near hysterical.

“Gaurav, calm—”

“Just admit it!”

Mohit exhaled slowly.

“No. It’s not me,” he gritted out. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about. What sticker? Who’s following you?”

“They’re following me.” Gaurav was pleading for someone to believe. “They’re all following me, Mohit.”

“Okay Gaurav,” Mohit sighed. “Okay. Let’s head back to the apartment and talk about this in the morning with Asha.”

Gaurav’s body sagged.

“Take me home. I just want to go home.”

*

Gaurav stumbled into his bedroom and fell onto his bed. His head hurt. His body ached from when he fell.

He reached into his pocket for his phone, and dialed Upi’s number. No answer.

His display screen showed it was 2:03 A.M. Behind the time was a photo of Vidya on a white, fur rug, swaddled in a hospital blanket, her newborn wrinkles prominent under almond-shaped brown eyes. Her face was pinched and her mouth open, letting out a wail Gaurav couldn’t hear. He studied the photo until his vision grew blurry, then closed his eyes and let the phone fall from his hands.

The Sacrificial Wife

In a dream, Mother digs her knees into the green and yellow overgrown grass in our backyard. Her white skirt is covered with dirt from the bed of sunflowers she is tending. The sunflowers have the face of my father. They stand with spines extended into the air. *Tadasana*. Mother is bent over them. *Marjaiasana*.

She digs into the soil deep with her trowel, but there are no more flowers to plant. There is no end to her hole. The more she digs, the more she bends over.

Until the top of her head can't be seen.

Until her face disappears.

Until her black braid fades into the soft, wet loam.

Until the mangalsutra on her neck drops away from her, inching closer and closer to the earth, the diamonds in search of their volcanic origins.

She is almost gone, but a song stops her.

How did he become all you've ever known?

Mother and I swirl together, with purples and blues around us, our fingers grabbing each other's waists. My knees are hooks snaring Mother's thighs, locking us into each other. When I look into her oval eyes—more oval than mine, more Nepali-looking than mine—I don't see me. I want to see me. I press into her warmth as we swirl, swirl, swirl, because I want her to feel the daughter in me. The purples and blues turn sindoor red, then white like death.

In a temple, Mother is on her knees, bent over again. Marjaiasana. The Goddess Ambaji watches her. Mother sits back on her heels, closes her eyes, and puts her hands up in prayer. I look behind me and see father in one of the chairs near the exit. He doesn't look at us, doesn't see us. But when I look at him, I see my big lips and dull, small eyes. I see my crooked, puffy nose. My skin.

Near the marble Ganesh the priest sings. The song comes out of his mouth like a mantra.

How did he become all you've ever known?

I watch mother bend forward, her chest to the white, tiled ground. Her mangalsutra is suffocating. Her face is down.

Her arms slide across the floor, creating a triangle that reaches out towards the Goddess.

Balasana.

I watch Ambaji, resilient on her tiger, reach back.

PART THREE: COMMITMENT

I VOW TO BE FAITHFUL TO YOU

Oceans and Continents Away

Three subzi shops from the Naiks' BHK apartment, a chaat stall serves puffed pastries filled with spiced water, garbanzo beans, potatoes and sweet red chutney. As Leela Naik watches from the payphone in front of the stall, her seven-year-old daughter, seated on a cracked curb with scooters, motorcycles, and rickshaws zooming by, eats one. Though painted yellow, the booth looks ochre, having been subjected to countless grease-stained fingers. The yellow paint has peeled, exposing bare metal. Leela dials the number on the calling card, her stubby fingers jabbing at the buttons. When no one answers, she tries a second number in New Jersey, one she knows by heart. While it rings, holding the phone between her shoulder and ear, she cleans her hands with a wet wipe.

Leela watches as Saher taps her foot near a mountain-shaped pile of cow dung, the beat nearly identical to the rings Leela hears. Saher's Velcro sandals are navy blue with a Spider-Man logo on the side and Leela's close to telling her to not get them dirty. Saher has to know there is animal shit right there. Shit that will ruin her sandals and painted toes. But Saher doesn't seem to know; she just munches munches munches and taps taps taps. Leela watches closely in case she chokes. The pastries, big and round, are meant to be eaten whole. One barely fits in Saher's mouth, most of the contents dripping down her chin. Her red skirt is splayed behind her like a wedding train and Leela cringes, realizing the underwear she bought two weeks ago is making contact with the grimy pavement.

"Leela?" Greg answers.

Even though Leela can't see her husband, it sounds like he's sweating. It sounds like he's frantically pacing the floor. It sounds like "worried" and "distracted," but it took him much too long to answer his phone for Leela to truly believe any of that.

“You didn’t call the American embassy, did you?” Leela jokes.

“You were supposed to call when you landed.”

“I lost my phone in Frankfurt during the layover.”

“For fucks sake, Leela.”

At that Leela looks to the ground. A small roach is scurrying around her feet. She picks up her foot and lets her tan flip flop hover, the shadow following the roach’s every move.

Greg’s voice comes through again.

“You can’t lose your phone when you have our kid on the other side of the world.”

Leela steps down and twists her foot, killing the roach.

“This wouldn’t even be an issue if you were here with me.”

“Where are you right now?”

“At a payphone.”

“And Saher?”

“With me.”

Saher’s world is currently occupied by the woman across the street sorting papdi on a checkered towel with the speed of an Atlantic City card dealer.

“Your mom doesn’t have a phone at the apartment?” Greg asks.

“What does it matter? I’m calling you aren’t I?”

Greg lets out his signature sigh, the one he follows up with a shoulder rub. Leela is sure the many headaches she has brought on have been alleviated this way.

“Did you arrive okay last night?”

“Yeah. Really late. How was work? How’s that patient of yours? Larry?”

There’s a pause before Greg asks, “How’s your mother doing?”

Leela isn't fazed by the subject change. Her father's funeral is in three days, and after ten years of marriage, she knows there's no such thing as "rude" Greg. The person she's speaking to right now is "concerned" Greg, the "nothing is in my control" Greg.

"I'm—" Leela pauses, gripping the phone a bit tighter. "I'm not entirely sure, honey. Papa did everything for her. He got the morning post, he paid the bills, he drove the scooter to the market... what do you do when you lose that?"

"Nothing for awhile," Greg answers. "You're allowed to do nothing. Then hopefully you lean on family."

"I should have brought Saher here sooner. Papa would have loved her. They should have met."

"I know, sweetheart. We'll visit more often now. Does Saher like it there?"

"It's complicated," Leela replies.

When Leela's brother Achal picked them up from the Mumbai airport yesterday and drove them the three hours to Valsad, they heard relentless car horns that were as much a part of the landscape as the vast rice fields and tarp covered slums. These were things Saher calmly absorbed into her body as Achal swerved in and out of lanes and heeded the "Please OK Horn" signs behind every truck they passed. They stopped at a hotel around 9 P.M. so Achal could drink tea. He parked the van in a back lot near a ditch, and while he went inside, Leela and Saher ate the pathras Leela's mother made, the leaves freshly picked and steamed that morning. When Saher ate more than Leela, falling asleep afterwards with her head on Leela's lap and feet pressed up against the door, Leela knew she lost the bet she had placed with Greg. Saher was a flexible, one size fits any country kind of child. Greg had sensed this. Leela had not.

But then Achal entered the Valsad District and pulled into the apartment. The parking lot at the apartment was built on a square piece of dirt and the apartment only occupied the corner of a small, pink building strip. The wooden front door was worn, and the window was fenced with black bars. There was no lawn, or doorbell, or backyard. Saher found everything unfamiliar, so when she saw it for the first time, she wailed. The sight of Leela's childhood home was suddenly the monster beneath her bed.

"She had a small breakdown when we got to Valsad," Leela answers. "Achal gave her some Britannia Coco Chunkies. They're no Chips Ahoy, but she was fine."

"That was expected. We knew it would happen. I was shocked my first time."

"But it's just a place. Isn't she young enough to just see it as a place? She doesn't have to cry about it."

"Is she still upset now?" Greg asks.

"Right this minute she's fine."

"I'm glad you took her, Lee. She should know a part of who she is."

"Yeah," Leela replies. "She should."

"Is she eating the food?"

"She's eating the food."

"If her poop gets watery—"

"I know. I'll go get some meds."

Leela hears Greg yawn, and she can see him now, lying in bed with his dark hair wet and combed through. A freshly shaven face that's slathered with the Old Spice his father got him for Christmas.

"You should go to bed," Leela says. "I forgot it's past midnight over there."

“It’s okay. I was looking at patient files. They weren’t kidding when they said we’d be understaffed at the hospital this week. Larry’s fine, by the way. Rheumatoid arthritis. We got him started on physical therapy.”

“Oh, that’s good news. You thought it’d be something more serious. I promised him brownies, so if you’re willing—”

“The recipe’s on the fridge,” Greg finishes. “I’ll be sure to get to it.”

Leela looks over to where Saher is still sitting, still curious about this new world she’s in as she watches her surroundings.

“You should see her right now. What she’s experiencing. You should be here.”

“I wanted to be there,” Greg says.

“My father loved you.”

“And I loved him.”

Leela grits her teeth to hold in a sob. Her hand shakes, her eyes burn.

“I need you.”

This isn’t a new conversation. For an involved parent who insisted on being a part of the PTA, who went door to door with Saher to sell tacky giftwrapping paper so that she could win a scooter, who organized surprise parties and fun Sunday trips, Greg was equally as absent. It was the excusable kind of absent, the kind of absent that would make anyone who disapproved of it look terrible. Greg Nolan needed to be shared. Part time husband to Leela and part time husband to the hospital.

The passersby begin to look blurry, and Leela has to take a deep breath before she calls out to Saher and gestures for her to take the phone. Saher eagerly jumps up, wiping the spiced water off her chin, before grabbing the phone and greeting her father with an energized hello.

Leela bends down, takes another wet wipe out of her purse, and wipes off the brown smears on Saher's shoes.

*

Having anticipated that Saher would have at least 54 breakdowns on this trip, Leela packed mini boxes of Cheerios so Saher had some semblance of her routine back home.

"Mama, I want the biscuits for breakfast," Saher whines the next day, her skinny arms wrapping around Leela's hips with the strength of a boa constrictor.

Biscuits are the current issue. Achal bought five packs for Saher, who ate them rapidly. After Leela confiscated the last pack, Saher began suffering from withdrawals.

"Cereal and milk today," Leela responds, untangling Saher and sitting her down on the tiled floor of the kitchen with an empty, floral bowl in front of her.

The doodh-wallah came early in the morning to strain their milk. After Leela's mother made the morning tea, only a cup was left in the steel, cylinder container. Leela pours all of it into Saher's bowl and sprinkles in the cheerios. Saher's one slurp in before she spits it all out.

"Chi, chi, chi!" Leela's mother shouts, walking in. "What does she think she's doing?"

Leela's mother, Esha, looks much older than Leela remembers, with greying highlights in her long, braided hair. Her dark walnut skin sags in a few places, and the glasses she wears are styled like the ones from the 90s, with thick multi-brown colored frames. Looking at her, no one would be able to tell she had just become a widow. There's a resilience there that Leela is envious of, a resilience Leela herself didn't inherit.

Esha is slow to bend down, but quick to pull the bowl of milk away from Saher's critical hands.

“Saher. You can’t spit your food out like that,” Leela calmly explains. “You can’t waste food.”

“It’s gross!” Saher says. “That’s not milk!”

“It’s milk,” Leela tells her. “It’s fresh.”

“I want the biscuits!”

“No.”

Leela watches the tears fill Saher’s eyes.

“I want to talk to Daddy,” she says.

Why doesn’t the child she breastfed listen to her? Where is that bond everyone keeps talking about, the biological bond that only mothers and their children share? Was it all for nothing? When they beg for the other parent, the parent who didn’t literally share a part of their body, is it okay to feel like it was all for nothing?

“Saher, beta,” Esha says. “This is no way to behave. If you want cookies, I’ll give you cookies later. But you have to listen to Mumma first.”

“No, Ma, it’s okay,” Leela says, pulling Saher up. “We’ll let Daddy sort this out.”

The back door that leads to a small alley is open, and the sun is so bright Leela can see dust particles floating around in the living room. She takes Saher and sits down on the couch her mother refuses to get rid of, the upholstery dating back to a time before Leela was born. She can feel the broken parts of the wooden frame poking at her thighs. After popping the Vodaphone chip into the new cell she bought, she calls Greg.

“You buy a phone?” Greg answers.

“Saher wanted me to call you,” Leela says.

Saher bounces her butt on the couch impatiently.

“Something happen?”

Greg always knows.

“She doesn’t like the milk here.”

“I hated the milk there.”

“You didn’t spit it out in front of my mother.”

“I wasn’t seven.”

Leela laughs.

“I miss you,” Greg says.

Leela knows it’s a reassurance. A reassurance that he physically wants to be there, but can’t be. It reminds her of people not going to bridal showers, or baby showers, but sending gifts anyway. The effort of having purchased something shows the interest, the “wish I was there” attitude. And maybe they do wish they were there. Maybe it is genuine. It’s a toss up really, and Leela hates that she’s even questioning Greg. Of course Greg wants to be there with her. Why wouldn’t he? Still, there’s a nagging insecurity that pinches her nerves, a soft voice beyond the abyss of her mind that asks: Right?

There aren’t any attractive colleagues or neighbors. There are no babysitters.

Greg asks, “So do you miss me?”

Leela laughs again. “Dumb question.”

Saher, agitated that it’s taking so long, reaches up and shakes Leela’s shoulder.

“I’m going to hand it over,” Leela tells Greg.

Saher grabs it.

“Daddy, you have to mail me some American milk!” Saher tells him.

While Saher chats, Leela goes to the bedroom and pulls out the book she bought to leave with her father. It would have been her father's favorite thing, a collection of Voltaire's work. She bought it at Half Price Books as homage to her father's tendency to always buy things cheap. The book is tan and worn with maroon trimmings. The pages are not marred with illegible notes. It was a good buy and her father would have been proud of it. Leela straightens out the paper creases that were caused by it being stuffed in her luggage between the Nikes she bought for her second cousin and her toiletries. Her purse would have been a better option, but her purse was filled with Saher's coloring books.

"Saher doesn't stop to take a breath when she talks." Esha walks in with her freshly laundered saris. "Help me fold."

Leela puts the book down on the bed, and grabs one end of the long orange fabric her mother holds out. They move in and out, matching corners and performing a tedious dance her mother whistles to in order to fill the silence.

"You're really going to leave that book with your father?" Esha asks when they begin folding the fourth sari. "Having it burn in the pyre doesn't seem right."

It's the first time her mother has mentioned the funeral to her, the first time her mother has acknowledged it was really happening.

"I—I won't do it if you don't want me to, Mumma."

"All I'm saying is why waste such a lovely book?"

"I don't know," Leela mutters. "It's not wasteful to me. It seems like the thing to do."

"All right."

"I'm going into town tomorrow because I don't have anything white to wear."

"I'll come with you."

After the laundry is folded, Leela finds Saher still sitting on the couch talking to her dad. She's giggling now.

"Hand it over, munchkin," Leela says.

Saher frowns but surrenders the phone after saying her goodbyes.

Leela sits, swinging her feet up, before pressing the phone to her ear.

"I miss you too," she says.

She looks up at the ceiling, colored different shades of white. Uneven. She imagines Greg lying on his back too, looking up at the dark brown fan they installed together weeks ago. Who the hell needs a handyman, they said to each other, when I got you babe?

*

When Leela was Saher's age, all wide eyes and oil-slicked pigtails, her father would tell her to use sorghum flour to draw a rangoli outside the front door every Diwali. She would squat barefoot for hours, feeling the fine grains slip through her hands and onto the discolored concrete. They would transform into crisp, cream petals. She would then use banana leaves, sticks, and cow patties to mold a square border for her artwork. The dung, so warm and soft in her hands, spread smoothly onto the leaves she would wrap the sticks in.

Leela's a Jersey girl now. She uses sanitary wipes on the handles of Shop-Rite grocery carts and has the pest control man do bi-weekly inspections. She recycles and takes Saher mini-golfing. She eats burgers during her lunch break and buys Green Mountain K-Cups. She and Greg drink sweet, sweet moscato wine on Friday nights and listen to The Smiths on vinyl.

Leela often thinks about what was then and what is now, especially as she stands outside Rajwadi, an upscale clothing store in the village. The building is white, clean, and big. It's crammed between two shorter, brown buildings and has a security man at the door. It's strange to

look at, like an art installation that doesn't quite fit. A younger Leela wouldn't have been able to go in; she wouldn't have been able to afford it. Now she sees a group of schoolgirls, only a few feet away, who look to be 16 or 17. They look at her with the same want and envy Leela had in her own eyes at that age.

It's shameful, she thinks, that she has to walk inside while they have to stay out here.

Leela's mother guides her across the street, and Leela drags Saher. They go right inside and to the counter. All the employees are men, a conundrum Leela could never figure out. They work together, presenting customers with different kinds of fabric for different occasions.

Customers aren't allowed to touch.

They go up to an available man, a boy younger than Leela with hair styled like Hrithik Roshan. They ask to see the saris appropriate for a funeral, and suddenly the air between them is more awkward than somber. Leela wonders if she should just wrap a white bed sheet around her frame. Nobody comes to Rajwadi for funeral clothing. They are taken into the showroom. Leela sits on the cushioned floor with Saher in her lap and her mother in a chair beside her. The boy peruses the shelves lined up against the wall. He pulls out a stack of outfits packaged in plastic.

Leela watches Saher, fascinated by the boy's speed and efficiency as he rips the package open and whips the fabric up and down so it lies beautifully in front of them. Leela wants to grab the first one and leave, but her mother shakes her head, no. The boy rips another package, advancing the process. Seeing possible choices, Leela pauses. Each white sari is textured differently. Leela's eyes trace all the beadings and sharply designed borders. There's one she can't stop staring at: a mixed silk sari with no elaborate border and beading that is subtle. She takes her phone out and snaps a picture. She tells the boy to put it aside, before excusing herself to go to the bathroom.

In the stall labeled “western toilet,” using the shop’s Wi-Fi she leans against the partition and emails the photo to Greg. Then she dials, the blue tinted light in the bathroom making her blink a few too many times.

“Lee?” Greg sounds like he has something in his throat, his post snoring voice that’s rough and choked. Leela’s so glad to hear it. “It’s 2 in the morning here. Are you and Saher okay?”

“We’re fine.” She hears clicking on his end. “What are you doing?”

“Getting out of bed. It’s red-eye tea and biscuits time.”

“Alone?”

“No.”

Leela sucks in a breath. She says nothing, but Greg continues.

“I’m on the phone with you, right?”

After particularly rough days, after Saher is put to bed, after the doors are locked, after the alarm system has been turned on, Leela and Greg spend time in the kitchen. Leela makes the ginger tea, while Greg plates tea rusk. They sit across from each other at the lunch table, swirling the tea slowly with a piece of rusk. They feel out which one of them is having a harder time that night. It’s usually the person who’s most distracted, the person who won’t stop swirling and will let the hot liquid disintegrate the rusk and let it fall to the bottom of the cup.

Then they talk it out.

“I emailed you a picture,” Leela says. “Tell me what you think?”

She hears the sound of a pot being put on the stove. A minute later, Greg asks, “For the funeral?”

“Tell me this is dumb,” Leela begs. “Tell me shopping for a funeral outfit is dumb.”

“You need something to wear.”

“The white fabrics, the beads... do you know what this looks like?”

They hear each other breathing. Leela imagines Greg grating the ginger into the pot, and flicking a pinch of cardamom in along with it—just like she taught him.

“Your wedding dress,” Greg says.

“How the hell do I wear something like this?” Leela cries. “What do I do?”

*

The day of the funeral is hot. Hot cars, hot food, and hot bodies. The pyre is set up on the beach. The breeze from the Arabian Sea makes the piled sticks clatter. Leela wraps her sari tight around her as Saher stands next to her frightened by the crowd around them. Family and friends have all gathered around, some wearing pure white and some wearing off-white, forming a massive, discolored cloud. Leela’s father is already in the wood, slathered in ghee with cotton balls up his nose and in his ears. His dark brown complexion is now a well moisturized gray.

This is the first time she has seen him in eight years. The last time Greg had been with her. He and her father rode motorcycles together, played cricket together. It was right before Leela found out she was pregnant. A part of her even thinks that Saher was conceived in India, between burlap sheets on the floor of the apartment.

Everyone was happy. When Leela left, she assured her parents she would see them again soon. Then Greg got into medical school. Saher appeared soon after. There was no time. There was no money.

With Saher and her mother, Leela approaches the unlit pyre. Her mother, who was so strong in the past week, is now crying so loudly it echoes across the ocean. Achal stands close by, holding the torch. His cries are silent and Leela can’t imagine how since he is burdened with

the task of having to light their father on fire. Leela picks Saher up so that she can get a better look at her Bapa and say goodbye. She doesn't quite understand what's going on, her eyes flickering up and down her grandfather's body. With her free hand, she puts the volume of Voltaire's collected works on her father's chest. It totters there.

Once they step back, their priest begins the prayer.

With a nod from the priest, Achal brings the torch down.

It doesn't take long for the breeze to blow the ashes onto those in attendance. Leela sobs now; chest-heaving, stomach-churning sobs that make Saher freeze in shock. She imagines arms around her. Not Saher's thin ones. These arms are bigger. They comfort her as the smoke makes her eyes water and the smell of her burning father makes her nauseated.

She turns around.

"I'm here," Greg says, she thinks.

Heat

It starts with me being needy in a club on Dirty Sixth. I want to kiss somebody. This is not news to you; I'm always wanting to kiss somebody. Pitbull's "Time of Our Lives" plays over the speakers, the beat hammering into the walls and beneath my side-to-side. It's too crowded for anyone to care about my clothes: black workout pants and a pale, pink sweatshirt. You didn't let me change after we got back from the Zach Theatre. You didn't want to wait, and since we weren't *together*, since you were just a friend I haven't seen in awhile, I didn't force the issue.

It's fine, because I don't need a mini skirt and a crop top to break it down with you. My skin is heated and drenched. We dance with just a small amount of space between us. A red strobe light flashes across the room, and reflects off the pole the featured dancer is twirling on.

Reflects off your black shirt and your white skin.

Tints your dark hair.

"Matty," I say. "I want to kiss somebody."

You don't respond. You move closer to me, effectively closing the gap between us. Still, we don't touch.

Pitbull is ending, Minaj is starting.

We share a look.

You grab the elastic of my workout pants and pull me into your body. Your hands slide away from my hips and find my ass, keeping me in place. We aren't dancing anymore. Instead, you lean down toward me and bite my lower lip, before kissing me fully.

You engulf me.

Me with this petite frame. You, a tower.

I'm cut off from the rest of the club, from the rest of the world.

I move my hands up your chest, up your neck. Finally, I'm holding your face. Pulling you
in more. Your stubble pokes at my hand, scratches my palms.

Scratches my face too, when your tongue meets mine. You've become desperate.

We're futilely trying to fuse our bodies together.

Our clutches become painful.

Grip, grip, release, only to grip again. Like a failing blood pressure monitor.

We took it from zero to ten in the span of one song.

I need to breathe, so I pull away.

Actually, it's not that I need to breathe.

We just can't handle another song.

I hide my face in your shoulder.

I can smell your sweat, so I wonder if you can smell mine.

Tonight you are the love of my life.

Tonight you and I move in together.

Tonight you and I propose.

Tonight you and I go on the honeymoon, the babymoon, the "kids are off to college"
moon – all the moons in the universe. We see them tonight.

We live a lifetime in one moment.

Because, often, this is how it feels.

That one good touch.

That one good night.

But when this song ends, I will find another man to dance with.

You will find another girl.

It just ends.

PART FOUR: SACRIFICE

I VOW TO PROTECT YOU

Seven Dead Letters

To Natasha

February 26, 2002

The air in America enters your lungs differently than the air in India. It's painful to breathe here in the cold. Raghav had warned me about this, but I didn't understand until I stepped outside the Newark airport this afternoon. The sharp wind went through me. I felt speared. I thought about you. My chest began to ache. Raghav and I made the drive down to Old Bridge, me pressing a hand into the space between my breasts to stop the pain, and Raghav relentlessly turning the heater dial to make sure I was comfortable. I wonder if this is what marriage is like – pressing hands and turning dials until nothing hurts, until everything is warm and alright. Raghav lives in a complex called London Terrace. I suppose I live there now too. I have to get used to climbing two flights of stairs to reach the apartment. I don't mind. The steps are dirty, yes, and sometimes littered with cigarettes. But the steps are no dirtier than the steps outside Papa's home in Godhra. Those stains were our fault, I know. I'm sure Papa is still upset about the hot pink marks left from the Gulal powder we flung at each other last Holi.

When I entered Raghav's apartment, he put our suitcases aside and stripped me. My shoes came off first, and then my tattered coat. The golden dupatta you bought me in Ahmedabad last summer was unraveled from around my neck. Raghav didn't understand how to take the kurti off, though. The tight cotton followed my every curve and Raghav lacked the technique to get it off. The leggings he understood. I imagine if I wasn't so numb from the murderous New Jersey air, I would have felt his fingers trace my unveiled skin as he pulled them down.

You have to know how much of a stranger Raghav still feels like. On the plane, we barely touched hands, but in his home he takes my clothes off like it's second nature. If you get married, I wonder if you will experience this too. I wonder if you will feel as unsettled as I felt standing naked in Raghav's living room, in front of his mustard couch, with his hands rubbing and stretching my frigid skin back to life. He did this for a few minutes before moving me to the bathroom where he filled the tub. They have tubs here so the water doesn't flood the floor, so the flooded floor doesn't bother you when you're using the toilet. I recognize this as a luxury, but walking into that bathroom made me long for home, and you, and Mummy, and Papa. A bathroom is such a strange thing to miss, but I miss ours. Raghav told me to sit in the water, so I did. He sat on the toilet seat. With a white cup that read "Big Ed's Barbecue," he poured the water over my body. We said nothing. I curled myself up and he poured until my chest stopped aching, until my tear stains washed away, until I felt warm again and okay with being in 2C, 713 Downing St, Old Bridge, New Jersey, America.

A letter a day, we said. So even though it will take more than a week for this to get to you, I will write you again tomorrow. I love you.

26/02/2002

Dear Dolly,

Papa is trying to bargain with the Vodafone man for a telephone so we can communicate with you that way. He tried to borrow one, just for a minute, but the man said no. When Papa explained that no one in our neighborhood owns a phone, that his daughter just moved to America, the man was unmoved. Asshole. Papa still cannot afford it, so I might work in Mr. Dixit's pharmacy stall during the weekends. For now, the letters will have to do.

You would not believe who came by this morning. Sahil. He and Papa sat in the kitchen. You know how these things go. The timing is not a coincidence. You left and Sahil probably thought Papa was trying to get rid of me, too. Funny boy. I watched from the patio window outside, peeking around our quilted curtains. During their entire exchange I thought about a few things: Sahil is my schoolmate. Sahil is a police officer's son. Sahil walks me home every day and brings me his Dadi's homemade jalebi sweets once a week. Sahil plays cricket so well, he'll probably make captain next year. Sahil hates the saris Mummy makes me wear just as much as I hate wearing them. Sahil's cheeks are puffy and every time he smiles, there are crinkles under his eyes. Sahil is good.

I thought perhaps it would be fine to marry him. I like him. But then he stood up and left looking like Papa cut off his leg – pained and unsure of what his future had in store. Clearly I would not be a part of it.

Mummy and Papa talked about it later. It is not that they do not want me married at 18, or that they think my education should come first. It is caste differences. But what difference? We both live on dirt roads and get the same animal shit on our sandals every day.

To Natasha

February 27, 2002

When Raghav left for university this morning, I saw him off at the bus stop. He assured me the trip to New York wasn't long, that he's never late to class and he'll be back soon. When he tells me things like this, I can't decide if I care. How do I connect with someone getting an MBA, when I dropped out of the 11th standard? Where do I fit in between New Jersey and New York? When Raghav comes home to me, does it even feel like coming home?

I don't have much to do here. Raghav doesn't own a television. He doesn't have a dial-up connection either. I don't know how to drive. I feel chained.

I decided to clean his kitchen. I removed the coils on the stove and scraped up all the old, burnt food. I wiped the counters. I took out the trash. Once the kitchen was done, I planned on doing the living room. I told myself I wasn't doing this because I was Raghav's wife and it was expected of me. I wanted to do it for myself, because I live here now. But when I saw all the old newspapers and magazines, the dust on the coffee table, and the dirt burrowed between the carpet fibers, I stopped cleaning. Raghav is lazy. I'm not going to be the one to encourage it. So instead, I sat down and looked through one of the magazines. I wish I could read English. Maybe I can ask Raghav about taking classes. Maybe I can take classes in New York. Maybe we can leave for school together in the mornings. That could be a good way to bond with him.

I miss you so much already. I'm afraid of what this loneliness will do to me.

27/02/2002

Dear Dolly,

There was an explosion at the railway this morning. Did you hear about it? Is it on the news there? Some Hindu pilgrims were on their way to Ahmedabad and their cart ignited. They burned. Women and children too. I cannot believe it. The phones at the cyber cafe have been out of order for weeks, but I went over today just to check. I had to call you. They still do not work. The bhai who owns the cafe told me they would not work for some time. He said I am better off getting a mobile. I asked to borrow his, but he does not own one either. On my way home, these terrified school children were being herded out of their classrooms and into the Sunflower Apartments down the road. Papa ran around looking for me. When he found me, his glasses were off and his face was dark with dirt and ash, and he smelled like petrol. Near the railway, he

helped a young student get his motor scooter started. Papa said it was dangerous, that people were running over each other trying to get away from the flames that consumed the train cart. He told me all this as he dug his fingers into my arm and dragged me home. My upper arm has splotches of purple now. I am not allowed to leave the house.

We are okay and I hope we can talk soon. I cannot bear it here without you.

To Natasha

February 28, 2002

Raghav must have noticed I was suffocating in the apartment. Tonight, he took me to the city for dinner. I was excited to see the tall buildings that reach the sky. I have never seen anything like it. I wish we had a camera so I could send a picture to you. It's truly God's work.

We went to an Italian restaurant. It would have been nice if the lighting wasn't so dim. They sat us down at a table near the bar, which was the best thing they could have done because Raghav wanted drinks and I wanted to look out the window behind him. At 10:00, people were still out. Some walked quickly, some were sluggish, and some leaned against walls to smoke cigarettes. I told Raghav cigarettes were disgusting. He said, "You're being insensitive. Their bodies have nothing to do with you." I asked if he would mind if I smoked. When he said no, I told him we would buy a pack after dinner.

I wish he would have minded. He doesn't care about me. Papa cares about Mummy so much. When Mummy had been pregnant with you, Papa wouldn't let her do anything. I used to watch him on the patio as he clipped our washed fabrics onto the clothesline before work. He had handled Mummy's saris so delicately. It must have taken them ages to care for each other like that. How can I expect Raghav to care about me, if I don't care about him? I want to.

Raghav asked me about you, Mummy, and Papa. He asked if I missed you all. I told him it was a silly question. He said with time, he stopped missing his parents in Ahmedabad. It's a sad thought. I never want to be so busy that I stop missing you. I need to ask Raghav for some money to send home, so you can buy a phone. I want to hear your voice. Raghav doesn't know how lucky he is to be able to call his own family. He never calls.

After dinner, we bought the cigarettes and went home. The rest of the evening was spent out on our balcony. We have no furniture out there, so we sat on the floor. The space is small, so we were huddled close together. He put his arm around me to make the cold more bearable. I'm starting to take comfort in his touch. Stars don't seem to exist here. We looked at grey skies and a cell tower across the way. I fiddled with my box of Marlboro Lights, until Raghav said, "Just do it already!" I picked a cigarette and put it to my lips. I used a match. Once I put the flame to the tip, I inhaled gently until it was lit. I took deeper draws. Raghav was impressed I didn't cough. I told him he wasn't the first person I smoked with. If only he knew about how you and I used to collect cigarette butts in the village. How we would see if some still had any tobacco left, and if they did, how we would use the box blade Mummy used to cut our nails with to take it out. How we would collect enough to roll a whole new cigarette, and share it under the bridge by Gurroy Ganga.

I miss you.

Now I share my cigarettes with Raghav. We sat on the balcony and passed it back and forth. The warmth it created inside me made up for the coldness, for the ugly northeastern lights that engulfed us. I heard there are prettier parts of the US. I can't wait to see it all.

28/02/2002

Dear Dolly,

We are okay. Papa says a lot of businesses have closed down after rioters threw a petrol bomb into a bookstore this morning. The Muslim owner was killed. They are saying Muslims burned the pilgrims at the railway. Riots are spreading all over Gujarat. Papa says your teacher, Mr. Deol, has been going around with a cricket bat, hitting any Muslim he sees. He bashed a man's head in. He dragged the corpse all the way to the man's wife. He killed her, too. The police have not arrested him. Papa says he is still outside with the bat.

Mummy says it is good we are not Muslim. She says we are safe. But the people we thought of as friends have actually been locusts in disguise so I do not think we are safe at all. I do not want to go outside, but being inside has me on edge. I spent the day rinsing rice for Mummy, and cleaning the floors. I took all your clothes out of the closet, and re-folded them. I smelled them too, and cried. It has only been a day and these rebels are choking us. We have courts and the law. I turn on the TV, waiting for someone to speak out against the violence. Modi. Anyone. But no one has. You cannot just kill people after having your morning chai. You cannot.

To Natasha

March 1, 2002

This morning, I told Raghav I need more to do. I need a job. I need to learn English. He looked sheepish and said he didn't think about it. I want to be angry, but I keep reminding myself this relationship is new for him as well. He never had to be responsible for anyone else. So today, he introduced me to our neighbor Alice. I've never seen anyone so blonde or tall. She moved here

from Sweden two years ago, and back then, she didn't know English. Now she watches American soaps and learns. She said I can come over in the mornings and watch a show called *Days of Our Lives* if I want.

It's nice interacting with someone else. After Raghav left for school, Alice took me to the mall. She works at a makeup store there. She said I should apply. You know I don't wear makeup, but maybe I should start. The mall here is big, but looks similar to the one we went to in Mumbai. The stores are different. You can't find Indo-Western styles here. I was disappointed, but maybe I should also start wearing different clothes. When I wear a sari or a kurti, people stare at me. I don't like it.

As we walked around, I saw a man advertising family portrait sessions at a store called JCPenny. I signed Raghav and me up for later this week. I want our portrait in different sizes and frames. One will go in the living room above this awful desk he uses to store outdated mail, one will go in our bedroom, and several will be sent to family back home in India. I want to commit to our lifestyle together, but I know it will take work. When he leaves the apartment and tells me he will be back soon, I want to care. I want to have the chapatti dough ready for his dinner. I want to belong in his life. What better way than with a picture of us that our grandchildren can put away in storage and take out every so often to say, "This is them and I want that."

01/03/2002

Dear Dolly,

We are okay. Today Haleema's family came to our doorstep asking for help. They left the Gulbarg Society in Naroda Patiya because they thought they would have gotten killed there.

Papa did not want to keep them. I think he is okay with Muslims getting killed. Mummy told him

we had to help because the Hassans gave you the extra luggage bags you needed for America. I do not like how we are treating this as business. Why do we not help the Hassans because we are good people? Maybe we are not. Haleema and I are sharing a bed, while her parents sleep on the living room floor. It is nice to have them here, because I now have someone to talk to. I do not think Haleema feels the same way. All I want to talk about is what is happening outside, but Haleema wants to talk about anything but that.

I overheard her parents talking to Mummy and Papa. Their neighbor's daughter was raped with a sansi. It killed her. They said it could have been Haleema. Papa seemed sad then. Maybe he is not so heartless.

To Natasha

March 2, 2002

We have a disposable camera now! I'm excited to send you pictures once we develop the film. Raghav picked the camera up today on his way back from school after I told him I wanted to show you America. We decided to go to a nearby lake called St. Catherine to have a picnic and take photos. Old Bridge isn't pretty, but the lake here is. We walked around for most of the afternoon. At the mall, I had gotten a new winter coat since Raghav said my wool one wasn't very good. I feel much better being outside now. I even got a hat.

Our picnic was delicious. I packed us kadhi and pakoras, which I think taste better in cold weather. I'm glad I was able to get Mummy's recipe right. I was worried I wouldn't find chickpea flour, but there are a lot of Indian grocers here. Every time I walk into one of those stores, I feel like I'm back home. Raghav and I sat by the dock to eat. The sun was going down, and for the first time since I've been here, the sky wasn't grey. I had to take a picture of the

orange-gold masterpiece in front of me. I don't think you would have believed how gorgeous it was without a photograph.

I almost lost the entire film, actually. When I stood at the end of the dock to take the picture, the camera fell out of my hands and into the water. My gloves were definitely too thick. It was hard to turn the dial. It just dropped! Guess what I did? I jumped in after it, of course! I didn't even think! It was so cold, but I got it. It was such a laugh. Raghav was so scared, he jumped in after me. He yelled, "Are you insane? You're going to die for some shitty film strips?" Honestly, I was offended. These are good pictures! Oh my god, Natasha. Thinking about it all again, I can't stop laughing. After we got out, he took me behind some trees and had me take off my wet clothes so I wouldn't get sick. I wrapped the picnic blanket we used around myself like a sari. He drove us home soaking wet. Raghav is sitting here as I write this. He says you better cherish these photos! Oh my god. I really think I can love him.

02/03/2002

Dear Dolly,

Last night I dreamt you were here and Mr. Deol came to our house, beating our door down. He took his cricket bat and killed Mummy. There was blood everywhere. Then he saw Papa sleeping on his cot, and he broke his legs. Papa was screaming so loud. He could not move. Mr. Deol dragged him off the cot, dragged him all they way to our bedroom. We held onto each other, crying. And then Mr. Deol touched us. He put a sansi on our bed. Our wails joined Papa's on the ground. The way Papa looked at us, I could tell he was already dead.

I woke up wanting to hug Haleema, but I did not. I do not think I can sleep anymore. We are okay. For the first time, I am glad you are not here.

To Natasha

March 3, 2002

I don't want anyone back home to worry, but I thought you should know Raghav was attacked by a man in the city today. I knew a lot of South Asians were being harassed since the terrorist attacks last year, but I didn't think it would happen to us. He came home with a bruised jaw. It is a few shades darker than his skin. After class, he had taken pictures of skyscrapers for you when a man approached him about what he was doing. When Raghav answered he was only taking pictures, the man called him a sand nigger terrorist and punched him. He took the camera, and stomped on it. Raghav had managed to grab onto it once the man ran away. The film was salvageable, so we dropped it off to get developed.

I wanted to take Raghav to the hospital, but he said no. I wanted to take him to the police so he could describe the man who did this, but he said no to that, too. So all I did was take him to the kitchen. While he sat on the kitchen counter, I pressed a frozen pizza to his face. With my other hand, I cradled his uninjured jaw. He held my forearm and closed his eyes. I don't think he was crying. We didn't say anything for a long time. We only listened to each other's breathing. Then he finally said, "I promise our life will be more than this. Do you believe me?"

I didn't say anything. He must have taken that to mean I disagreed. Really I was just thinking about it. But as I'm writing to you, and as I see Raghav sitting across from me studying his accounting textbook, I can say I do believe our life is more. I do. Please tell everyone not to worry. He is doing much better now.

03/03/2002

Dear Dolly,

My left arm is broken. My shoulder is dislocated. It happened when I went outside with Sahil and his father today. Sahil's father, Mr. Trivedi, is someone you have not met. He is the officer who guards Civil Hospital by Mesri River. I hope you two never meet.

It all started when Sahil and Mr. Trivedi came by the house this morning. Sahil wanted to make sure we were okay. He was accompanying his father on a patrol. Mr. Trivedi said to Papa, Natasha could use some fresh air, let her come with us. He always liked me. Papa had agreed I think because he knew we were all rotting away in the house. He told me to be back in an hour.

We had walked past Vohra Cottage and Iqbal Girls High School. Mr. Trivedi asked how I liked school and if we had lost anyone at the railway. I told him Mrs. Patel from the jewelers lost her son-in-law. I asked if he knew who had been responsible for the railway bombing. He said, probably Muslims since they hate us. I asked if the police had any evidence. Sahil told me to stop. I asked again, do you have any evidence? He did not say anything.

When we had reached Jahurpura Market, we saw two men beating a young boy with a pipe. I looked to Mr. Trivedi, but he did not do anything. So I did something. I put my body over the little boy. I felt his boniness underneath me, and I felt how out of place those bones were. My body pushed him further into the dirt. I was smothering him. The pipe hit my back and then my arm, before Mr. Trivedi pushed the thugs away. He said, don't hurt her. He said, she's Brahmin. The men stopped long enough for Mr. Trivedi to pull me away, but I saw them take a funnel and petrol container out of one of their bags. I watched as they wedged the funnel into the boy's mouth. I could not hear him scream anymore. The petrol was poured down his throat. I was screaming though. Sahil and Mr. Trivedi held me back. The men set the boy on fire. I was on the ground, 11 feet away, and my wails must have shattered the universe because nothing made

sense anymore. Sahil and Mr. Trivedi stood by and watched. Monsters. I refused to leave the boy alone. Sahil dislocated my shoulder as he tried to pull me away. No arrests were made.

Sahil carried me home, while Mr. Trivedi continued his patrol.

To Natasha

March 4, 2002

Today we got our portrait done. Raghav came out of the bedroom wearing the only suit he owns. It's the suit he wears whenever he needs to do a presentation at the university. This was the first time I've seen it. It made me proud. The brown coat was slightly big on him, but his trousers were perfect. I ironed his tie and shirt the night before, and he managed to keep them wrinkle free. I wore a pink sari and kept my hair down.

People at the mall stared at us, but I'm trying not to mind things like that anymore. I don't think Raghav ever minded. The photographer told us we could choose up to three different backgrounds. We chose just one: grey. He asked us how many poses we wanted to do. Just one, we said. Raghav stood behind me with his hands on my hips, and I kept my hands clasped in front of me. We both had small, barely-there smiles. Not too intimate, but not so distant either. Respectable. The photographer asked if we wanted Raghav's bruise photo-shopped. We said, no, keep it. This is who we are.

We'll be sure to send these out. For the time being, here are the pictures from our camera. I picked them up this afternoon! They turned out good. Tell me how you like them.

PS: I finally asked Raghav if we can send Papa money for a phone, so that's in the envelope too. Can't wait to hear your voice soon.

04/03/2002

Dear Dolly,

I need to hear from you soon. Do you remember when Ba took us to Gurroy Ganga? The river was naturally clear, and you asked her how this was possible. She said holy rivers are always clean. God makes it so. I said, when I die this is where I want to be – will my ashes make it dirty? She told us death makes it pure and good souls make it flow. I always wanted to be a part of Gurroy Ganga, but now I imagine myself dead in front of the cricket grounds where the other dead bodies have been piled up, and where the stray dogs linger.

The neighborhood is ruined. Homes and shops have been destroyed. The rioters are not stopping. The news is shit. Some say it was the Muslims who caused the railway explosion and some say it was an accident, but no one is saying anything about the violence. The people at the *Gujarat Samachar* think the murders are justified. I am sending you a copy so you can read for yourself. 500 dead Muslims and counting. Haleema and her family left after I came home injured. They thought perhaps Mr. Trivedi saw them yesterday when he came to our door. They thought that if Mr. Trivedi could let me get hurt the way I did, then he would not care about what happened to them. I have to agree. I cannot imagine anyone staying here, though I think our family will. Haleema gave me her yellow scooter and I always liked it because she pinned fake daisies to the front. I want to use it to run over every rebel I see on the streets. I know this makes me no better than them. I have to be honest, though. After yesterday, I do not know who I am anymore.

Chocolate Chip Mornings

One September morning, when I was nine and getting ready for school, I sat down for breakfast: two chocolate chip cookies and tea. The blue Chips Ahoy package rested next to my forearm. I looked out the window at the large, tan satellite dish on the lawn of the motel across the way. The dish had always fascinated me. The sheer size of it was daunting, ten feet off the ground and seven feet wide. I didn't quite know what it was for, but I knew it had value. I liked the way the rising sun glinted off it. I liked the morning calm. I loved the sweet, disintegrating cookie in my mouth. I loved the melting chocolate on my tongue. In the mornings, I wasn't a big talker. My thoughts stumbled around in a daze. Mama and Ba sat at the table with me, chatting with each other about what they would make for lunch. Chapatti. Spinach curry. The frozen spinach thawed on the counter. This was a common meal in our home. I sat there, listening to Mama and Ba's Gujarati, the soft syllables flowing out of their mouths. I imagined what would happen if I climbed that tan, satellite dish. Would I be able to see over I-35, that tall highway that was built up in the sky? Would I fall off and break something? And if that happened, would I have to go to school?

My family always sipped chai from foam cups and ate biscuits on brown palms. Not English biscuits, not the Britannia brand sold at Indian grocers, but Mexican biscuits baked fresh every morning in what was a predominately Hispanic neighborhood in Fort Worth. Mama would drive early on Monday to pick up two batches that would last for the week. Sometimes she would bring back oval shaped bread too, soft and chewy at the center, a melt in your mouth treat that was especially filling when dipped in hot, ginger tea. Freshly baked goods sometimes didn't fit our budget.

My mother worked at a dollar store on Berry Street, selling cheap, colored contacts at the register to anyone who would buy them, while my dad worked on and off at a cell phone company. We had less than a thousand bucks coming in at the end of each month. When these rough patches hit, my mother would buy us Chips Ahoy cookies. For the adults, she bought Wonder Bread. Mama didn't get to spoil us often. Christmas was socks and lotion. Birthdays were new school uniforms. Chips Ahoy cookies were a treat she was proud to give us via the coupons she meticulously collected every Sunday. She spent hours clipping them from ads, and safely tucked them into her red, coupon pouch. We got two cookies with our tea, and I would dunk mine into the scorching liquid until it was mush. If I was especially good, Mama would sometimes bring one cookie with her when she picked me up from school. I developed a fondness for the fresh Mexican biscuits, sure, but that fondness was unequal to my love for chocolate chip cookies.

That morning, my fantasies about surfing through space on a satellite dish ended with fast approaching stomps coming up from behind me. My father snatched the blue Chips Ahoy package and threw it against the back door. I stopped looking at the satellite dish. The cookie in my mouth cemented itself because I was too startled to swallow.

“What is that?” Dad bellowed.

It was enough to make my eyes wet and my cookie-occupied hand tremble. He approached Mama and Ba, coming up to the back of their chairs. His left hand grabbed the back of Ba's neck and his right hand grabbed the back of Mama's.

He squeezed hard and then shook them.

Mama and Ba stayed silent.

“Don't you ever feed my daughter this crap. Both of you.”

Dad's entire body twitched. He had a wild look in his eyes. It frightened me.

Then he walked away.

He walked away, like the broken cookies on the yellow, tiled floor didn't exist.

Like the crumbs hadn't nestled themselves into the cracks.

Like we didn't already have a rat problem.

Ba stood up and grabbed her sweeper. It was better than an American broom. This sweeper had long, soft hairs bound tightly together with colorful plastic. It picked up dirt from the toughest of spots.

I sat at the table, looked at Mama, and let out a silent cry. The kind of cry that comes from the back of your throat. My small eyes puffed up and scrunched up, and my mouth fell wide open. Mama saw the brown goop in my mouth. She encouraged me to swallow it, telling me it's ok, it's ok. She knew how to deal with dad's rage, she knew how to be composed, but I was still learning.

PART FIVE: CHILDREN

I VOW TO NURTURE THE NEXT GENERATION

Boundless

No one comes to Tithal Beach during monsoon season. The winds, fat with power, startle waves out of the Arabian Sea. Black sand turns to mud. Pebbles from the ocean cut bare feet and tear up the soles of cheap slippers. The ground is covered with torn newspapers that were once filled with charcoal roasted nuts and kebab sticks that punctured the hearts of halved sweet corn, the only remnants of the summer season before. Even sunsets can't be seen anymore. Not when the clouds are oil black.

No one comes to Tithal Beach during monsoon season. That's what the fisherman tells Anya when he sees her sitting in the chunky mud.

"You're here," she counters.

Her little short legs stretch out in front of her. Each time the water pushes forward onto land, it sloshes up to her torso. She's shorter than most eight-year-olds. Her black hair is styled by the elements. The circles under her eyes are as dark as the dirt she sits in. Two long sticks teeter on her knees. She tries to tie them together with a burlap thread she stole from a bag of basmati rice being sold in the market.

The rain stopped an hour ago, before the fisherman left his apartment, but the sea is still active. It's getting darker, the water colder. A soaked girl four kilometers away from the village is unsightly.

"I'm headed to the temple," the fisherman says, pointing to the cliff behind them. From where she lies, only a large, white dome with golden trimmings can be seen. "Would you like to come with me? You'll get sick sitting out here."

Anya thinks, then answers "No thanks. I really need to get this tight." She lifts up her loosely tied sticks. "I'm not good with knots."

“What are the sticks for?” The fisherman squats down. The bottom of his trousers – the good ones he wears for God and sometimes his wife – are already soaked up to his shins.

Anya looks at him wearily because he looks like he’s about to ask a lot more questions than the one. She doesn’t have the time for it.

“I’m building a boat.”

“You’ll need more than two sticks to build a boat,” the fisherman says.

“I’m not dumb. There’s gonna be more.”

“What’s the boat for?”

Anya releases the knot she just finished tying off and tries again.

“So I have something to sit in when I get out there.” She juts her chin out toward the water. “What else are boats for?”

The fisherman smiles.

“Where do you want to go?” he clarifies.

An irritated sigh leaves Anya’s mouth and she stops fiddling with her sticks.

“Kochi. My grandmother wants to go, so I’m taking her.”

“That’s a little far.”

“So?”

“Do you know where Kochi is?”

“You’re being mean now, bothering me and telling me I’m dumb.”

“I never said that.”

“You did too.”

The fisherman watches how she continues to work on the sticks.

“Do your parents know you’re here right now?” he asks.

“No.” Anya’s fingers get stuck in one of the loops she made with the thread and she tries to tug it out.

“Maybe you should go home. There are rickshaws that wait near the temple. Let me take you there.”

Anya pulls her finger free and sucks on the red imprint that now curves around the pad. She releases it with a noisy pop and glares at the fisherman.

“I said I have work to do.”

“If I finish those knots for you, will you go home?”

Anya embraces the sticks tight to her chest, away from the fisherman.

“I only have a 50 rupee coin and I’m not giving it to you.”

“I don’t want your coin. I want you to go home before you get sick.”

Anya knows she’s getting nowhere with her project. She slowly hands her things over. She does think the man looks capable.

“Two knots,” she says. “One at the top and one at the bottom.”

The fisherman works the thread expertly between his fingers and ties two tight, foolproof knots in less than a minute.

“Home now?” he asks.

Anya takes the newly bound sticks and inspects them.

“How did you do it so fast?”

“It’s part of my job.”

“You work in a knot shop?” Anya is fascinated. She’ll have to visit.

“I’m a fisherman.”

Anya frowns. “But the knots?”

“To make fish nets.”

“I always thought someone else made those. Like factories.”

“Sometimes.” The fisherman rolls up his dripping pants. “But I make my own. So home now?”

“I can walk back.”

“It’s too dark to walk back now.”

“I can try.”

“I won’t let you.”

They stare at each other, long and without blinking. Anya does this with her grandmother sometimes, like as when Anya sneaks candy from her grandmother’s cupboards, and her grandmother walks into the kitchen at the same moment and gives her a stern look that Anya just mimics back, her cheek rounded out by hard caramel, eyes squinted down, eyebrows following. But Anya is always so bad at it, always giggling half a minute in, and then her grandmother giggles too, the way old women giggle – first with their eyes, and then with their bellies.

The staring contest is no different with the fisherman. Anya admits defeat through her laugh and stands up. Her red leggings are wet and iced with mud. Her black buckle shoes, the only pair she owns, have mars and cuts that look irreparable. Her Punjabi dress is also ruined. What were once colorful beads threaded into the fabric are now just one color: black. Her dupatta scarf, made from sheer and light material, is weighted down with moisture and hangs around her neck, cascading down her back.

Without addressing the fisherman, Anya walks to the nearby bush, one that looks barely alive, and hides the bound sticks in the foliage.

“To keep them safe,” she explains when she returns.

The fisherman leads her to the cliff and carefully guides her up the slippery, uneven temple steps.

“What’s your name?” Anya asks, overtaking two steps each time.

“Mr. Muttyala” he says, breathing heavily, trying to catch up. “Slow down. You’ll fall.”

“My name’s Anya.”

“Slow down, Anya.”

But they have already made it to the top of the cliff. The temple grounds are mostly made up of white marble. The temple stands out in the dark, Gujarat landscape.

Anya takes off her sand coated shoes. Mr. Muttyala can’t help but notice how they look like two heaps of cow dung. He takes off his own shoes, not much better, and takes Anya across the shimmering floor, shoes in hand, to the other side of the temple where the motor park is located.

Anya sees a rickshaw right away. Once off temple property, she puts her shoes back on. She tells the driver to take her to Sunflower Road, and Mr. Muttyala barter for a cheap price to get her there.

“Will someone pay him when you get home?” he asks, not reaching for his wallet yet.

“I guess.” Anya shrugs.

Mr. Muttyala just nods and taps the yellow roof of the rickshaw.

“You should wait until autumn to finish the boat,” he says.

The rickshaw driver pulls away. Anya looks back at Mr. Muttyala and quickly replies, “You should wait until you have clean pants before you go to temple.”

She thinks she likes Mr. Muttyala.

*

Nobody pays for Anya's rickshaw fare. She knew that would be the case too, but didn't dare tell Mr. Muttyala. She accepted money from someone once, back when she was four and stupid, and her grandmother cried about it for an hour. That isn't going to happen again. She pulls out her 50 rupee coin, the one her grandmother gave her last week for her birthday, the one she was going to use at the chaat corner across the street to buy a fried potato sandwich with green chutney, and pays the driver herself.

A cow lingers near the bike racks where her front door is located. She pats his side before entering the home. She's greeted by the small television monitor that sits on her grandmother's sewing table. The nightly Hindi soaps are on, and Anya's grandmother is reclined on a maroon quilted pallet – her bed – with a gray sweater over her sari and blankets up to her chest. Her gray hair falls unbraided and limp across the front of her body. Her skin is just a pillowcase for her bones. But she looks happy.

Their next door neighbor, Mrs. Vyas, sits on the floor beside the pallet and wrings out a damp tea towel in a copper bowl before placing it on Anya's grandmother's forehead.

“They killed his wife just last week, and now they bring this ganchu into his home?” Mrs. Vyas vents out loud, looking at the television with distaste.

“But look at him.” Anya's grandmother croaks out her words and looks at the handsome actor on the screen. “Watching him every night is worth it.”

As Anya stands beneath the door frame, she sees Mrs. Vyas notice her.

“Dirty girl!” Mrs. Vyas shouts, looking up and down at Anya. “Where have you been? Your Baa lies here sick and you go out and ruin your nice clothes?”

Anya doesn't have a chance to respond before Mrs. Vyas stands up and drags her to the small bathroom. She strips Anya down and pours buckets and buckets of cold, day-old pumped

water onto her body.

An hour later, Anya is sitting on the floor next to Mrs. Vyas and her grandmother's pallet, wearing itchy, fake cotton pajamas, sporting two tight pigtails drenched with coconut oil, and shelling out peas for lunch the next day. Mrs. Vyas leaves only when all the shows are finished for the night. Even though she's been helping Anya's grandmother ever since the illness started two seasons ago, Anya still thinks the only reason Mrs. Vyas bothers to come by is because she doesn't have a television in her own home.

After Anya packs up the peas in the kitchen, she gets her grandmother ready for bed. She carefully changes the bedpan, rubs Vicks on her grandmother's throat and chest, and brings over an extra blanket before climbing onto the pallet and settling into the curve of her grandmother's body.

"What were you doing today?" Her grandmother's words come out in throaty snippets, but she's smiling.

"Building our boat for Kochi," Anya says, reaching out to hold her grandmother's hand.

"I might not be able to sit in a boat. You'll need to build one big enough for the bed."

"Oh I will, don't worry. I already took foot measurements this morning."

Her grandmother's laugh is lulling, and Anya has to blink a few times to keep her eyes open.

"And what will we do in Kochi?" her grandmother asks.

"Eat fish curry!"

"Or get you new school clothes. You start at St. Joseph's in the winter."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Anya sighs. "But food should be our main priority."

"Hmm." Her grandmother's eyes drift closed. "Did you get your fried potato sandwich

for dinner tonight?”

Anya sobers up. “Yes, with the chutney and everything.”

“With the chutney.” Her grandmother’s head sways toward the wall, away from Anya.

“Good.”

“Jai Shree Krishna, Baa. Good night,” Anya whispers.

“Jai Shree Krishna,” comes the almost inaudible response.

Anya falls asleep to the sound of her grandmother’s snotty snores.

*

The next day, Mr. Muttyala finds Anya on Tithal Beach again. He is heading back to the temple, with clean clothes this time. His teenage daughter, Pinky accompanies him too.

Anya sits in the same place, except now she wears an oversized yellow poncho she found draped on a porch chair she passed by when walking to the beach. She yanked it away and made a mental promise to return it washed.

“I see you’re working on stick number three,” Mr. Muttyala says as a way of greeting.

“Yeah. It was hard to find one the same size as the other two.” Anya studies the knot Mr. Muttyala tied the day before, hoping to replicate it. “But this one seems to work okay.”

“Pinky, this is Anya,” Mr. Muttyala says.

“What are you doing?” Pinky asks.

“I’m building a boat,” Anya says, stretching her fingers. She cracks cracks a knuckle before manipulating the thread onto the third stick.

Pinky tries not to laugh. “Uh, good luck, I guess.”

“Thanks.”

“So were your parents upset with you last night?” Mr. Muttyala inquires.

“No. It’s just me and my Baa.” Anya manages to tie one fairly decent knot.

“Oh, I didn’t know.”

“Why would you?”

“So was your Baa upset?”

“No. How else are we supposed to go to Kochi if I don’t come out here and build the boat? Who gets upset over a present?”

“Oh, I see,” Mr. Muttyala says. “Is it her birthday?”

“No. It’s just a present to make her feel better.”

“She’s not well?”

“Sometimes she’s fine and sometimes she isn’t. I don’t really know, okay?” Anya tries to keep her voice pleasant. “But she told me she wants to go to Kochi and I said we should try to go before I start school at St. Joseph’s. That’s why I don’t have time to *talk* about it anymore. I have to get this done.”

“What do you mean you start at St. Joseph’s?” Pinky asks. “That’s not for kids like us.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Anya asks, offended.

“Pinky,” Mr. Muttyala says. “Perhaps we should get going.”

“Bye,” Anya says. She thinks Pinky would be a terrible friend anyway. Older girls are never fun.

Pinky lingers, watching Anya. Her father tugs on her arm.

“We’ll pray for her,” he whispers. “What else can we do?”

*

By the end of the monsoon season, Anya only manages to form a small raft she can barely fit on. The disappointment she feels is exhausting. In a last-ditch effort, she goes to the only internet

café in the village, owned by the family of one of her school friends. She gets to use a computer for free and tries to figure out this boat building thing. She wishes she had thought of this sooner, but she wasn't friends with Bobby when she started her project.

Even from her seat indoors, Anya is able to breathe in the smell of gasoline from the busy streets. The gasoline mingles with the scent of new fabric deliveries for the sari shop next door and the chicken fried rice being sold out on the curb. It's soothing and familiar. It only takes a moment for the car horns and motor engines to pleasantly hum in her ears the same way crashing ocean waves do.

When Anya finishes collecting information (she only finds one site with instructions she actually understands), she heads home. Her grandmother lays on the cot, eyes closed, lunch tray empty on the ground, and Mrs. Vyas nowhere to be seen. Anya takes her instructions for paper boats and practices on the torn out pages of one of the Bollywood magazines they keep in the apartment.

She folds and folds for about an hour. By the end, she has six pretty decent looking boats. She puts one on her grandmother's stomach, the one with the actor Govinda plastered on the side, wanting it to be the first thing her grandmother sees when she wakes up. She wonders where she'll find paper large and sturdy enough to hold weight out in the ocean, but her thoughts are interrupted by Mrs. Vyas, who bursts through the door with a doctor behind her.

"Anya! How long have you been here? Oh my God." She pulls the girl out the front door, but Anya catches the doctor looking over her grandmother's body and it's too late for Mrs. Vyas to censor anything.

"What's going on?" Anya asks.

"Oh beta ... I'm so sorry."

*

After the funeral, Anya decides she will never bathe again. As the sun dips into the ocean far, far away, the ashes from the pyre are still speckled in her greasy hair and her eyes are still watering from the smoke that swelled up into the sky. She revels in the ashes on her body and the smoke that fills her lungs because once it's all gone, then her grandmother is all gone too and Anya isn't ready for that. She sits in her spot on Tithal Beach and patiently tears apart her tiny raft because wood just doesn't look the same anymore.

“But you worked so hard.” Mr. Muttyala sounds wounded as he sits down next to Anya.

He's shirtless, wearing only threadbare cloth pants and a towel around his head. Further away, Anya can see his boat resting on the shoreline. She feels a pang of jealousy because of how readily available it is for Mr. Muttyala.

“Are you going anywhere today?” She doesn't look at him and jabs patterns into the sand with one of her broken sticks. “Take me with you?”

“I'm going out into the deep end. You have to know how to swim. Do you know how to swim?”

Anya groans, says no, and resigns herself to a life without aquatic adventures.

“My, my. And you were going to go all the way to Kochi?” Mr. Muttyala teases. “That's a frightening thought.”

They both stay silent, watching the sunset. Every year when the monsoon season ends, the skies take on vibrant pink hues that curl around the few remaining dark clouds. Mr. Muttyala and Anya meditate with the lightness and the darkness and the God given beauty in front of them. Mr. Muttyala is a solid presence beside Anya. He's the first person she's spoken to all day. She can't help but speak to him some more.

“Did you know that St. Joseph’s is for kids who don’t have a mummy or papa? Or a Baa? Everyone knows that. I didn’t know that. No one told me.” Anya rubs her dripping nose with a sand-dirty hand. “Everyone thinks I’m dumb. They don’t tell me anything.”

“Anya, nobody thinks you’re dumb,” Mr. Muttyala assures. “I imagine everyone just loved you too much to tell you.”

“I don’t know enough people to be loved too much and I don’t want to go to St. Joseph’s. I’ll go to Kochi instead.”

“You tore up your way of getting there.” Mr. Muttyala gestures to the destroyed sticks.

“I’m switching to paper.” Anya figures the weight won’t be a problem anymore since it will only be her and the ashes.

“Interesting.” Mr. Muttyala nods at her seriously. “But you still need to know how to swim.”

He stands up and offers his hand to Anya. “I can give you your first lesson, if you want.”

Anya lets Mr. Muttyala lead her into the water until the water reaches her belly button.

“I’m going to first teach you how to float the way a boat does.”

He picks Anya up, one arm supporting the back of her knees, the other her shoulders. He positions her flat on top of the water, and Anya focuses on the pink in the sky. Her loose, white funeral clothes balloon out, spreading around her like a tarp. She doesn’t say anything when she feels Mr. Muttyala combing out the dust and ash from her hair with his fingers. She doesn’t say anything when he rubs her bare arms clean, too. She lies there, still and strong, like a boat. She lies there while Mr. Muttyala washes the death off her body.

Bloody Bicycle

The bike is blue. Durable. It shouldn't hold two kids, but in the moment it does. One boy and one girl. The girl sits at the front, right on the frame where there is no seat. She uses her core muscles to keep herself on, her fists gripping onto the stem. She goes with the motions, the ins and outs ins and outs, because she is merely a passenger. It is the boy who is in control. He sits on the black seat with his hands on the handles, carefully maneuvering his way down the narrow, suburban street adjacent to the Pleasant Hollow apartment complex in Plainsboro. The boy's friends, all four of them, are right at his rear on their own bikes.

They always go through this neighborhood, with the green bushes and manicured lawns. The mostly one-story houses are all painted a faded yellow or white. The owners have nice, spring gardens outside filled with roses and colorful dahlias. If they're outside tending to these gardens, or sitting on their porches, they wave at the kids who ride by. The kids always wave back, one hand leaving the handlebars.

As the boy's confidence builds, he speeds up and peddles faster. The girl's feet dangle helplessly off each side. There is nowhere for her to put them. So it's not surprising when her right foot gets caught in the top half of the front wheel, ankle pressing against the fork. In fact, the only surprising thing is that it didn't get caught sooner. The boy doesn't realize fast enough what has happened. He keeps peddling. The bike makes an awful thudding noise, a car with a dying engine, and the girl's white sneaker scrapes against the gravel it meets after each cyclical turn. The boy doesn't register the girl's scream until it's too late, until the wheel makes nearly two full turns with the caught foot that is now bloody. It's not the boy who stops the bike. It's the bike that stops the boy, the blue, durable bike that can't function with a torn up foot and ankle stuck in its anatomy.

The bike topples over on the road, right in front of a yellow house. A man and woman are out front, pushing a child in a swing that is installed to a large tree. The girl's screaming and crying alerts them. The man runs down and examines the situation. The boy and his friends have open mouths and eyes that swirl with shock, disgust, and fascination when they see blood seep through the girl's pale denim jeans, her white sneaker also stained. The girl is distraught and shaking.

The man shouts for his wife to get the first aid kit. He takes the sneaker off the girl's right foot, takes the sock off too and rolls up the denim cuffs. Seeing the four deep gashes on the girl's ankles, he mutters to the boys, "Whose parents are we calling?" Blood pours out of the wounds, colors the gravel, drips off the bicycle spokes like melting wax.

PART SIX: DEVOTIONAL

I VOW TO PRAY WITH YOU

Taboo

Yash cleans the bathroom stalls at the end of Sunset Point Road, parallel to Windermere Lake, every Sunday for Kartik bhaiya in exchange for sugar packets. The packets are fancy ones too, provided at the five star hotels in town during tea time. Yash likes to rip the tops off and suck until all the sweetness is gone – until all that is left is saliva wet paper he can flick into the lake.

When he's not cleaning stalls on Sundays, he climbs a hill that feels like a mountain on Monday. And Tuesday. Maybe Wednesday, depending on the time, and almost always Thursdays and Fridays. It's a good way to make money, because at the top of Goya Hill sits the Durga temple, and at the Durga temple there are tourists. These Hindu westerners, usually from the U.S. or England, make their way up using the man-made steps that are smooth, clean, and fenced off by safety railings. It's beautiful, and comfortable, and child vagrants like Yash aren't allowed to use them.

That's okay, because Yash can climb. He scales up the hill on the other side of the railing, the footings there raw and untouched. He pleads with the breathless tourists over the divide to give him some money. He's a vulture – he knows – but he can only stalk them to the halfway point. The hill gets trickier there, the ledges not wide enough for him to steady both his feet.

On Saturdays, Yash sleeps in Sai's garden for most of the day, knowing the old man is one town over visiting his grandchildren. He rests among the pea vines and vibrant colocasia leaves, which feel soft against his head. This is an improvement from sleeping at the train station, which he does every night. At the train station, people move too quickly and trip over his small, 5'1 body. Injuring delicate toes on the hip bones of a child is a travel inconvenience paired with the likes of misplaced tickets and too much luggage.

This is the way things are in Mount Abu, where the air is thick and hard to breathe, and children like Yash have to climb hills and clean bathroom stalls to survive.

*

It's Thursday when a large bus comes in with visitors wanting to see the Durga temple. In paisley green print, "Salman Khan Tours" can be seen on the side of the bus, though Yash is sure Salman Khan has never set foot in Mount Abu. He stands outside the double doors in his faded berry colored trousers and a fitted white T-shirt that shows all the lines and dips in his body, and waits for the men and women inside to collect their cameras, children, and offerings to the Goddess.

Yash isn't a goddess – he knows this too – but he is envious of every monetary gift She receives. She is a statue at the top of the hill, marble and white. Her stomach is cold. Her lips are carved touching. Closed. Hard. Unforgiving. She wears a new sari each week, and gold adorns Her shapely collar bones. Yash isn't a goddess, but he wishes he was. At an early age, he was dipped in the sun and left there. He lives at the bottom, in skin colored different shades of brown, and walks on feet cut up by the protruding rocks She sits atop. His stomach is warm, but croaks hourly, begging to be warmer. His mouth is always open; he's always panting, or yelling, or crying.

Drool makes his lips soft, but tourists don't drop vermilion-powdered money and flowers at his feet.

When the double doors of the bus open, Yash is already speaking.

"Please, can I have a rupee, bhaiya?" he asks. "Please, didi. A rupee?"

He alternates between the phrases, pausing when he sees a young woman sliding her fingers into the light, cotton pockets of her blue dress. Her family is already walking toward the

nice steps, but she lingers between the bus doors. Yash's hands twitch, wanting so much to feel the coolness of a coin on his palm. But the woman doesn't pull out money. Instead, she holds up a tampon.

“Bathroom?” she asks.

Yash is startled. Kartik bhaiya sells tampons at the stalls he cleans, and Yash, like most 12 year-old boys he knows, wants nothing to do with them. Still, he points to three gray boxes sitting at the end of the lot.

“Dead butterflies inside,” he says. “I can clean it for you, didi. 20 rupees.”

The woman tilts her head, her eyes on his. Yash thinks she's considering. She looks a decade or so older than him. The sunlight reflects off the large, gold hoop in her nose. Her hip length black braid is off center. Sweat drips from her hairline down to her temples. Her skin is as brown as Yash's, her Gujarati also good, but her accent is American.

“Okay,” she says.

Yash sprints off to reserve a stall, looking back once only to see the woman following him slowly. She's unfolds her white sunglasses and puts them on. Yash watches, mesmerized, as she pulls a bulky camera out of her bag, the kind that prints the picture right away, and points it upward toward Goya Hill. The wind pulls her dress back, the camera looks uncooperative in her hand, partly because she's still holding a tampon, and the heat has made her braid frizzy.

She looks good.

Yash opens the stall on the farthest left. He already sees a dozen orange butterflies dried up and sticking to the door. There are a few on the ground too. Yash doesn't know how they got trapped in all three stalls, probably a crack somewhere, but he remembers a little boy who ran out screaming a week ago.

Yash thinks it's beautiful. By itself, the bathroom is rusted and grimy. The toilet is in the ground, Indian-style, forcing any occupant to squat down low. In the place of toilet paper, a black bucket and hose sit in the corner. The butterflies bring color into the dankness, and Yash would enjoy spending a minute or two in there using the toilet. But sometimes people only see the dead things, and that's fine too.

Yash takes the hose and sprays the stall down, watching the butterflies fall like petals into the puddle at his feet. He washes them out, so they find peace on the dirt outside, and then takes a dry rag near the bucket to wipe the wetness off the toilet.

He finds the woman outside, looking down at the butterflies, chewing on supari. Yash finds this strange. He always thought supari was a treat reserved for old men. It's not pretty watching someone eat it. Yash can already see pieces of it sticking to the woman's teeth.

"It's ready, didi," he tells her.

"I'm Anjali," she says, spitting the chewed supari to the ground.

"Okay, Anjali didi."

Yash waits for her to finish her business. He sits on the ground and flips the butterflies around so they're all right side up. He puts one in his pocket. Five minutes later, Anjali comes out. She hands him a crisp 20 rupee note.

"Thank you."

Before Yash runs to the hill to see what else he can get, he notices Anjali walking in the same direction.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"Up to the temple to meet my family."

"But, the tampon? You're—?"

Yash doesn't know how to make it come out the right way.

Anjali smiles. "So?"

"Anjali didi, it's against temple policy to go in while you're – you know."

Anjali's eyebrows come together.

"Are the guards going to lift up my dress and check?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Then I should go pray, yeah? Durga is the Goddess of Motherhood. She'll understand."

"But the policy," Yash says.

"The policy isn't God's law. It's man's."

"Huh?"

Anjali sighs. "So you can go up to pray, but I can't?"

"I can't either," Yash admits. "There are rules here."

"Oh?"

"They don't let kids like me up there. It ruins the experience."

"The experience of worship?"

"Yes?"

Anjali slides her sunglasses up to the top of her head, and pins her coffee eyes onto Yash's darker ones.

"Come on. Today we'll pray together."

*

Yash being brought in front of the security guard he's evaded for years is unsettling. He feels tired and small. He's also sure there is a panic in his eyes. The only reason he gets away with scaling the hill is because he makes sure he's never seen doing it. Sure, tourists will report a

“crazy boy” when they come back down, but which one? By then, he’s gone and there are duplicates of him in the lot.

“Miss, he’s not allowed up.” The guard puts his arm out, blocking the entrance.

“Says who?”

“He’s a beggar. We can’t have him bothering people.”

“How do you know what he is?” Anjali asks. “Is there a sign on him or something?”

Yash finds himself relaxing as Anjali fires on:

“Are you a beggar? Is this a ‘takes one to know one’ sort of thing?”

And then:

“Show me the holy book that says he can’t go up a damn hill.”

And finally:

“Do you want to come with us? It sounds like you need God.”

With a huff, the guard steps aside and lets Anjali and Yash through.

“Realized we’re not worth the trouble?” Yash laughs. “Good on you, *yaar*.”

The term of endearment shared between friends slips out of his mouth easily, and because he expects it, he graciously accepts the cuff on his head for using it.

“I’ve never been to this temple,” Yash tells Anjali, taking the first few steps. “I’ve only seen pictures.”

The stairs feel strange under his feet. This is new territory. Each step he takes is a hesitant one. The other side, the crumbling terrain, is familiar. Safer. He can fly up. Here, he’s unsure if he belongs. He sees different families making their way up. An older man up ahead stops every now and then to drink from his Bisleri water bottle. A little girl in front of him takes tentative

steps. With one hand, she tugs at the back of her mother's pink salwar kameez, and with the other, she squeezes the railing so tight, her bony knuckles jut out.

Yash wonders if he is a different person today. He wonders if he will grab onto the back of Anjali's dress because he doesn't know where he's going. He wonders if he will stop, rest, and admire the landscape halfway up. Huddled in with these groups of people, he wonders: is he a part of their community now?

Anjali puts an arm around his shoulder, guiding him up. She smiles. Yash can't help but smile too.

A few feet ahead of him, outside the railing, a triangular white sign with a red border shows a diagonal line with "10%" next to it. The hill grows suddenly steeper. This is where Yash usually turns around.

"It's beautiful here," Anjali says. "Let's take a picture."

Anjali offers her camera to a woman nearby. She takes a picture of them. They stand side by side in front of the sign, though Yash knows it's not the sign Anjali thinks is beautiful. It's everything beyond. It's everything Yash never took the time to notice. Fishermen down below paddle around each other in small boats in the nearby lake. Brown mountain peaks are littered with white bungalows and sparse, green patches of land. Duplicates of these mountains go on and on until Yash can only see a line of charcoal grey in the horizon.

When the picture prints out, Anjali hands it to him.

"To remember this."

Yash looks at it. Looks at their bodies close together, Anjali's braid over her breast, and his smile. He tucks it away in the same pocket he put the dead butterfly in.

When they make it to the top, the highest Yash has ever been anywhere, the crowd forms a line.

“Here,” Anjali says, handing over a US dollar bill. “An offering for you to give.”

“I can’t keep it?”

“You can if you want. But I hope you’ll want to give it to Her.”

The line moves forward. Their shoes come off. Yash watches how the people ahead pray in front of the Durga statue that has now come into sight. He hasn’t been inside of a temple since he was a little kid, much smaller than he is now. Seeing the statue makes his envy flare again.

He doesn’t know why he bothered coming up here. Perhaps it was because Anjali defended him so valiantly that he fell in love with her, just a little bit. Perhaps it was because he thought he could fall in love with the Goddess, just a little bit. But now he’s in front of Her seeing those carved lips in person for the first time. Cold. Hard. Unforgiving. Swooned over, anyway. Given money too. Fed well. Kept well. Inside. Well rested.

Anjali stands beside him with her head bowed. Her lips move as she whispers her prayer. Yash decides to pray too, only because he wants to show Anjali he knows how. He closes his eyes, presses his hands together in front of his face, and bows his head. When his mother was alive, she taught him a simple bath time prayer. Though he knows it’s a prayer for Krishna, he recites it now. He tries not to think about how in front of him, coconuts, apples, bananas, roses, and money litter the Goddess’ feet.

The line goes on, and a priest waits for both him and Anjali to offer up their hands. Anjali does so right away, but Yash falters.

“Wearing the Goddess Durga’s red thread will protect you, son,” the priest says. He works a light, thin thread around Anjali’s wrist.

Yash is next. The priest doubles up the thread on his frail wrist, making it look bigger and feel heavier. He hates it.

The priest then brings the steel Aarti tray in front of him, the ghee dipped wick producing a blinding and sputtering flame. There's a ton of bills and coins cluttered in the steel too. Yash takes the blessing from the flame, putting his hand above the fire and then crossing his chest. He checks to see if Anjali is watching him. She has already moved forward to get Prasad – a mix of almonds and sugar cubes. With her eyes away, Yash shakes his head at the priest. He has no offering to give.

At the bottom of the hill, Yash watches Anjali's family board the bus. Anjali stands beside him.

“We're headed to Jaipur now,” she tells him.

“Never been.”

“Will you be okay here? Do you need more money?”

Do you want to come? Yash imagines her asking him. Do you want to see the palaces of Jaipur?

“Thank you for taking me up the hill,” he says.

“You're a person, Yash. You're allowed to be near God.”

*

That night, Yash rests his back on a pillar at the train station and pulls out the Polaroid Anjali gave him. People walk over his feet. A man's roller suitcase scrapes his toes. It doesn't bother him tonight, because tonight he's gripping onto a supari chewing woman. He's also eating spiced, puffed rice and drinking a mango lassi. It was a dollar bill well spent. Using his teeth, he

rips off the red thread on his wrist and ties the butterfly in his pocket to the photo. It's temporary. He'll find something stickier later.

He wishes he were in Sai's garden now. He wants to rest his head on colocasia leaves, not concrete. He wants to hold the photo up to the stars before he goes as he drifts off to sleep.

Sal Mubarak

Come to our house, take off your shoes on our brown rope welcome mat, and pray with us as we bring in the new year. Watch out for the golden flames that sputter off the brown clay diyas Ba carefully arranged outside our door. They're long-lasting. The secret is homemade wicks made with Wal-Mart cotton balls and the same creamy ghee we drizzle on our rice. Walk across the brown hardwood floors of our living room, past the brown L-shaped couch. Enter the kitchen where our miniature Hindu temple sits on the brown speckled countertop near the sink.

Recently, mom painted our house. She downloaded the Home Depot app that allowed her to take pictures of our walls and project specific Behr paint colors onto the images to better decide what suited our home. She played with Sparkling Apple, Aztec Sky, and Unmellow Yellow. At one point she was certain Juicy Passionfruit was the answer. I came back to Fort Worth for a visit, ready to walk into bloody bright rooms, and was instead welcomed into a sensible brown home. Brown doesn't call out for attention. Brown matches nearly everything. We love it like we love the shades of our skin. Cinnamon Crumble doors. Espresso Martini walls. Brown little cousins who missed me. Brown parents who squeezed me. Brown aunties with their quiet "hellos." A brown Ba with her arms wide open.

On Diwali, we welcome you into our brown home in the same way. As we stand in the kitchen getting ready to pray, please pass the golden bells to my little cousins so they can ring it as we chant. Take a golden bell yourself and don't be afraid to ring it loud. Let the neighbors hear. We are happy.

Watch as I, daughter and sister, bring out the coconut, the dark skin of its rough shell against my palm, and dip my right ring finger into the vermilion powder. Against the brown strands of husk, I trace lines with my stained finger.

Line 1, to the left.

Line 2, down.

Line 3, to the left.

Lift finger.

Continue.

Line 4, down.

Line 5, to the right.

Line 6, down.

Lift finger.

Dot.

Dot.

Dot.

Dot.

Swastika.

I might mess up and get my lines backwards. I butcher my swastikas all the time. Thousands of years. Ancient history. Vedic Scriptures. Reclaiming what was stolen. The brown girl can't draw.

You might see me google “Hindu swastika” to remember how it goes. The brown of the coconut is marked red now, as the tip of my brown finger is reddened from both the vermilion and the coconut’s sandpaper texture. I place it in front of the Goddess Durga and together we will chant “Jai Ambe.” Ring that golden bell. Hard.

Now that we’ve prayed, come outside. Come close to the fire in the barbecue. Let the heat make your face throb. Are you fascinated when my mother throws our marked coconut into the flames? Poke. Poke. Watch carefully. It chars, specks of brown peeking through. Don’t be alarmed when mom tries to golf it out. She won’t let it hit you. See how it falls and rolls onto our patio floor?

You can do the honors.

Wear the oven mitts and pick it up off the ground.

Throw it down. Smash it. Hard.

Watch it shatter. The white insides a littler darker now, smeared with ash. Brown.

Ba will bring out a block of jaggery.

Let me show you what to do.

Take a piece of coconut and prod your finger into the jaggery. Don't hesitate. Pinch out a good piece. Warm it up in your fingers, let it turn to brown goo.

Spread it on the coconut.

Stick it all in your mouth.

Bite into God's offerings.

PART SEVEN: COMPANIONSHIP

I VOW TO LOVE YOU UNCONDITIONALLY

Five Moments Inside an Interracial Relationship

1.

4 months in

In Warner Robins, Georgia, in my two-story town home, Martin is on top of me in bed. We're talking about what attracts us, our kinks. The lights in the bedroom are off, but the glow of my diffuser lets me see his blue eyes when he laughs and says, "It's crazy, but you're not really my type." He tells me this in a positive way, in a *look, I'm turned on right now so obviously my horizons have been expanded* sort of way. I look at him flatly. He explains. "I'm usually into tall, blonde girls." It's hard to hear this from someone who is not a casual fling, but the man I am falling in love with. As a girl who – since Cory bullied her Indian-ness and taunted her about living in a tipi even though she was not that kind of Indian – has dreamed of natural blonde hair, of green eyes, of lighter skin and an English name ... As that girl, I knew his comment about tall, blonde girls also indicated a racial preference.

"Am I fetish to you?" I ask. "A phase you're going through?"

This takes Martin by surprise, but I'm angry and sad, and insecure.

"What? No, no, no," he continues, but I'm already exhausted from this exchange. I know Martin thinks his comment is innocent. I know he doesn't mean much by it. He might actually be entertaining a fetish and not even know it, so I also know I'll have to explain it to him.

I get off the bed, wipe my tears, and put on my silk, pink robe.

"I just need a minute," I say.

"Ok."

As I leave, Martin presses one of my white pillows to his face.

I go to the kitchen. I don't turn the lights on. I just lean against the oven and cry some more. I thought I was finally in a relationship where someone loved me for *all* of me.

Minutes later, when I walk back into the bedroom, he says:

"It's like when you're a kid." He's sitting up and pensive. "Like when someone asks you what your favorite color is and you say 'red.' You don't really think about it. As you get older, you don't think about whether the answer is true."

"Ok," I reply slowly.

"I grew up with people who looked a certain way. I thought that was what I liked."

I take my robe off and get back into bed under the comforter, covering my brown skin – something I've never felt the need to do until now.

Facing the wall, I say, "I don't need to be any particular way to be loved."

Thoughts like this are on stilts though, but I don't tell him that. I don't tell him that it only takes one heavy blow to be swept away again. Years and years of self-love, and I've only managed to scratch the surface in accepting myself.

"I love you," Martin says, turning me over so you can look at me with those vivid blue, genuine eyes. "I love the way your mind works, the way you speak. The way you look. You're not a phase, Aarti."

And can I fault him for not being exposed to more people of color?

Martin falls asleep first. The diffuser is still on. The smell of lavender makes me drift away. In his sleep, Martin puts an arm around my torso and pulls me closer. He puts his face in my black hair that is frizzy and big with Georgia humidity. We fall asleep skin to skin.

2.

6 months in

At our friend Aaron's birthday party, I hear some of Aaron's friends, Martin included, laugh at an immigration joke while sitting around the dining table. An android phone is passed around, until it arrives to me. The bright screen reveals a meme, a picture of a brown boy laughing in a pool with a pretty woman in a swimsuit. The text: "Kids in the detention camps seem to be having a good time without their parents!"

I'm the only person of color at the party.

I'm also the only person who doesn't think the joke funny.

These two facts are not a coincidence.

I speak up. "There are children who are suffering, children who were torn away from their families. No they are not having a good time."

"It's just a joke," Martin tells me.

As the party continues, I wear the labels "mood killer" and "doesn't understand a joke even if it bites her in the ass" proudly.

Later in Aaron's kitchen, I tell Martin, "It's not funny, and I don't think you'd find it funny either if you came from a family of immigrants."

"What does that matter? I find it funny because it was a joke. A harmless joke. You're not even undocumented! Why are you so offended?"

I think about this, trying to reconcile my own privileged status in this country with why I feel the need to defend those who are similar to my family only in a few ways – not white, not originally from the United States – and for the most part vastly different.

Martin is right; I'm not undocumented. My parents have their Green Cards and I'm citizen. But when did there become requirements to speak up against something wrong? To me, it didn't seem like a far stretch for someone like Martin, who has had family in America since the arrival of the Mayflower, to also feel disgust at the joke. Where was the disconnect?

I think Martin must feel safer with his privilege than I do with my own.

We don't bring it up again until the drive home.

I drive my car out of Aaron's suburban, Southlake neighborhood, and when I turn right at the QT, I ask Martin, "What if we have kids, and someone took them away?"

"That would never happen."

"No, I don't think it would," I agree. "But in imagining that, can't you be empathic? Can't you understand the pain these families are in?"

"I don't agree with what's happening. I don't agree with the policy at all," Martin says.

I say, "If we had kids tomorrow, they probably won't have a childhood like yours. Chances are, they will look more like me than you and they will have to deal with things you've never dealt with before."

"I'd like to see someone try and tell my kid anything," Martin says.

"How would you feel if someone questioned your parenthood one day? While you're at the store? Or at a restaurant? That happens, y'know. How would that make you feel? How would that make our kid feel?"

Martin stays silent for the rest of the drive, as though I dangled information in front of him he never knew existed. As though I pointed to a clear trail on the side of the road that he only saw as wild bush and said to him, "this is a well-defined path" and he just couldn't see it until I said it.

The sun dips down, and we don't say anything else. We just watch the road colored with orange and pink hues.

3.

Nine months in

In May, Martin finishes up Airman Leadership School, officially becoming a Staff Sergeant. I spend weeks trying to find the dress I'll wear to his graduation. On an online military spouse thread, I study the dress code. It has to be conservative. Something with sleeves, something that reaches my knees. Since it's my first formal military event, I want it to be perfect.

Martin doesn't care much for formalities. He says I shouldn't stress too much. He even tells me to wear one of my Indian dresses, like a kurti or sari. My mother suggests this too.

I don't want the attention. I don't want questions about my origin, one not as "exotic" as people might expect when I walk in wearing a sari: born on a hot summer, southwestern day. Texas, USA.

I find a dress straight out of the American 50s, maroon with a rose gold floral print. I wear rose gold heels too, ones that match the color of my feet. The skirt reaches my knees and billows out, while the top is form-fitting and molded to my waist. The only issue is the halter straps. My shoulders are exposed. I remedy this with a silk grey cardigan that slides off my shoulder every now and then. It's bothersome, but I keep it on. I'm not going to be the partner who doesn't know how to dress correctly for an event like this.

When we reach the venue, I get nervous when Martin opens my car door and asks me to take his elbow instead of his hand. He's in his blues, so there are etiquette rules. I've never been escorted so formally. It feels like something out of Jane Austen. When we reach the entrance, I

see several uniformed men on either side of the sidewalk with sabers in their hands. Once we approach, the sabers go up. They shine in the sunset, creating a triangular tunnel for us to walk through.

It's cool, but I feel awkward the entire time like my every move is being scrutinized. I'm afraid I'm going to fall, even though I'm great in heels.

I don't fall.

In fact, throughout the night I am the picture of grace. Many people compliment my dress, I don't gulp down my cocktails and beers like the young, college student I am, and to every new face, I introduce myself eloquently.

There is a seating arrangement in place. Martin and I share a table with some higher ranking officers. Two are European and the rest are American. I realize I am the only woman at the table, also the only civilian. I sit up straighter. Martin's boss, Master Sergeant Schultz, sits next to me and I talk to him for a little bit about my nursing major and my upcoming graduation. When our food arrives, Shultz asks, "And what is that accent? Where are you from?"

I don't have an accent. Martin is listening now too.

"She's from Texas," Martin answers for me. He's polite. "She says 'y'all' a lot," Martin laughs. "Is that the accent you're hearing?"

"No, no," Shultz says. "But where are you really from?"

I don't mind the "Where are you from?" question; I mind the "Where are you really from" question. The fact that the asker has to adjust the first question into the second question shows their lack of acceptance.

The truth is I am from Texas.

This is never satisfying enough.

If I am not from Texas and I am not from India, where do I exist? Do I even exist? In India, I am not Indian enough. In America, I am not American enough. I feel as though I am void. I am nothing.

I feel stabbed each time I hear “Where are you really from?” The stabbing becomes expected. Unsurprising. The pain, however, never numbs.

I don’t want to laugh at Sergeant Shultz. I want to yell and have an attitude. But grace. So I give him a fake laugh. “I don’t have an accent. I’m from America, so…” Cue a second laugh from me, which I follow with a blinding smile. Now I think I should have worn one of my beautifully detailed and colorful saris over this boring, maroon dress. The questions, I realize, were inevitable.

“Oh, excuse me,” Shultz says, laughing too. “I don’t know why I thought I heard an accent. So ‘Aarti’? Where is that name from?”

We all know why he heard an accent.

“It’s Hindi,” I say. “From India.”

“Ooooh Ok. Yeah, that’s what I wanted to know,” Shultz responds.

Martin puts his hand on my thigh, squeezes it. That’s all I need to smile respectfully at Shultz and turn back to my food.

Later in the car, Martin tells me, “I’m starting to see it now. It’s fucked up.”

“It happens all the time,” I say.

It’s usually easy for me to forget those sort of encounters. They occur so much, I don’t have the energy each time. Nothing would ever get accomplished if it did, and I’d never be happy.

But Martin is looking at the road like the road kicked his cat. This doesn't surprise me.
Baby's first encounter with casual racism.

"I wanted to say more at dinner, but Shultz is my boss," he says.

"It's ok."

"I don't want it to fall on you to have to deal with something like that every time it happens. We're a team."

I stay silent. I never considered there would be a time in my life where I didn't have to manage these things on my own.

Martin reaches over and intertwined my smaller fingers with his bigger ones, and we keep them like that for the rest of the drive home.

4.

A year

For our anniversary, Martin and I take a week-long road trip to Florida at the start of the summer. We first stay on Tyndall Air Force Base, and then make our way down to Sarasota. From there, we spend a night in Miami where we dress up, go out, and eat amazing Cuban food at not one restaurant, but two. From Miami, we fulfill one of Martin's lifelong dreams: driving through the keys. When we reach Key West, we spend the night on someone's shitty boat that was posted on AirBnB. Below deck, random pieces of wood and ship parts are strewn across the floor. The bathroom only partially works. I have to sleep on a wet mat.

It's fantastic.

We drink beers and interact with two Chinese tourists who have also decided to stay on the boat that night. By morning, I'm hungover and filthy. Martin cleans up by taking a swim in the ocean. I don't know how to swim.

After we have breakfast, we hit the road toward our final location: Cocoa Beach. It isn't normally a long drive, but rain and traffic keeps us from town until 8PM.

We don't rent our own apartment from AirBnB, and instead rent a room out of a nice family's home.

I am ready to check in and shower. Martin is ready for bed.

When we arrive, we are greeted by a middle-aged man with dark hair on an otherwise balding head. It takes him almost ten minutes to answer the door, but the smile he gives us makes up for the delay. We walk into his living room, a large space decorated in white. A white rug, a white TV stand, a white couch. His son sits in a chair, a foot away the television with a game controller in his hand. He doesn't even look at us.

We are taken to our bedroom, which is clean with red walls and a white comforter. The first thing I notice are the candies on the bed. Two Chupa Chup lollipops.

My mouth forms a wide o as I look back and forth between Martin and the man.

"You like those then?" the man asks me.

"A childhood favorite!" I say. "We had a Spanish neighbor who would bring a jar of these to any get together. I haven't had one since I was nine!"

"Where are you from?" the man asks.

"She's from Texas," Martin answers. "We're both living in Georgia right now."

"No," the man says, still looking at me. "I mean where are you really from?"

He speaks casually, like most people when asking this question. This particular man is nice enough. Hasn't been rude. Has given me my favorite lollipop. So I keep my patience and freely offer the information he is seeking.

"I'm from Texas," I say. "My parents are from India."

"Yeah, that's what I mean," he tells me, laughing now. "You're not illegal are you? I'm not gonna have ICE knocking on my door, right?"

"Hey man," Martin says as a warning, but trails off.

"I'm really tired," I announce. "I think I'll lie down for a minute."

"Cool." The man is unfazed. "Wanna see the rest of the house?" he asks Martin.

While Martin takes the rest of the tour, I process what happened. I very badly want to leave, but the 50 dollars we paid keeps me under the covers. I want to shower, but I am too sure I'm close to crying. I don't want to run into any of the other family members.

I don't feel so welcome anymore. I don't even want to suck on a Chupa Chup.

When Martin comes back to the room, I have tears in my eyes. Not sobbing. Just more fed up with the world than usual. When he sees it, he says, "Alright, we're leaving."

"No."

"Yes."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Martin."

"Aarti, get your butt to it. We're going."

I sit up on the bed. "We're gross and sleepy. It's just one night. It's not a big deal."

“It is a big deal. That was not okay. You’re going to go to the car, and I’m going to go have a talk with him.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

After having a debate, we leave around 11 P.M. We sneak out, and don’t tell anyone. We pass the kid playing his video game, but he hardly notices us.

“Let’s find a hotel,” I say when I get into the passenger side of the car.

“Ok.”

Martin drives. Things are quiet. I can tell he is still trying to understand what happened, but this lack of communication is not what I need. Sleep eventually overcomes me. When I wake up, I have no clue where we are. It doesn’t look like anywhere near Cocoa Beach. It doesn’t even look like Florida. A thick fog permeates the immediate area. The rough structure of a bridge sits to the left, an industrial building to the right.

“We’re not at a hotel yet?” I ask.

“Does that happen a lot?”

I realize he’s talking about the AirBnB man.

“All sorts of things happen,” I say. “It’s okay. Well it’s not okay, but I do need to have thicker skin. Sometimes it gets to me, sometimes it doesn’t. Tonight it did.”

“I wish I said more,” Martin admits. “Not just ‘Hey man.’”

It’s quiet again and I’m wanting a shower and a bed. I know Martin wants that too.

“Hotel?” I ask.

He begins driving again, and I fall asleep again. What I don't know, until later, is that while I am sleeping, Martin is pissed. What I don't know is that he smokes and smokes, breaking his long "no tobacco" streak. What I don't know is that he is downing several energy drinks.

What I don't know is that he is thinking about someone othering our children, that he is thinking about how society might make our kids cry. I don't wake up until he nudges me, and I realize that we are not at a hotel, but back home in Warner Robins.

He drove six hours through the night with just his thoughts and empty Monsters in his back seat.

5.

A year and 4 months

After our engagement, we make a trip to Texas to visit my family, and Martin's paternal grandparents who also live in Texas. I never met his grandparents, even though he has met my own family several times through family vacations – vacations he was always invited to.

Growing up, I never pictured myself marrying any particular sort of person. I was a true believer in love, and treated love like a concept that couldn't be applied to a certain race or look. Perhaps this was because of how my own race tended to be a factor when it came to other people liking me. It seemed cruel, and I couldn't understand why it would matter. So when my parents constantly told me from a young age that my future would consist of marrying someone within our culture, marrying someone Indian, my response would simply be: "Sure, if that is who I end up falling in love with." I wasn't going to be with someone just because they looked a certain way.

My mother and father didn't need any convincing when it came to accepting Martin. The three phone calls a day I gave them indicated a happiness they just couldn't fight.

During our trip, my mother and aunts gush at Martin, a handsome boy who not only eats Gujarati food, but also picks up everyone's plates to do the dishes despite my mother's protests. The sight of a man doing kitchen work is not one these women are used to, and I, too, was unfamiliar with it growing up in that household.

Martin also holds entire conversations with my grandmother, who only speaks Gujarati. He sits on our black, leather sofa and talks and talks. I walk in during one of their conversations, and my grandmother laughs and says to me, "I don't understand him, but he just keeps talking." And Martin says, "I know she can't understand me, and I can't understand her, but I just wanted to chat."

I was expecting things to be much harder. I've understood it to be much harder for other Indian men and women pursuing a relationship outside their culture. I'm compelled to believe that the only reason my family came around as quickly as they did is because of Martin and his agreeability. It is not difficult to like this guy.

When it comes time to meet Martin's grandparents, I'm apprehensive. Martin tells me his grandparents have an interesting way of speaking about people, that with every anecdote they tell, they also feel the need to mention the race of any non-white person that is involved.

"They don't say anything bad, but they weirdly feel the need to give people identifiers. They're nice people," Martin tells me. Pleads with me even.

I'm worried about how Martin's white, Texan, Trump-loving grandparents are going to take to his brown girlfriend. But I wonder if Martin felt similarly coming to my parent's home

for the first time. Was he also worried about how they were going to take to a white, southern military man?

Before we leave to go to his grandparents' house, my mother tells me in Gujarati:

“If they don't treat you right, come back. Don't spend the night there if they aren't good to you.”

As Martin pulls in to his grandparents' driveway in the small town of Novice, I'm nervous. Martin's grandmother stands on the porch to greet us. She hugs Martin long and hard. They haven't seen each other in over a year. I'm surprised when she hugs me too. When we walk into the living room, Martin's grandfather, a retired Air Force officer, sits in a recliner. Martin immediately goes to hug him, while I shake his hand.

I'm still nervous, but the more minutes that pass by, the better I feel. Actually, the more attention that is being paid to my presence, the better I feel. I imagine it would have hurt more being ignored, but Martin's grandfather has a lot to say to me. Most of it has to do with his current medical problems – a swollen ankle, a bad knee, some back issues. I nod and offer any comments I can about his treatment and the bad service he's been getting at the doctor's office.

The next morning, the grandparents treat Martin and I to breakfast at a diner in town. Novice is the epitome of a place where everybody knows everybody. When Martin and I walk in, everyone seated is excited to see Martin. It feels like a Christmas Hallmark movie. And suddenly, I get self-conscious about being presented as this beloved guy's girlfriend. Am I good enough?

Everyone treats me kindly, and I can't ask for more than that. I can't tell if everything is a polite façade or if they are genuinely excited for our engagement. I remember what we were at

the beginning of our relationship – “I’m usually into tall, blonde girls.” Is that what these people are into? And if it is, does it matter?

Back home in Georgia, Martin tells me my mother pulled him aside the day we left for Novice.

“I know you love your grandparents,” she had said to him. “But they’re older and older people are used to living a certain way. They’re used to things being a certain way. If they aren’t nice to her, don’t make her stay there. Bring her back.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Martin had answered. “Aarti being happy means more to me than anything. And if any problems come up, we’ll come right back.”

I knew nothing of this exchange. I was already in the passenger seat of our Toyota Highlander and only saw Martin walk out the door of my parent’s house. He sat down in the driver’s seat, adjusted his GPS, and put a hand on my knee as he pulled out of the neighborhood.

The Photo

In her bridal shot, my mother's wedding sari is green and red with gold pinstripes on the border. Her blouse is a dark, hunter green with sensible sleeves. Her stomach, adorned with a silver belly chain, can be seen through the thin material of the sari. She wears dainty gold earrings with a matching necklace and heavy red bangles. Her hair is in a neat oval bun covered by the green panel of her sari. See how she pinned white flowers in her hair, the petals peaking out from beneath the cloth?

Her nose is pierced.

A big red dot rests between her eyebrows.

No makeup, not even lipstick or blush to give her paper white skin color. Just the red dot. She was the town anomaly with her lack of melanin. All five of her sisters had caramel skin.

In her bridal shot, my mother isn't smiling. She stands in front of a mirror, at 19 years old, and through the reflection you can spot her profile as she looks at the camera. As your eyes roam down to her arms, you can see the beginnings of sun-kissed skin. Then, past the arms, past the red bangles on her slim wrists, you can see her fingers. Her right thumb and pointer finger grip onto two of her left fingers.

No other solo photos.

No redo.

No photographer telling her to smile.

No photographer telling her to relax.

The woman in the photo, my 19-year-old mother, is preparing to wed a man she had only known for a few days.

As a child, I wanted my mother's wedding sari for my own wedding. I wanted the white skin too. I created fantasies in my head about my mother marrying someone light like her so that I would be light too. The sari would only look good against white skin. When I told my mother to keep the sari aside from me, I expected joy. I wanted us to create a tradition. I wanted the sari to be in our family for generations.

No.

I love the sari, but with age I can see the cheapness of it in the photo. The material is thin and likely prone to tears and rips. The blouse with sensible sleeves is actually just poorly cut. What could a village girl with six other siblings have afforded? My mother was forced to wed in that sari, a sari she did not choose. After the wedding, she threw it away. It held the weight of all the changes that would occur in her life. It held her new husband living an ocean away in New York City to get an education, while she lived in Ahmedabad with a mother-in-law who hated her. It held her move to the United States, and with it, it held her goodbye to her father, who would die before her return. It held her need to learn English. It held her work ethic as she walked through the snow, pregnant, to work in factories through her twenties. It held her back pain – developed after laboring a large son, and something that would remain persistent well into her 50s.

It held me.

Those threads stitched up her whole world.