

ABSTRACT

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Nitin Sawhney, Master of Fine Arts, 2006

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Four short stories and the first chapter of a novel.

JOY AND OTHER STORIES

By

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Joy

12th December 1999

I am a doctor, not a writer. I write reports, not poems. The words I choose are dry and dull. I read, so I know the pretty words, but when I write, I don't remember, and when I do, they don't flow and they don't fit. And where would I use the pretty words – in my patient reports?

“Dry, dull, and dead,” Rohit whispers into my ear, as he leans over my shoulder to read the night report I am writing. “Constipated. Like the English.” He is leaning further and further forward, breathing down my neck now, lower and into my chest now, into the space between my tight blouse and my chest. “English,” he whispers. The “sh” is cool. I feel cool, between-teeth air go down my blouse. “Englishshsh,” he repeats. And again. With the soft of my palm, I push his forehead away. Gently. His hair is in the spaces between my fingertips.

He gives me a quick peck on my cheek and stands up. Suddenly straight. Suddenly distant. My neck turns – involuntarily. A breath stops in my chest.

“Your head,…” He reaches into my report and draws a square and a triangle on top of the square: a storybook house, with a red brick roof, like the ones in English storybooks, (do houses in England look like that?) “... is a house.”

Inside the house, he draws rectangles: bricks. All the bricks are words of three and four letters. One line reads: CAT CAN DO DOG.

“The house was built by your Anglo-Saxon granny. It has no windows. No doors. You can’t get out.”

He drops the pen. From behind me, he runs his index fingertips under my eyes, down my cheeks, by my nose, and touches the nose studs on either nostril. I crane my neck up to his face and his upside down lips smile. And they do not mock me.

Love ... flows.

But that’s not true, what he says. My sentences are brief and active, yes, but only because that is how they told me to write at Medical College. Thanks to my grandmother I am one quarter British, and although my hair is thick, long, and crow black, my skin is fair. I have long lashes and big eyes and my breasts are full but my hips are not – and so, for Indian men, I am beautiful. I am grateful for that beauty. But I am not constipated. I get sad and angry and happy. I try to let my feelings flow. And when I handwrite my reports, the letters are cursive not printed, and they flow into each other, and the words begin and end with a little curl. A little flourish.

And I am not always direct. I don’t always get straight to the point. I haven’t told you my point yet, have I?

I try to read poetry – a little Shakespeare or Dante, sometimes Tagore – every working night.

I am from Bengal, and in her heart, a Bengali woman is a poet.

The Ganges flows from ice. I think poetry flows from pain. And I have felt pain.

15th December 1999

When I read the words I write, they jar me. They come in bursts. They don't flow; they stick. My paragraphs are unconnected within themselves.

Poetry flows from pain. From the melting of long-frozen pain? Or from a sharp, intense downpour?

They say talking helps, but I have no one to talk to.

Maybe, soon, the words will flow. Maybe my story will end with a flourish?

Sheetal is a troubled, underweight thirty-four year old, suffering from an as yet undiagnosed psychotic disorder. Two months ago, Sheetal was admitted into the psychiatric ward of the Delhi hospital where I am a resident doctor. At twenty-six, I am the newest and junior-most doctor and so from Sunday through Friday, I am assigned to the night shift.

In the evening, when my husband Benoy returns from work, he drops me off at the hospital. I have with me a couple of books of poetry and my purse. For the first couple of hours, I try to read. Sometimes a patient will distract me. Mrs. Singh, who has been here for a year, will come running out of her room in her nightdress, or sometimes without her nightdress, and she will run straight to the second floor exit, to the door with the green-tinted, one-and-a-half-inch-thick glass, and through it. Or so she thinks. I hear the thud and the heavy body, sometimes in the rustling cloth, sliding against the glass and I lift my sari above my ankles and run out. By the time her attendant comes running out of her room she is on the floor, holding her head, tears rolling soundlessly, hiccups shaking her body. The attendant and I will pick her up and drag her, her thick legs

sliding on the floor, her nightdress billowing wide from the wind of the ceiling fan – an open umbrella, to her door. He holds her, I open the door, prop it open, he drags her in, and I lock the door from the outside. A double-stemmed mushroom. Round legs – bulging out then in, thighs swelling, shins curling in to toe the heels. My last view.

In another hour, I will begin to drift in and out of sleep. Read, then sleep, then read, then sleep. The words are unclear now. Maybe they are subconsciously entering my head? Maybe I will be a poet in the morning?

In the morning, I comb my hair, wait for the day doctor, and when he gets here I take the bus back home. I'm very tired. Often, I am terse with my husband. Sometimes I am rude.

17th December 1999

It's Thursday today. Another Thursday night, two months ago, Sheetal was admitted to the hospital. And a week after Sheetal was admitted to the hospital, I heard a sharp rapping on the locked door of the second floor entrance. Three sharp, loud, distinct knocks. Because I am only the night doctor, I have no need for a proper office with the other doctors' offices. My room – the Doctor on Duty room – room is beside the nursing station of the Psychiatry Ward, on the second floor of our six-storey building. Behind my "Doctor on Duty" sign, on my desk beside the nursing station, I had drifted off to sleep with my head on the newspaper.

I walked around my desk, outside my tiny room and past the nurse on duty at the nursing station. She was rubbing her eyes and as I walked past her, the eyes looked past

the rubbing hands to show me their chagrin. From the green-tinted glass on the top half of the locked door, I saw what I thought to be a tall boy, in blue jeans and a green sweater. Behind him stood the watchman, with his hand on the boy's shoulder. The hand was meant to restrain, but the shoulder was still. There was no tension, no desire in that shoulder to break free of the hand. The watchman looked at me with uncertainty. I looked at my watch. It was three a.m.

A foot away from my face, the boy rapped on the glass again. He had a military green rucksack on his back. His black hair was cut short, like a soldier's, very short, almost shaved on the sides, and a half-inch long on top. I unlocked the door and opened it about six inches.

“Hello doctor,” he said in American-accented English. “I’m very sorry to bother you – at this time – but my sister, Sheetal, is in this hospital. I just flew in from the U.S. Landed an hour ago. I need to see her.”

He was about six feet tall, broad shouldered, and big boned – raised on milk and meat – and dressed like a very proper American educated boy would be, in a faded, collar-less t-shirt and a button shirt that hung loose on top of the t-shirt, over old, overbled jeans that hung loosely over his legs. It was casual clothing; it showed disdain – the working classes wear long-sleeved shirts tucked into belted trousers, and breeding – it was quiet, dark green and blue, not loud-colored or checked or striped. He wore sneakers, not leather shoes, which made him even more boyish, but the sneakers were dark blue and quiet, not loud. The hair was fine and straight, and cut short, like it was never meant to be, it stood on end.

I must have been inspecting him for a little too long because the watchman's hand had fallen off the shoulder; somehow they were both inside the hallway now, and the boy was looking past and around my five feet five inches and straggles of undone hair, at the rooms behind me.

"I think she is in Room 19," he said, and indicated the door with his chin. He spoke with a man's voice, low, clear, and distinctly spaced.

"What's her name?" I asked, then remembered that he had told me. At that the watchman slipped out the door and as the door swung shut behind him, I awoke.

"You have to leave. Come back in the morning. Do you know what time it is?"

But his eyes smiled, although his lips stayed straight and serious and he didn't respond to my words. He didn't need to. After a moment the eyes turned to my lapel, bold upon my lapel, upon my husband's name, bold so they burned through my lapel, so I felt the heat on my breast. His eyes turned serious. Then, softly, from deep within his throat, he spoke. I think he said: "What's wrong with my sister, Doctor Dé?"

19th December 1999

He came up behind me softly as I read and I knew he was behind me and I did not turn. He touched the side of my right upper arm. I turned full circle and stepped into him and my lips were on his.

I think it was about two o' clock on the night after he came. He had received permission to stay in his sister's room, they told me. I was nodding off into Tagore's *Gitanjali*. Actually, I had nodded off. My cheek was resting on *Gitanjali* and I heard his steps and I was on my feet, my senses were sharp as cut glass. Now, again, my senses are cut glass.

His sneakers were soft outside my door. So soft I could pretend to be engrossed and not hear. My feet were asleep. I stood up, went up on my toes, settled on my heels. Up then down. Soundless. Even my shoes did not clomp. I did not turn, pretended to be reading. Standing to stay awake? Enthralled by the beauty of the words I read? My mind was darting. I was light, very light, as if I was filled with helium, sealed, and eager to float. On the skin of my bare stomach, I felt my silk sari; it was caressing. When I breathed out, my stomach sank in, and silk parted from skin. The skin was awake, anticipant. When I breathed in, my breasts strained against the tight, blue blouse. Moist rings of sweat on my underarms. A bead was rolling down from one of the rings. He was behind me.

His fingers on my arm, slipped inside the arm of my blouse, a little inch then nothing, light and creeping a hello, then they were gone. I spun around.

My breasts were crushed against stomach muscle; my hair was inside his shirt, on his chest. I was digging into him, eager to fall into him. He eased back, stepped back – surprised? I stepped forward with him. He pulled his upper lip away from between mine and I fell into his chest, holding his shirt by the open lapels and breathing into him, wanting to be inside his clothes, wanting to hide within his chest hair.

“I know you,” he whispered into my neck, in my ear. It was low, a smiling whisper. I couldn’t look up into his face but I saw the smile.

“I know you.” A growl.

“Why do I know you?”

Then he kissed me again, stepped forward, enveloping me, his legs around mine, and his feet were walking, and he was holding me up, pushing me back, walking me until I was walled by white cement and muscle. And when my back touched the wall I slid to the floor and my legs opened under my sari and he leaned forward, his hands on either side of me, leaned into me, his chest on my breasts, weight on me, hard weight upon my breast, then he was off.

He was hard against me, holding me up by my arms, tight on my arms, soft on my face, ... then away. Watching me – closed-eyed me? Smiling benevolence upon eager me? Hard on my breasts, soft on my lips, so soft a soft lip touching my shut eyelid, dancing upon my ear, peeking under my chin, searching my neck hollow, hovering,... he hovered over my open lips, ...

nothing. Hard then nothing. I feel, crave, lunge for hard. He breathed deep and from his lips he spread cool air on my face, down my neck, into me, and he sank. Rested his torso upon mine. His arms in soft wool around my bare arms, his chest on my breasts. But he started to away and I wanted him on and I pulled his shoulders, his chest, his hair, him, onto me, and his thigh came between my legs where I cradled it in my warm and I held ... tight.

He was laughing now, laughing noiselessly as he sprang open the clasps of my blouse, pull so I strain, strain against cotton cloth, release, laughing at me, with me, for me, laughing. No malice. No pain. No hurt. No anger. Just joy. When my breasts fell out of my bra, my eyes were shut, and he was laughing and when he stopped laughing, he was smiling, smiling in anticipation, when his lips came down upon my breasts they were smiling. With happiness. He was happy. It was happy. Joy! Happy! You hear me? I was happy!

It's all I want.

Sex! I'll say it again! I want sex. Again and again and again. And again. And then I'll die.

20th December, 1999

He teaches History in the U.S. In Chicago. Or some small town outside Chicago. He was born in India, moved there with his father when he was twelve. He's not a boy; he's twenty-five, but he is happy, he looks younger. He's not a banker or an engineer or a Computer Engineer. He teaches History.

His father is an engineer. At first he wanted his son to be a businessman. Then, he realized, Rohit was quiet, an introvert. He'd be a good doctor. He would make good, steady income. You will save life, he told him. But Rohit didn't want to be a doctor.

I want joy, love, happiness. I want high, the love high. Forever high.

I want to be like him – free.

22nd December, 1999

It is Wednesday tonight. You know now that I am in love. Know now that I am alone in love. Rohit left for the States a month ago. For the past two weeks, I have lived as if he were here.

I have written – and relived.

Must I know that he will never return to me?

I feel like a tree whipped long by an incessant storm, now left to ponder. For a whole month, when he was here, I didn't think, just watched as the wind bent me and twisted me, snapped my twigs, caressed and fondled me, shook my roots.

Now the wind is gone and my roots are moved.

What shit!

I am shrill as a broken violin, leaky as a cowdung hut in a nonstop rainstorm.

I look through the glass of my room to the nurses' station. The blinds are all the way up and I can see that nurse on night duty is asleep. So is the watchman. I guess I have no one to speak with.

That's a joke.

They are always asleep. And I don't say a word when they are awake. I have nothing to say to them.

What would I speak of? Tagore? Or Wordsworth, perhaps? My feelings? Should I flirt with Matthew, the neat, handsome nurse? Tap my pen on the table, turn up my chin on my palm, hold my neck tilted to the left and my eyes tilted back to the right, pout my lips, the insides a juicy smile, the outsides thin, curled into exasperation, and flash my big eyes. Yes?

I've done that.

I stopped talking. It began a year ago, when we first moved from Calcutta to Delhi. I had no one to talk to. So, slowly, I stopped. A psychologist would say I was adjusting. I needed to talk. To whom would I talk?

There are the nurses. They're all from Kerala, the educated state of the south; they moved north so they could work, feed themselves, send some money to the struggling family, and then, marry. They have a twelfth standard education and two years of nursing college.

My friends?

What friends?

Mary? She's pretty, perhaps the prettiest of all the nurses. Often, there is a man with her when she comes to the hospital. If she sees me coming, getting

out of the car, she will wait until Benoy drives off, brush down her Salwar suit self-consciously, and fall into step with me. As a conversation starter, she begins to complain about the man who just dropped her off. Then she will start on that doctor who likes her. Then, perhaps, she will brighten, talk about the clothes sale at MotiChor's. I don't face her, don't nod; I give no sign that I'm listening.

When we get to the door, she sighs a heavy sigh – men! Work! – she could be complaining about anything, shakes her head, rolls her eyes, and smiles at me. I look at her for that smile, then away when she smiles that smile. I know she will smile. I wait for that smile. It will make me feel like shit for the next few minutes, I know. We come to the door. I pull it open for her. She smiles. I jerk away from that repulsive fakeness. She doesn't notice.

What about the happy ones?

What happy ones?

I guess a few of them... a couple? – truly care. They don't get involved but they don't make fun of the patients. But sometimes, when the cleaning man or the Chaiwallah's boy make a joke about a patient, they laugh.

Sometimes, we all do.

If they are unmarried, they are unhappy, unfulfilled, and thirsty. And they're stupid. Beronica is noisy, a loud-mouthed, guffawing optimist. Milicent ... is quiet. She's reticent. When I know her, I will know that she is mute because she is empty.

Well,...

She touched me. Milicent did. The night that Rohit left, with her eyes. She knows about Rohit, knows he left. A soft glow from a tentative Deepawali^o diya,^o and I was cold. So she flickered out.

Why would she talk to me?

Why talk? I didn't even speak with him, when he was here – just lived, satiated. Took him in, let him do with me what he did.

Why talk? Do I need to talk?

23rd December, 1999

Every morning, when I step out of the hospital to walk to the bus stop, I take off my shoes and walk on bare feet through a small garden outside our building. It is 30 yards long, and 20 yards wide, our garden.

But every morning, when I leave my building, I stand on the top step that leads down to the garden and look up, around me, at the grey city.

It is six-thirty and already the city has begun to smoke. On the road home, there is an endless line of soot-greying cars stuck to one another. Somewhere in that line, my bus is stuck to the mating line; as it gets hotter inside, people sweat until they could stick. In a half hour I will get on that bus.

There is a parking lot just outside the garden. Cars are closeted, one stuck to another, just fifty yards away. Some have drivers who are waiting for their masters, reading the newspaper or a lurid Hindi novel, waiting. Some are just

^o Deepawali: literally, the woman of light. Here, Deepawali is the festival of light.

^o Diya: red clay oil-lamp, about the size of an eight-year old's palm, with a cotton wick dipped in kerosene.

hovering, some alone, some in swarms. They encircle me. If I look at them I see that they watch me with interest. If I don't I can pretend they don't exist. Today, they will not exist. I'm in a prairie – a grassland where there is only grass and I ... I walk.

After every few yards I run an eight around a circle of a purple-flowered, light green leafed Azalea bush. For a while I walk around the purple upon light, light green, and I am upon darker green, of the grass around the purple, and I walk on – and grass takes over. I need to look no further because I am within, within a sea of grass that has no end. My head hangs low, leans thirsty into the dew, I'm bent like a stork leaning into life-giving water, and there is only life giving water – I will drown in the grass – and from the corner my eyes see a light green sheath around dark and ... I almost ran into a tree. Light, yellow-green leaves or are they flowers?; they ring the dark, deep green within. And I ring circle upon circle of the tree and feel the wet green pricks upon my bare soles and insoles, between my toes and underneath, in the crook where the toes meet the thick arches of my Bengali feet. And when I am almost full, I turn, return to walk a circle of the garden and another and another, and then I see the red. Red! Red flowers shock the green. They hedge the greenness, they shock the green. I look back at the green upon green of my tree, the purple green of the Azalea, and the red upon green of the hedge – I step back. I stumble back. I've discovered the pattern. Circles! Concentric rings of color!

Every morning I discover the pattern.

Why can't I rejoice in the love that we had? What fun – oh, so much fun!
Each moment we spent together was joy.

Actually, I know only that each moment *I* was in joy.

Can I relive that joy?

Every day.

For the rest of my life.

24th December, 1999.

It's Christmas Eve and it's a Friday and I don't have to be here – but I volunteered. I told Benoy that I had to be here because the other night doctor couldn't make it. Benoy is a dear.

Benoy tells me he loves my eyes and so when I married him I began to inspect them in the mirror. Now, I look at them in the mirror each night, before I go to work. When I draw soft rings of eye-liner around them, the black is luminous within the liquid white and the black outside is a duller – it makes the inner white clash with vivid, jet black. Yes. They are beautiful.

Rohit never said a word about my eyes. He never gave me a compliment, except once. He was talking about Sheetal and how she raised him like a mother. I told him that Sheetal was angry with him. He looked at me with a quizzical expression. For a moment he was bemused. Then his eyes widened. His face widened, the little cracks disappeared, as if a light beneath the skin had been turned on. He looked at me with admiration, then tenderness, and then a thank

you I cannot forget. “You’re very perceptive,…” he said. I think he stopped because he had forgotten my name.

For twenty minutes each morning Benoy and I are alone. I return from hospital and he has jam, butter toast and coffee ready for himself and rice or chapatti, dal, and a vegetable – dinner – warmed for me. For twenty minutes he tends to me. Here is what happens.

He is sipping his coffee and reading the paper. The bell rings. He folds up his paper in a hurry and smushes it up more than a little, slips into his chappals, sometimes one or the other has slipped far under the dining table so he can’t find it, and then when he runs to the door his feet shuffle unevenly and his hair is falling over his anxious eyes and they are so eager to see me.

We hug tight. He holds me for ten seconds and then, too soon, too sudden, with a jerk of his arms as if he is done, done with a job, he lets go. “You’re so tired,” he always says. “You need to stop working these crazy hours.”

He knows and I know I have to work these crazy hours if we are to live in a South Delhi flat, have a small car, if I am to be a woman who hires a woman to do the floor and the laundry, and someday, maybe, has a child. I’m tired. I walk past him. He shuffles after me. We eat. He looks at the paper, eats, looks at me with guilt, shuts the paper. Midway through my meal he begins to look at his watch and his eyes become apologetic because in two minutes he must leave.

26th December, 1999

Many people tell me that I have poise. They say I am unruffled. I am proud of that. My father taught me the value of being outwardly serene.

My mother is like a sparrow. She chatters because that's what she is. A chatterbird. When I was a child, all day she chattered – her voice nervous, high-pitched, and chopped into clumps of dissonant words, her words short and sharp-edged – about anything and everything. Everything worried her: if I walked barefoot, I would catch a cold, if I walked with socks, the socks would get dirty, and if I walked with slippers inside the house... the slippers had been outside, they belonged at the door. But when my father came home it was as if the sparrow had been fed white bread dipped in sleep-drugged milk. She was quiet and calm, her eyelids fallen to half shut. She moved about the house in slow, heavy steps, and they were measured evenly, with composure, not hurriedly, with trepidation, and her voice, when she spoke, was soft and level. Peace descended upon the house.

When Rohit rapped on the door I had poise. Never mind that he woke me up at three in the morning with my cheek stuck to the newspaper on my desk. My chin was high. I walked to the door with poise. But when the door banged shut behind the watchman, when Rohit walked first to the wrong room, then, after entering and being rebuffed, towards the nurses' night station, when he peered at my name on my office and walked inside, when I walked into my office behind him, stood looking at his tall back curved, slouched on the chair in my office, his

face in his hands, I did not know the meaning of the word poise. I was not Amina Dé, physician, daughter of Ashok Bannerjee, physician, calm in adversity. I was standing, I think, because I was trying to find me.

27th December, 1999

The Indians know that the eyes can tell stories. The classical vocalist spends years to learn control over her voice; the Kathak dancer, who tells a story from her fingers and eyes, learns to play with her eyes. She relates epics – without opening her mouth. And if you know how to watch, you will know why. People of culture have steady eyes; eyes that express. People of culture don't use their mouths when they can use their eyes.

My husband? I have tried to teach him the language of the eyes. He asks me, eager love in his eyes, how my day was, and I answer, with my eyes, and he repeats his question. "How was your day?"

How do I tell him that words are ugly and limited, that words express little, that words are inexact? That they mean many things and so nothing, that when they come out of his mouth they are sometimes hoarse and sometimes shrill, sharp and short, dull and tired, and they say so many different things and they don't know what they say. He doesn't care to know what they say. And they are restless, they are pungent, and they rot, the little droppings, they fester restlessly in the space between us.

My husband is eager as a puppy dog. He wants to please me, to make me happy, to keep me happy all the time.

We haven't had sex in six months.

December 28, 1999

Yesterday, I told puppy dog.

He runs up to me when I walked in the door, my puppy dog, and he hugs me. He doesn't kiss. He hugs.

"Your sari is wet," he complains as his leg brushes the bottom of my sari. His voice is concerned. Behind his glasses, are his fat eyes suspicious? The fool.

"I've been with someone, you fool."

"What? Today?"

"What do you mean, today?"

"What?"

I look into his eyes.

Finally, he is blank. A half-minute. He starts again. "You've been with someone," the words come out slow, spaced, not clean and intentional and attention seeking. He's not slow and enunciated, not haughty and supercilious, not angry. Just soft, breathing out words in little bursts.

Rohit is gone. Why am I telling him now?

“Yes.” I walk past him into the living room, pull one of our straight-backed, wooden dining table chairs. I sit and it wobbles under me and I steady it with my feet on the floor. My back is straight. I wait for him.

“I’ve been with someone, Rohit. I mean Benoy. Sorry, Benoy. Benoy.” I repeat, firmly, a little angry. My feet are strong on the floor. My legs are tight; inside my shoes, my feet are curled tight around flat floor.

I will be clear, calm, confident.

“I’ve been with someone, Benoy. His name is Rohit. Not today, not last night. I mean, I’ve been with someone. I’ve had an affair.”

He takes his place at the table and his fat eyes blink at me with uncertainty, indecision. A tuft of hair has fallen onto his glasses. I always brush it back. I reach out and put it back in place. His eye beneath the glass beneath where the hair was – it pools. Now it pools over. A tentative tear creeps out. Now it is swift down his flat cheek.

“It’s ok,” I say.

I put a hand on his two hands, folded on the table. I cover half the small, hairy back of his palms, the bones jut out. The knuckles are sharp, they poke out from between my forefinger and thumb. There’s black hair on the backs of his fingers, on the back of his hand, covering thick green veins. Tiny hair sprout in between poking knuckles. He seems to be watching the hair. His neck is tight. Under his slipping jaw – he is only thirty, he is thin, his clothes hang, but his jaw has slid to the middle of his neck – I think his jaw is clenched. He is very still.

Why am I telling him?

He jerks up. His neck cranes so his eyes can see the clock over my head. It's time for work. "I have to go."

"Ok." Needless.

"I have to go." His voice is dull, not angry, just dull. But he sits.

Then he stands up, looks around, and walks out the corridor, out the door. My legs relax; my toes uncurl. I breath a deep breath, smile with relief. With anticipation.

I see his briefcase on the floor.

He's left his briefcase. He walked over it actually, neatly sidestepped his work. I stride to the door.

"Benoy!" He starts, looks back at me, fat eyes, widened by glasses, small mouth open. A triangle of goldfish O's bulging wide with mistrust. Pathos curves their ends into tiny tails.

I'm going to eat you, goldfish.

I hold out his briefcase.

"You've – been – with – someone." His breath spaces out the words, a little burst of air between each word. There's no anger or shock in the voice; no, his voice is not shrill, not the way it gets when he's shocked or in deep sorrow. Four soft, little words carried on a rocking breath. He turns around, walks to the car. From the car, he looks at me once, then backs up and drives away.

29th December, 1999

The house is fraying. The wallpaper is tearing off in chunks. When Benoy gets up from his chair, he grinds it hard against the ground so I feel like crying in pain and anger. Today, when arrive home and put my key in the lock, I heard his chair shuffle in uncertain haste, just like it used to. His feet shuffled too, in his slippers, but then the noise stopped. As I pushed the door open, I looked down the narrow corridor that leads into the living room: Benoy standing in uncertainty. His newspaper was still in his hand. When he saw me, he sat down in his chair and with his feet he pushed back against the floor. The top of the chair hit the wall, his head hit it behind the chair, and both Benoy and the chair slid to the ground against the wall. There is a three-foot long, jagged rip in the wallpaper now.

Another thing. Benoy keeps rubbing his back against the walls of the house. He's got the itch so bad it's funny. He walks around looking for something to rub it against. He walks up and down the house and he looks for new places, first it was walls, then wall corners, stair corners, closet doors moving with his back as he moves from side to side, even the backs of the chairs he sits upon. And he rubs and rubs and rubs. It's funny!

30th December, 1999

William Tell was a great bowman; the greatest in the canton of Uri. As punishment for his insubordination, he was ordered to shoot an apple from his son

Walter's head. The son stands, tied to a tree, waiting, while Tell takes aim. Tell takes aim ...

He is so angry! But he loves me, the poor fool.

Until today, he didn't want to know what happened. Or he didn't want to ask. And I didn't care to tell.

Tell had the guts to wait, to be sure. He drew an arrow and Walter waited. He carefully drew his bow and he held the arrow in place – and waited . How did it feel, Tell? How did it feel to know that inside, your son twitched with fear, to know that every second you waited was stretched out for your son, that his fear grew, and to know that you could bring the torture to an end. And you didn't shoot. You waited.

He wants details. Not the why, but the when, the how, the where.

“Where did you do it?”

It's my night off. I'm shut in my room, traversing Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*. Naked, on a cool Delhi winter night, between warm blankets. With the twin metal rods of the room heater glowing red heat on my uncovered arms, hands, back, and face. Like I'm on fire. In an idyll of languor. I'm on fire in a pit of dreams.

In a couple of hours I'll heat some *parantha* from the fridge, make some Darjeeling tea, get back in bed, read. I will read all night.

He walks in, early from work, into our bedroom. I read.

He is taking his clothes off, first his pants, then his shirt.

“Where did you do it?”

I look up at him, comprehending, unsure of what to say.

“Where? How, I mean, was it good? Was he good?”

His pants are off. His briefs are completely covered beneath his shirt and tie. He is in the dark entrance, by the closet. His hairy legs are dark beneath the white silk shirt, dark, spindly, naked. One leg is shaking, shivering, cold, nervous.

He watches me watch him.

“Are you naked?” he asks suddenly.

“Put your clothes on.”

I return to my book. He watches. Waits. His leg is shaking the floor, the bed, my book. He turns, fumbles with his tie. Facing the closet, his head in the closet, he says it again, muffled, irritated. “Where did you do it?”

His shirt is off now. He throws it into a corner, turns to me.

“Where did you do it?” It’s a demand. His crotch, across the bed, at eye level, is bulging.

“In the hospital.” I hold his eyes. “He was a patient’s brother.”

“How? I mean, how was he?”

“What?”

“How was he? I mean,…”

“What?” Surprise in my eyes.

“Oh, my God, how could you?” Anguish in his eyes.

Fake anguish?

One of my life's most liberating discoveries: I don't have to shoot! To be free in a world of death-driven bunnies who rush, rush, rush, want me to rush, rush between noisy cars, within angry traffic, rush to kill and be killed, I know now that I don't have to shoot. Do I have to have the guts not to shoot?

I start scribbling on the margin.

Freedom, Tell,
Is the strength
To let him wait
Endless.
Joy, Tell,
Is the prize
For the arrow
Unshot.

In his pajamas, he walks out. Slams the door.

31st December, 1999

He hugged me when I walked in the door today.

It had been a long, hot, and hard night. A new patient – tentative diagnosis, Suspected Paranoid Schizophrenia – refused to take her medication. God would punish us if we forced it upon her, she said. For two hours, we reasoned, cajoled, threatened. But she knew that the medicine was evil, that it was corrupting her brain. Towards one in the morning, I was beginning to feel very evil. I called Dr. Vaidya, head of the Psychiatry department. “Give her the shot. Haldol,” he said. “Twenty milligrams.”

So we held her down, the night watchman, her attendant, Milicent, and I – we have no straps in this hospital – and she bit and kicked and scratched for a half-hour. Even then it wasn't over. I couldn't sleep – couldn't shake off her screams.

I was tired when I returned home. I struggled with my large set of keys, tried the right one, then a few wrong ones, just kept trying key after key. When I pushed the door open and walked in, he was standing by the door, ready. And he hugged me tight, his arms going over mine and behind my back, his neck folding into the side of mine, his face buried in my shoulder. He had coconut oil on his hair and tiny specks of dirt and nothing stuck on the smelly, sticky black hair – his mother oils his head with coconut oil. His hug was suffocating: oil on my cheek and brushing my nostrils, my arms were trapped between his, and I tried to free my neck, to lift it and breathe, and he began to cry. He was holding me with all his strength, this short man whose neck fits into my shoulder when he's straight not bent, and shaking and crying, and I was trying to breathe. I'm claustrophobic, I've found. When my nose or my mouth can't get to fresh air – under a blanket, or when someone shuts the windows in winter, I hyperventilate.

I try to be calm. I take a deep breath and try to push it in, but just below my throat, my windpipe has shut. I inhale; the air goes in, stops at my throat, bounces back. I crane my neck, lift my nose to the sky, away from the hair and the oil in my nostrils, the smell of stale coconuts on my face, and I try to breathe. The air bounces back.

I begin to struggle in his hold. He tightens his clutch, pulls me closer, his face wets my shoulder. A hair pokes into one of my nostrils. I twist my head. There's hair in my ear. I lean back further. Maybe I could fall to the ground. Just buckle and fall. I start to fall but he steps forward, his face still jerking spasms into my shoulder, and suddenly my back is against the shut door. The door handle is against the small of my back, it digs in when he jerks, and it hurts. And above the handle, his hands are wrapped around each other, fist around wrist, squeezing. I am gasping. I push against his arms with my shoulders, upper arms. He tightens his grip. My head is spinning, my eyes are watering, and I am still getting squeezed.

And I raise myself a little and press back against the door. Actually, no. I squeeze my stomach and raise myself until his hands slip to the small of my back, and I hit the door handle where the small of my back should have been. As hard as I can. He yelps and jumped back.

“Why?” He screams. He's holding his hurt hand.

I'm bent at the waist, my hands on my knees, looking up at him, breathing a mouthful that stops, then one that goes. The air jerks in my throat, shaking my body, bounces out. Then it goes in. I'm taking lungfuls.

He's moved away, moved so his back is to the wall. He's staring at me with malice, with hate, and he's sliding away with his back against the wall. He reaches the entrance of the corridor, where it opens up into the living room. He's looking into my eyes and rubbing his hands against each other and rubbing his back against the edge of the two walls, scratching left and right, wincing,

scratching hard. His eyes are red and stubborn and his cheeks are swollen and he's rubbing his back against the wallpaper. Oil is spreading a smudge on the corner, the wallpaper is turning dark, wearing thin. I see dark beginning to seep from the back of his shirt. I see the wallpaper turning lighter in his favorite places and then I see it getting darker, dark and red, in the places he likes most, like the edge of the wall where the entrance corridor opens into the living room and light, it is dark and red with blood.

He slides to the floor along the sharp edge and I see a thick stain of blood following him down. His shirt is smudging it, dragging the line all over until it's a blob. He's sliding down blood. I see myself slide down with blood, the line between my hips, the hollow of my spine, my red blouse slide down a wall, my legs open, a tall dark man, big shouldered, looms in front of me, something hard, a hard thigh, muscle, sinew, rubs against me. I pull him onto me, my sari and my petticoats come up around my waist and hard is pressing against me, against my thin, white underwear sticking to dark me. Hard is pushing, straining, trying to slide within wet me, open me, gore me. My panties slide to a side. Hard slides in, in, in, in...

From behind him, down the corridor, I heard a cough, his father's. His mother and father are in the living room, at the table! Now he's sitting on the floor and his mother is leaning over him, now, kneeling down into him, now, she looks at me a moment, with hate, hate, hate.

Why?

I gather myself. Walk a careful, head-lowered walk past them into the living room, into his oncoming father, the father moves back and almost falls, and I'm past him and into my room. Our room. Shut the door and lock it. Out of my sari and onto our bed. Into the sheets and my eyes shut and my hands go down between my legs. There's a blackness in my head, a memory of shut-eyed, thoughtless sensation, and then shuteyed darkness has taken over. I'm fever. My fingers are fast, probing, knowing, they've never been so knowing. I'm so hot, so open, so awake, every pore is aware. Blood is coursing through every pore, to each fingertip. Each fingertip tingles. I'm open, open like I've never been. My thighs are soft wet, wet mud and my hands are hard. Water within, water without. My fingers, my nails, they probe, they claw, they scratch. The inside of my arms on my breasts, my tongue on my hands, my spit on my nipples, my thighs clutch my hands. I'm open. I open! Joy!

Joy!

Joy!

1st January 2000

His parents are living here.

Happy New Year.

3rd January, 2000

It's been four days.

They hate me. They don't know what to do, the poor people. They don't want their son's marriage ruined. It's so improper, so unprecedented, so impossible to have a once-married son looking for another bride. They can't imagine it, never thought about it, have never seen it happen. They hate me.

But they can't see beyond me.

They will just keep hating.

And I will keep trying to deflect the waves of hatred that crash into me when I walk in my door.

He hates me, too. Every morning, welcome flickers in his red eyes, and then it fades into cloudiness. And the red eyes blink and pool and blur into mine.

Then I look away. I will go create a poem – or a fill my journal with insight.

I'm not Anna Karenina.

He doesn't come to the door – just cowers behind his paper, and when I walk behind the paper, and turn, and look in – I have to look in – black orbs shine at me, through red-specked glass. For a moment, I see feeling. Then, he straightens his back, turns to his paper, shakes it with a jerk. It crackles and submits, it straightens, but it needed no straightening.

He hates me.

Moong daal and Haldi have taken over the house. Jeera is frying in vegetable oil. And that alien odor... it's his mother's kitchen odor – Curry Putta. I never use Curry Putta.

His parents are sitting around the dining table. They're eating. His mother is at the stove, flipping dough from hand to hand, then onto pan. I'm walking through my kitchen, my arms are straight, pressed to my side and my hand is still stiff because I force it still but below my wrist, a vein – it twitches.

I would take over. It's my job.

She looks at me tentatively, nervously. Fearfully.

I smile at her. But she has looked away. Straight at her, but she is away, and I stride straight and past, into my room. My bed. It's not my job!

He doesn't leave before I get home, though. He could, but he doesn't.

I undress under my sheets. My hands are cold. I fumble with my blouse, kick off my petticoat, kick the clothes off the bed, rub my hands together. Soon, they'll be warm.

He doesn't come into my room. I think he wants to, though.

He hates me.

6th January 2000

There's a new man-nurse on my shift. He smiles a lot. When he says something funny, he smiles. When he says something that could be sad, he smiles, too. – in commiseration? He smiles when he's angry, too. Mrs. Singh – she's been here for a year now – Her relatives have left her to become a vegetable – If they visited, if they gave her love, they might be able to take her home – He's angry. Outraged. A little smile. It's not a fake, lippy smile – it shows teeth, it

reaches his dimples and rises up his face. But the teeth are together. Mine open when I smile. His are together.

And then he changes the topic. The cash-crazed Redline bus drivers killed two kids and their mother today. They're killing pedestrians every day. Anger. Outrage. Smile.

The anger?

He holds it inside with his teeth, inside that smile, and he swallows it with no sign of a swallow in his throat. Like air going down.

His hair falls on his forehead when he leans forward and if he is leaning forward and I enter, he looks up and he doesn't brush back the hair that is falling over his eyes. He flashes that smile. Smile thinks it is cute and thinks it can win a smile from me because it is cute. I smile. Idiot.

I'm scheduled for a vacation. Maybe I'll go home – to Calcutta?

Some time alone, some peace of mind –
A movie? Superstar is playing.
No. It cries, it cribs, It smiles –
But out of tears. It's sappy.

A black-eyed whore from Calcutta,
Tired bones adrift in alien
streets. Late, one graying sky,
drifts into a nebulous nimbus,
grim, water-laden, and moist.
All of a sudden,
Mary is nigh.

“Repent,” she screams. For you are sin!”
“Why?” I cry!
Flush proud, flash angry
From deep dark, I cry: “Not I!”
The black-eyed whore from Calcutta.

Long live love
 lovelonglive
 longlove
 is happy?

My first poetry. But I'm dripping sleep from my fountain pen now. I'll
 be blotting lines with shapes soon.

I wrote those late last night or early this morning – before I fell asleep. I
 don't think they work.

Today, I return, to a door opened by a neat – a handsome tie – and
 pressed, Benoy.

He's going to work late, he tells me. He wants to talk.

I should worry.

I don't care.

He told his parents to leave. They were getting intrusive, he says.

“I don't want them to come between us.”

He's made breakfast. Eggs, coffee, and toast. Gleaming silverware. The
 kind we never use because it is for special occasions.

Toast is burning. He runs, pulls it out, burns his fingers. I sit.

There's a mountain of pots, pans, and ladles in the sink. Four eggs. Six
 dishes.

All through breakfast, every few minutes, he looks up over his food, and
 smiles.

“Good?” he asks, and nods his head rapidly in answer.

I love him.

“Good?” he asks me again, and I realize that I haven’t even thought of a response – I’ve just been looking into his eyes.

The eggs have onions, tomatoes, and green chilies. They’re fluffy – slow cooked over a low flame, and for the last minute, covered with a top. They are good.

After breakfast, I notice that the sun is shining. I’m still tired, but now I’m full stomach tired. He leans back, pats his little tummy, smiles at me. He burps.

My puppy dog.

I used to be exasperated.

Exasperation. I’d smile, rue my luck, shake my head, go to bed, and be exasperated tomorrow. Life.

“Coffee?” He asks me.

‘Happy New Year?’ he seems to be asking me.

10th January, 2000

Mun maangé more. My heart wants more.

The silly ditty of the Pepsi advertisement tells me that my heart wants more. The Pepsi advertisement plays on every break of this day-night cricket match on the television in my office. Tonight, all the keepers of this zoo are crowded around my desk. For years, they petitioned for a TV set. When the

hospital director changed recently, they got the TV set. He couldn't install the set in the open reception, so he picked my twelve-by-ten-foot cuboid. Tonight, it is being goggled by my four fellow night workers. India is playing Pakistan. I couldn't possibly not let them watch India play Pakistan.

The new male nurse and I sit on a bench and the others sit on the floor beside us. It's 12:30 now and the match is headed for a cliffhanger so they're silent and I have peace. I sip coffee. With my notebook open on my lap, I watch.

There's an advertisement break after each Over – about every two minutes. In my head, the coffee is singing *Mun maangé more* over and over and over. *Mun maangé more!*

Tomorrow evening, I leave for Calcutta, on the Howrah Express. It takes the night and most of the next day to get there. I'll be home – my parent's home – on Wednesday, the day after tomorrow, at two in the afternoon. On the Howrah Express!

I'm restless.

Every summer, I lay on the top bunk of our airconditioned, first-class compartment of my Rumbletrain: the Howrah Express. Every summer, we came from Calcutta to Delhi and then returned, my parents and I, on my Rumbletrain. And I lazed: lay on Bunk One, or Bunkum, the name depended upon my mood, and I lazed. Bunk One was my high seat of surveillance: the higher of the two-tier, reddish-maroon A/C Sleeper Class bunks. From my throne, I watched over the world. Bunkum was my hideout. I walled the open side, the one that looked

down upon my parents, hung a black bed sheet or a big towel across, turned on the wall-light, and cozy in my cave, I watched. And I read.

Either way, I was on top, in charge, over seeing: directly on top of my mother, sitting with an onion and a steel plate on her lap – lop off a top, chop, chop, chop – chopping angry, crying onions, and across from Daddy – reading, or simply staring out the window. And every now and then, I’d look down upon Daddy, and Daddy would look up, and we would smile.

My Daddy loves me.

My Daddy will hate me.

Benoy should hate me.

“Outttaaiiii!!!”

Everyone – the two nurses, the watchman, the three attendants – are on their feet, appealing to the umpire – to declare the batsman out. Yelling in my ten-by-twelve foot room. I hate the bastards.

They all know.

The Indian bowler, his index finger up in the air, is still beseeching the umpire. The umpire ignores him. The bowler looks at him in disbelief. He looks like he’s ready to cry. Everyone in my room is protesting. Even Milicent is looking at the T.V. set with anger. But the umpire is firm. Moin Khan is not out.

I don’t understand cricket. When I was a child, when every one was either playing cricket or watching, I was reading.

It’s between Overs. Here comes the advertisement break. The new male nurse looks away from the T.V., into my notebook. I look into him. He smiles,

unembarrassed, and begins to explain what happened in the last Over. It was a Maiden Over – very good for India. Bastard.

I sip my coffee. I pretend to listen. Why do I pretend?

I don't sleep too much. I get to work. The world rolls. Upon it I tread, and part of it, I roll as I tread. A treadmill train spinning beneath me; a little bit of it, I spin. And I watch. It's a funny world.

And sometimes I watch myself watch and I break into smile. I'm headed home on a packed Delhi bus and I see that I'm smiling full and wide – into the tall man next to me. His chest is six inches from my nose. He smells of the sweat that runs through his shirt. A mason? – he does look like semi-skilled labor. He's tall, unusually so for a man of his class: the moustached class, the blue-collar class. He seems proud. Beneath his curling black moustache, his tobacco-blackened lips are curled with insolence. He stares at my smile with uncertainty. He's puzzled. Then he grins, steps closer, so his hips are touching mine, his arm – holding onto the banister brushes my hair; he grins stink into my face. His teeth are tobacco brown, misshapen, holed.

I turn my back to him. He pushes into me. With a bus turn, I stumble a backstep and between my hips I rub into his groin.

He steps back. Surprised?

He's closer now. One arm comes around, upon my bare stomach. It's a sure arm. His hands are wet with sweat; rough fingers, wet palms. They feel clammy and grainy at the same time. I don't like his hands.

I lean forward with the bus, then lurch back. My sharp left heel is on his toe. I lean into my left heel. He yelps. I walk to the exit. It's a stop before my stop, but I'll walk.

The commercial is back. *Mun maangé more!*

When Rohit was here, no one would crowd around my office. He would walk out of his sister's room, past Beronica or Milicent and into my room, shut the door, and let down the blinds. And there was no reaction.

But now there is reaction. They all know. With their mouths, they say nothing. But their eyes talk. Behind my back, they talk. And the doctors pretend not to hear, but they do. The doctors know. Dr. Karandikar no longer smiles at me. Or he smiles too wide. Like I'm a patient. He doesn't talk to me. Just takes the night report in the morning, when he comes in, and walks off. Sometimes he looks troubled, when he looks at me. The bastard. Like I'm a patient and he's worried about me.

I'm not making this up.

Everyone. Everyone, everyone, everyone looks. Every one knows. And every one cares.

Fuck them.

I write to wash out these memories, to clean them. I drub them on the rocks of this river, rinse them, beat them against the wind, and set them out to dry in the sun.

And when I'm dry, someone will use me again.

The male nurse is sliding closer to me.

He thinks I'm a whore.

He's beside me now, still looking up at the television, pretending, like everyone, to be engrossed in the match. They're all watching me.

He puts his right arm around my waist. He's breathing upon my neck. He's doing something to my hair. His fingers are poking into my neck. He's trying to massage my neck. The coffee has made it tight. It's unyielding. But his fingers keep going. While his eyes watch the television, his fingertips work. They circle. My chin falls to my chest.

His fingers are strong. Digging deep into the hollows. He does this often.

My eyes close.

He's behind me. He's probing in circles and the circles are going lower down my back. I slouch forward and with his other arm he catches me across the stomach. His palm is upon my bare stomach. He sits, enfolds me. I'm pushed up to the edge of the bench, his legs are around me, his chest against my back. I fall, he holds me firm. I'm loose, his fingers mold me. My body is tired. He pushes into me. He holds me up.

It's so easy when you're loose, so easy to fall. Into dark. I'm falling into dark.

All the lights are off. Every one is asleep. I'm sleepy, too, on Rumbletrain, reading late on Bunkum, sandwiched and cozy and comfy and drifting with the rumble. But I need to go to the bathroom.

I stumble out my bedsheets, aside my blacksheet door, down the stepladder. They're all asleep. When I come out of the bathroom, I feel the draft.

The door to the outside is open. Now it bangs shut. Swings open. Darkness beyond. A flash of white – chalk? between dark pebbles? I'm at the open. There are no lights anywhere. But I can make out the hills – or can I? Behind the door, the ground rushes, rushes so I can make it a blur. I hold on to the rung and lean forward and look, look until I can't see the stones by the tracks, can't see the wheels of the train. Just like Anna? Hair whips my face, rocks crunch in my teeth, water runs down my cheek, my hair is dust. But I am numb. The whizzing world is a blur. I can step into the blur. I can be the numbed blur.

Almost morning. I just brushed back my hair, washed my eyes clear of the grains. From my window, I can see the smoke rising from the huts in the slum behind the hospital. A hundred yards away, a little girl comes out of a hut, she's still sleepy, a tin can of water in her hand, drops her dirty Salwar, a flash of brown bum, and she is crouched right in the middle of the street. She opens a big yawn, looks up, right into my window, into me, it seems. Piercing black eyes reflect flint into mine. *God!* I flinch.

In a few minutes, Mrs. Singh will run out of Room Number 11, and into the locked, green glass door of the psychiatry ward. Her attendant will run after her, pick her up off the floor, open the door, and lean her upon her own shoulder. They will walk out the door, outside, to walk in the grass. The Chaiwalla's twelve-year-old runt will bring my tea, with too much sugar – there he is now, early, grinning cheek – and I will smile with exasperation, with the understanding with which my father looks at my mother. I am the last teacup of the morning.

I smile. No exasperation today. I smile at the unchanging freshness. His grin widens. Cheekier still. He turns, skips out the door. He's free.

In a few minutes, Benoy will come to pick me up. He'll wait for me to finish my walk, then drive me to the station. Soon, I'll be on the Howrah Express. Soon, I will be free.

Feel This

Art does not explain or declaim. It merely presents.

-- William Carlos Williams

My dear Āina,

There are times, Āina, when I must. I sit to watch myself, to meditate, as the world calls it, and in my head – two inches above my left ear and a horizontal inch inside – there's a throb. An itch. And I must reach inside and pull out – whatever it is that itches.

There is a spider on my window dancing shadows on the floor. I must crush it. If it rains, I must smoke. Now, I must leave.

There are times, my love, when it's a memory. When I sit to meditate, I see a memory hole and I must look within. Sometimes, I will fall. And deep in the darkness of that memory hole, deep, deep inside that sordid dreamland where I am not lost in sleep and not in awake in sun, a little gnome in my head will light up a story. Pop! A story! Your platformed heels spring with my mother's lightness – did you know? Twenty-five years. It's been twenty-five years and even now you clickety-clack up the woodenstairs and a still nerve jumps in my forehead, a jerk low in my upper back pushes me up to erect awakeness, a thin man, handlebar mustached, grins with malice, my uncle weeps, and my dead mother stares – every time you clickety-clack up the steps to the loft.

I do try to block this craziness. Each morning I wash my face, rinse the sleep out of my eyes, and retreat into my cave. I climb the ladder into the sunlit

loft where it is warm in our Vermont winter and cool in the summer, and cold or warm, I look for the sun. If it is out, it streams in through the skylight and falls into a neat square. If I find the patch of the light, I sit and center on the sun. And I try to feel. For when I can feel, there is no must.

Let me tell you about today.

Today, I climb up and it's bright summer. My cave is a greenhouse, a garden of bright light and heat! Shadows of birdshit on my window crawl across my yellow; there are shapes and creatures running through my grass – sons of the sun and those who block her. But today we are small, we blockers; we seek to fill but are filled, and my garden is all grass. The elongated corners reach into the deepest nooks, dry the leaky ceiling wet, air the dank smelly leftmost corner. And in this prairie of happiness, I find my center. I sit. I wrap my legs into a lotus and feel my bare butt on the warm floor. I soak.

Heat lights up the hair on my arms and legs, the draft from the open crack in the loft window rushes through the wet hair on my head, and first my head and then my body begin to tingle. My heart is warming. My feet are warm. There is heat on my chest, my stomach, and today, even where my legs fork, where my folded knees stop the light, the shadows are small. I enter sensation.

The doorbell! That buzz of static, the deep chime that follows, that bounces around inside your head – it's the doorbell of the house in Gulmohar Park! No, it's mini cymbals, the happy Bhangra drums and the clinking mini-cymbals of the evening, the wandering mendicants who sing their happiness then beat their drums, sing, drum bamboo stick against goat skin, happy and hollow,

and beg, who live in the tired slum that mushroomed in the cleared woods just behind the elementary school, three houses down the South Delhi street where I grew up. Turn left into the dirt street behind the elementary school. Watch! That's childshit on the ground. Does it crunch? A bone. Keep walking. See the light? Past the shrub and trees – there it is! The muddy slum at the end of our Gulmohar-shaded, middle class island of South Delhi.

There are no stray dogs on our street, where the drummers cabal. No dogs live in our houses. And now the drummers wander beyond our street, they drum and beg their alms outside our neighborhood. And dogs, stray and pet, follow them home, but they never come back to that Gulmohar-shaded colony of ours. Our happy-making Bhangra drummers by day, spreading joy among our people and begging alms for their love, and they eat our dogs at night.

Ring the bell. Listen. Listen to the bald hollowness of the drums. They cry and the cries reverberate within cement walls.

They don't.

It's a lie.

You come in... Aina, my mirror, a soft knock on the door and your calm love streams in, and with your petty reminders of reality, the sleeve of my shirt's stuck upon a nail in the chair, the desk that I drum my knees against... so it is I who drums, the doorbell is actually the doorbell of my house – today – not thirty years ago ... with a knock, you step into my craziness and I see my dank, sweaty self twitching in another fit of madness.

They flash, you know. These lies. They flash. "I" didn't think that story.
They pop. Pop! And a flash.

*

Surya,

It is easy to wrap my legs upon our couch and lose myself in your words – and to try to feel what you feel. Your words bring sounds. They echo memories. But, you ask: do they have meaning? And if not, you say, why write?

Yes, when I first read them, I would wonder: is there a meaning? Inevitably, your stories inundate me with image. They mystify. I can see, perhaps, but never completely.

Of course I fall in to your stories. I am programmed to fall. But then you jar me – a moment of incomprehension, perhaps, and somehow I am lost. And open. Wondering. Dreaming.

Your images awaken memories, Surya, memories that I had lost for years. They make me know that I have been young and eager and so in love, and generous and selfless and big -- big beyond what I am now. And angry! oh, so angry – and in my anger, in love, in loss – have I not been creative? Have I not been driven? With so much life! Have I not produced?

You show me that I am rich! That I'm alive with feelings, and thought, and action. I am so much more than the life I live.

Don't leave just yet, my love. I will be at the cottage the day after tomorrow.

*

Today. I escape the loft. I pace nervous in the house, up and down my room, the hallway, the stairs, the kitchen, I pull drawers, shuffle through piles of which I see nothing, throw out nothing, sift through nothing, toss back nothing, run upstairs and into my bedroom, hurl my clothes on the floor. I race to the larder, collide with the stairs, the walls, the corners, run into the glass doors of the larder, grab a cookie, nibble on it for a morsel and a half, spit it out. I make me some coffee, my knee taps the stove side, it's frantic for the water to boil, it boils and I gulp it, burn my tongue, but who cares? Then, when the tension is electric, when my hair is on end and sharp as quills, when my skin tingles and my touch could shock, I break out. I run to the door, outside the house, into the woods.

Gradually, I slow, slow into a lope. My arms hang down my sides; my steps are long, easy, and even. I am bent at the base of my back, but my head is tense on my neck; my eyes are sharp for brush, twigs, and man, my nose points to the ground. A little air goes in my nose, a little leaves. I lope. And then the lope is timed, sweat beads my brow and my pattering feet have warmed my body, and breath is my toy. I am faster. Faster and faster I run, until I can't feel the ground beneath my feet, only the cold wind on my face, the newest wildflowers and the smell of the earth after the rain, the bare branches that prick my arms and the snow that crunches in winter, and my eyes get small and pinched and in winter, they get watery.

My lids fall to half shut; I'm running and feeling, I run and feel, then feel, only feel, whipping, stinging wind and crunchy snow, moist heat in my open

mouth, the colors of the fall in my eyes... I have stepped out of the path, into my story.

I am one with the unplanned, unconscious wild, one with the living. I can kill and not care.

I run and do not to break the twigs, dodge the trees and step out the squirrel's way, and my story shakes my head and it hurts but I feel not the brambles whip my face. My eyes scour the trees for man, who could shatter my world, pry and burrow into my mind with his nosiness, man who will hunt my dreams and track down a whiff of the why of my stories. I dart between tree trunks and my eyes are sharp for a fresh beer can or a burning ember and my nose is sharp for man dung. If I sniff it, see it, if it is fresh, it's bad. Slow now. I turn and I scribe a wide circle. I hide, cringe, bare my fangs in fear of man. And I run – a moth into my flame, until my story is lit, fanned, and I have been engulfed.

I see joy and sadness, good and evil, fun, laughter, friends, foes – I run. Your coolie, Äina. And your mother's lover. And when I see them I must see my mother. The kaleidoscope flashes in evitable, in order. I see my mother, Äina, and then I see you. I see violence.

And I run and run until the story that hammered my head is shaking in my hand, my cold fingers are itching with tension, and then I turn and run to my home, fling in the door, rat up the stairs, and then you can hear the nervous chatter of my fingers on my typewriter.

Pop! A story.

No more running. No more stories.

I have no reason. No message. Pop! Is my reason. My motive. My message.

I must leave.

*

Zero is not the aim of life, Surya. It is the beginning.

We grow. The universe grows. It's natural. To mirror that creativity, to give life, is the ultimate aim of existence.

Purity is a season. So is evil. To seek only purity is to deny a part of you.

You have taught me this.

Do you know what else you have shown me? From you, I have learned that I am cruel. That I am jealous and sadistic. That I am you, and me, and the pedophile who lives down the street. That I want to be sexy. I want to love, to be loved. I want to tie you down to a four-poster and spread myself upon your eager dick.

I am happy and whole, Surya, when I am loved. I am all – and not just. I am not just good, or striving to be good. And I will not live without the courage to know, praying to an impotent ascetic in the shadow of a dualist god.

When *you* are driven, you can create – beauty.

To meditate, to look for emptiness, is cowardice.

Why now? If you're tired, take a break. Rest. Please let me see you tomorrow.

*

Now, when I sit, I control. Now, no stray thoughts creep in. Nothing separates me from observation. Now, when I watch myself, I watch until there are no drummers, no brothers and no mothers, no joints that I must light and no daughters to dream, nothing but my breath coursing through my inside or the sharp weight of a straight spine upon its base, where it meets the hips. I watch the *Muladhara* at the base of my spine and the *Ajna*, the one between my eyes. And I watch my thoughts.

Sometimes, I have insights. But I refocus and the insights cede to nothingness, to the rotation of the Chakra. It rotates and I enter the cycle. Each cycle I am new.

Pride at accomplishment, anger at being deceived, even humility... they're inorganic. What is organic is a state of being. You can be placid and aware, or you can be turbulent.

If you are turbulent, you are unaware of stimulus and its effect upon you, you react. It drives me crazy when my brother insinuates that I'm a liar. You're mad when the cat poops in your clothes. You will be miserable when I leave.

The reaction could bond to a sensitive corner. You were abused; your parents fought, and hit each other, and all through your childhood you were ashamed, furtive, hiding. I love you. I fill a hole.

The reaction needs an explanation. So you create a name for that reaction. You name it a certain feeling. Pride, sorrow, anger – they're patterned biochemical responses to patterned stimulus.

Even humility. Even as I deny that it is I who have created, I am respected, even revered for my humility; and I exalt myself. I *sublimate* myself. Ha! No, Mr. Kant. And no, Mr. Hegel. As a writer in a society that reveres beauty and even more so its creator, I cannot make them accept that I am nothing. They know only that I created it. *I created it?*

If I self-efface, I must admit that I created before I effaced it. And is it really effaced? Or will the pride remain forever?

A person is good, Āina, if he is happy. When I live in joy, I am unconscious of pride.

I will live in peace. I won't flash and I won't pop. I'll blind my mind to the bee who loves its hive and the tree it hangs upon although it cannot reason why, only feel; a blind man who loves a broad-trunked, thousand-birded, tangy smelling tree and he returns to sit under it and he knows not why, only that when he wanders after dinner in the patch of woods by his group home – a dreamer, a somnambulist to the world, inebriated upon the smells of the woods which home that tree, and when sits underneath that tree, his emotions heighten, feelings flash in small and big bursts that light up his existence, and it's all association, not

observation. And one day, he returns and sits by a beautiful runaway woman whom the tree mothers and the blind man's dreams dance, his love bubbles and joy mists up his eyes, but he cannot know why. A tree who branches to bees and to birds, and once, in a cold, rainy December night, provides storm shelter to a mother, who is now dead mother to a fool – dead so far – and she must return. Will the fool sit just beside his sleeping mother, cry his unseeing eyes to sleep, and leave at dawn?... And return again at dusk. Or will he rape her? The woman...will she sit on the bee so it may sting her and alert the fool?... Where is my mother? Where's my mother?

I must leave.

It flashed. I couldn't help it.

To stay is to create. Innovation, originality, art – what is all this but pride? Ego motivates creation, creation satisfies the ego, and creation pushes the ego back into the cycle: pride and achievement, pride and achievement...

But sometimes, ... sometimes I only want to let out the beauty. Beauty is reason, is it not? Colorful clothes on a line, dancing in the wind – they're beautiful. I put words on a string and I set them up so they look pretty. And then I add a few more strings. It's pretty. I draws words. I draw them good.

Ugly? They're beautiful!

Love – is so selfish. It's beautiful!

And my little traps, my stories...?

I lie. All stories – all lies.

Have you felt me, Äina, when you come upon me as I meditate?

You're mouthing these words now. You always do; when you're upset, you forget to read in your head. No! Don't stop. I love that. Your dark eyes are shining bright, aren't they? I love your eyes, Äina. Black bangs falling across your forehead and they match the black in your eyes... no, don't brush them back – I love those bangs falling across your forehead. Yes, smile. Look. Your eyes are filling up. Let them fill. Mine are full, too. But smile, Äina. Please smile. Smile, because it's beautiful when your black eyes smile through wet, and your lips smile through pain. Smile. This one's for you.

*

The man believed it was dark outside. He believed he was alone. On the other hand, he reflected, it wouldn't take much to convince himself that beyond life in this pale – beyond the oblivion of the smoke haze, the cat odor, and the dark brown wooden blinds, beyond the shut up half basement, beyond the murk of October's London – somewhere, there was broad, flooding daylight. That he was not alone. His eyes shut momentarily.

“Surya!” The name is a song. The song falls into a rising then falling crescent, the “u” dips, slows at the knell, struggle swims up to its peak at the ‘r’, scales the ‘r’, falls again, but as it crosses the ‘y’, it stops suddenly, midway, and is enveloped by joy. “Surya” wakes *Karamsala*, the small North Delhi shelter for battered women. In *Karamsala*, the only women's shelter of North Delhi, “Surya” is onomatopoeia for love. “Surya,” in Hindi, is the sun. “Surya” is the name of Nandini's child. The *Karamsala* awakes to “Surya!”

Nandini has run the *Karamsala* in her parental property in North Delhi since Surya was a year old. Ever since he can remember, at any given time, between sixteen and twenty women live and work at sewing machines in their rooms. Five mornings a week, Nandini calls her agent in the U.S. for orders, explains his specs to her designer, then hers to her master cloth cutter and workers, and packs and mails samples to the agent. Five evenings, she teaches her workers Math, English, and Hindi. After they pass their literacy tests – her tests, not the state’s – they are on their own. Others need the space.

Only mothers, children, and the lone, unarmed watchman live in Nandini’s *Karamsala*. Only women who have renounced their last names – their fathers, brothers, and husbands – are allowed to live in the house. There is no need for others. In the evening, on his rounds, the local policeman will come to get his cup of tea. He will chat with the watchman, walk inside and to the office, fold his hands and bow a little to Nandini, and she will have tea made for him. And Surya has a rock, smooth and round, held in a red cloth, tied by a folded clothstrip around his back and over his right shoulder.

Inside the narrow teak door that leads into the still-dark bungalow, a narrow corridor of cheap, inlaid tile leads into a hallway. Three rooms and a long passage break out from the hallway. When you enter, the rooms are on your left and facing you, in a half star: a small, white room with a slim, steel table and steel chair that opens into the tiny front yard – the office, a larger room: in the middle sits a dinner table with eight chairs, around it are several couches, a short coffee table, and a few magazines – the social room, and then there is the kitchen. The

passage on the right runs from front door into back wall, an open door on either side at every seven feet. Each door houses a mother and a child or two, and sometimes three.

“Surya!”

Inside the door at the very end of the hall, a child of five, slight, small for five, big-eyed, and dark, tousle-headed, jumps up from sleep, up on the edge of his thin butt. His eyes are narrow chips, triangles that corner low into his temples, and within them, his eyeballs dart back and forth. His arms are stretched to his sides, lightly supporting his spine, arched into thin alertness, and he is so light on his small butt that it seems like his erect spine supports itself, his arms merely balance his spine on its perch. His forehead is tense. Then, as the footsteps come closer, his arms slacken, the forehead wrinkles dissipate into cracks and the eyes became almonds again, but the smile that the song of happiness has to awaken will not break surface.

A broadening beam of translucent sunlight falls on the shimmering green of the creeper that climbs up his window and bounces, refracting into a dazzle, into his room – a wake up call all his own. He and his mother have no alarm clocks – only the dazzle, *their* dazzle. When he was younger – when he was small enough that she sometimes called him *Suryadeva*, the Sun God, he believed that his eyes opened with the dazzle, and they both opened a blink and a moment, only a moment – never more – before his mother would yell: “Surya!”

The man smiled. He realized that he had never chosen or chosen never to disbelieve that.

His eyes were shut. His face was peaceful. Did he smile voluntarily? He wasn't sure. He was still thinking, he thought, so he wasn't asleep.

“What're you thinking?” The cat odor was back. The man began to grimace, then didn't. In answer, he turned left and rolled towards her and inside, into himself, so his head fit into her armpit and his knees folded into the side of her stomach. She was a small woman and he was big – a little over six feet two, but he had no trouble folding into her frame. And she knew what he wanted and half rolled towards him, so that her breast fell upon his face, and she brought her right arm around over his face. Her fingers ran through his hair. They went deep through the tangled mess and rubbed his scalp. It felt good. He breathed through her smell. It wasn't unpleasant. Is anything unpleasant, he wondered?

“Maybe we're troubled because of who we've been before – before we met.” Pause. “You know?”

He didn't know. He didn't want to know. She was older, twenty-four. She wanted answers. He had none. She was perturbed when he forgot things. Nothing seemed to matter, she said. He didn't remember the restaurant they first went to, and when she probed, she found he'd forgotten the kiss: his bold, unfearing kiss on her virgin surprise – the kiss that was so conscious, so perfectly knowing, so aware that for her, that kiss was everything. She wanted a history. How could he tell her that he had none? They had been together two months –

over her first summer break from teaching autistic elementary kids and his second from being taught at business school – and she said she knew nothing about him.

“Show me your face, Surya.”

He dug deeper down into the bed. This time he went down, not towards her armpit.

“What do you think, baby?” Her voice was soft, massaging, inviting him in.

He said something into the sheets. It was muffled from long before it entered the sheets. It may have been: “I’m not troubled.” It may have been: “I don’t think.”

Her body turned abruptly back so that she was facing the ceiling. Her arms folded under her head. He couldn’t see it but he sensed that she looked thoughtful, removed. And he loved her even more.

“You know I was molested... when I was in Delhi.” The words were like dried clay or play-dough that she’d swallowed, stuck to her throat for years. Now they’d come out in two hardened lumps, pellets that were out there, between them, out in the open while she breathed deep and slow, trying to calm herself, but each breath was a staccato not a hum, a pause punctuated mid-inhale, a pause punctuated each exhale. And he knew she waited for him, but he was afraid.

“I was ten,” she offered.

“Wake up, Surya.” The door pops open and the child opens his eyes. No more darkness.

“I’m woke, mum.” Permanent wakefulness. That’s what he wants. His eyes will always be open when the door opens. The door will always be shut when his eyelids drop.

She doesn’t linger, only smiles and shuts the door. She never does trouble herself about not spending time with him. A smile, sometimes a wink, and she hums out the door. Once in a while she throws a tennis ball – if it’s lying around – or a piece from the *roti* she is chewing, at his face. Then she goes to do laundry or the dishes from last night or yell at the watchman so he wakes up before she walks up to him. In about forty minutes, she’ll yell “breakfast”.

His eyes shut instantly. He has twenty minutes. If she comes again, he will hear her feet and be at his desk when she opens the door. When his twenty minutes are over – he will do the S.W.T. ‘S’ for Shower; ‘W’ for wash – what he does instead (wet his hair, wash his face, sometimes shit, usually not,) and ‘T’ for Trick. It’s quick. S.W.T. and he’s ready. He doesn’t need to shower. He doesn’t brush his teeth.

“I was ten.” The woman wasn’t looking at him. Her voice was going up to the ceiling, not left, in his direction. He was fine. He was in control.

He wrapped his arms around two sides of a pillow and sandwiched his head in between. Long ago he had found that he could breathe through the pillow.

When he needed air he could lift his nose a small millimeter, take a long, streaming noseful of air, then sink again. Every moment was a countdown. His

lungs beat harder and he watched. He kept the air sitting in a little ball in his stomach for as long as it could then it crawled up to his neck, pushing, struggling against the barrier, but he only inhaled a little more and pushed the old air back deeper. But it came back up and it was stronger this time, and again he inhaled a through the pillow and the fresh air pushed the old air down and nourished him a little longer. A third time he tried and then he knew he would have to exhale. But he watched his lungs flutter in his chest, his arms, his stomach. It's funny, he thought, how my insides respond to no oxygen. And then he let the air slowly leave his nose. Slowly. He watched as it caressed his nostrils, then his stomach, then tried to feel it hit his throat, and back to his nostrils.

“My mother and had taken us to Delhi – away from Dad. She put me on a bus and she told the coolie to watch over me.

“I'm going to stand right outside, baby – right there, by the coconut man.’ She smiled at me. I noticed because she was edgy but still she smiled.

“Mr. Satya, the writer guy, a soft talking, black bearded guy – he used to pet me so much, I hated him. He was standing by the coconut seller with two green coconuts in his hands. He was sweating so badly, his shirt was all wet. ”

The man was holding it out now. Every time his stomach jerked his body, he found some more air to empty. But something was creeping inside his head and there was nothing he could do. A woman in a torn white sari lies prone on the ground. She's on her stomach, one cheek on the ground, the other shows the sky an imprint of a hand inked in red. The hand is rapidly drying, darkening as he stands looking at it.

The bed moved under him and his hips jerked up as if he'd been shot. He felt her turn towards him. She was going to ask a question.

“What're you thinking?”

There was no answer this time. She put a warm hand on the shoulder nearer her. The muscles unknotted. His body sank, the skin on his shoulder, under her hand, spread out. She could knead it again.

His pillow was wet, so wet. But now he was in control. He was always in control. All the girls knew that. He was the quiet, handsome rebel; the one who wouldn't speak, the one who followed his own way, the one they all wanted to know.

“I talk too much.” Her voice wasn't regretful. It was questioning. “You don't mind, do you?”

Inside the pillow he nodded desperately, then knew it was too late. She too would have to go.

She breathed deep. “I'm just, ... just making sure. Thanks,” she whispered, and turned to him, onto him, covering his broad back with her arm and half her torso. Love sank into his back.

“The coolie – he was fixty, I think. Maybe more. God, he was ugly. Ma motioned towards me and Mr. Satya looked up and waved. He was ok, I guess. But I hated him. With all his friendliness and all the lollipops, I still hated him. You think children can spot creeps?”

The white sari is red with blood. And the child watching knows suddenly that the hand on his mother's face is painted in blood also.

“The child is the father of the man,” the woman said. “Freud was right, you know.”

She waited. She wasn't perfunctory. She was babbling now, but she wasn't glib. She would stop. He was stationary but his heart was knocking so hard he wondered why she couldn't feel it on her chest. Any minute now he knew he was going to scream and throw her off. “Why can't you shut up? Please!” His appeal reverberated inside his head. Why can't she hear me? She's sensitive. Extra sensitive. He knew she would hear.

“The coolie sat down on his haunches. You know. Like they do in India. Like you do, when you take a shit in the wild. And I can't stop looking to my left, outside my window, at Mr. Satya and ma and I know ma is not happy but she's talking and Mr. Satya is smiling so wide. Why does he smile so wide? And this coolie is sitting with head level with my hips and I look at him and he's grinning. He's grinning!”

The last words were almost a scream. She shivered upon his back and stopped speaking. “I'm sorry,” she whispers, “I couldn't help it.”

The pillow isn't working any more. He's holding his breath and the wet is getting sticky. He stabs the pillow with the top of his head. A knife stabbing the pillow flashes into his head. Water – saliva? a tear? – rolls into his nose from the corners of his lips. It feels like swimming – when was a kid in the pool doing headstands on the floor and the water seeped inside his upturned nostrils. His friend Mukul grabs him by the ankles and holds him so hard, so long inside, that he can't breathe and then the water seeps inside. He knows that Mukul will get

him when he does his handstand but he does his handstand anyway. He can't let any more air in. He has to figure out a way to break free. The man smiles into the pillow. He's smarter than Mukul. He can get out of this one.

“He puts a hand on my lap. I knew he was going to do it. His grin was telling me. The red shirt is on my leg. I was numb until now but now it is strange. It feels ok. It... feels funny, not bad.”

She's said this before, he thinks. And the thought does get his mind away from the pictures that come with her words. *She can touch me and hold me while she says it. She's said it to another man. She's over it. She's just...*

“His face was so ugly, Surya. Pockmarked. His skin was like old, wet leather drying in the sun. But his hands ... they weren't unpleasant.”

The bloody woman in the white sari is back. There's a man, pockmarked and sullen, standing by him. Her front teeth are smashed; the hair is pasted to her head – blood. The creases on her forehead are darker – blood. The lines of stress on her cheek – blood! The pool in the hollow of her ear, seeping out of her broken lips, soaking her sari – blood, blood, blood! He knows this vision. A hundred times he has seen this, a hundred times he has forced forgetfulness and lived. He knows he will not be able to stop her now.

The white sari moves at one shoulder. She's alive! He recoils, looks quickly around. No one else has noticed. The two men who stand with bowed heads beside the body have not jumped back. The man beside him – it's the uncle who manages the accounts of the shelter his mother runs – still stands with his arm around his shoulder. One of the bowed men, he has a Bhangra drum around

his neck, he has a thin face and a thin body and a thick black handlebar, looks around to see if anyone is watching, the child is, he grins, it doesn't matter – he's just a child, he looks left at the other, he gets his attention. He winks. He winks again. He does not see the woman move. He must not. No, she couldn't have moved.

But she is moving. She's twitching. The blood pool has moved. Two snakes have begun, two trickles now run down from the hollow where her arm cleaves from her chest, the hollow that is rising on her elbow. Her eyes! He's going to scream. He watches, his eyes wide with unknowingness, with terror, looks around again. No one notices him. He looks back at his bloodied mother. She's saying something but she can't because blood is streaming out of her mouth. But the man with the black mustache is saying something to the man beside him. He's urgent now. He points to the body with his chin, he must have seen! But she's talking, she's saying something! She's talking to him! To me. She lives. They will know. He has to do something. Before she knows. But his arms, they're being pulled apart... Some one's pulling something from him. He's fighting now. Fighting in rage, fighting for life. He reaches for his rock. Hard on the head. Once, twice, three times.

“Surya!” The cat odor is back. He's on his back on a bed clutching a pillow to his chest. He's looking at the woman whose smell he likes, the woman with dark eyes that pool over, he wants to make her his wife. She pushed him on his back, on a bed – it sinks a little, yes, it's her bed, and she's pulling on the pillow that he's clutching for life. Now she leans over him. Her naked young

body is crouched over him; her small hands are caressing his face. Her nipples are so long, so sexy around, in their ovals, he notices as if for the first time. He feels his penis move against her thigh.

“You’re crying!” She’s so concerned. Like a mother.

“Baby!” She cries again.

She’s hugging him. Holding him as tight as she can and still her arms don’t reach around his back. Her head is pressing against his chest. Her hair is in his nostrils and it smells good. She’s still holding him, so tight his chest is a little constricted. His chest feels wet, her tears, she is rubbing it. He looks down at the little woman who is loving him. There’s a silly smile on his face. The drapes are drawn and through them he can see that the sun is down. He takes a deep breath. His head hurts. The cat shit smells ok.

Evil is beautiful too. Right, Äina?

I live in filth, Äina. Do you know now – why I must leave?

Author's Notes

1. *Äina* means mirror.

In Hindustani, as in other languages, names have meaning. In Hindustani, however, the words they represent could be in use, sometimes in common parlance. In other cases, their use is more remote, their meanings are obscure and they are never used in common speech – except to name the person they represent.

Äina could be a girl's name somewhere, it sounds pretty enough to be one, but I haven't heard it as a name. It is a poetic word for mirror, usually found only in poetry and dramatic prose. 'Look into the *Äina*' is a metaphor for 'look within yourself'.

2. *Karamsala*, literally translated, means place of work. As far as I know, I joined the two roots – *Karam* (work) and *Sala* (place) and made a new word. I could be wrong. It may be in use somewhere.

3.. *Roti*, in India, is a flat, round, bread made of white or wheat flour, usually browned without oil. Don't confuse this with the Caribbean *roti*, a very different preparation from *roti* in India.

4. *Satya* means truth.

5. The *Gulmohar* is a close cousin of Mimosa, the silk tree. The leaves, height, and branches of the tree are similar. The flowers are yellow, not orange.

Snake

I push the car door open and the wind slices into my sweatshirt. Behind me, it hammers the door shut.

The sun is early over the trees but it is cold. It is cold in the joints of my fingers.

It rained all day yesterday and all night last night and today the sky is clean, the cold is crisp. Jagged light stabs the sheen on the trees, the shining rocks, the crashing water, bounces into my face. The trees shimmer. The rocks are like wet, black metal.

A few birds chirp in the distance, but most have not yet returned. There is green on the ground but not yet on the trees.

I shut my eyes.

The gravel crunches under my feet.

A candy wrapper.

In the campground, my feet sink in. My leg brushes a wet grill. The squirrels are bold. There is one here, by the tree a foot to my right. He is trying to crack an acorn.

In the woods, the path becomes a narrow trail. Leafless branches stick into my legs. On my left, the river is full. I walk to the bank and beside a dead birch that leans into the river I kneel. My knees sink in. I open my eyes. The water is two feet from my knees.

The river just pulled in a big tree. A long crack and it slips in, into a sharp pit in the water, gurgles inside. Ten yards on it pops out, races downriver. A green leafy arm swings out, waves to light blue sky.

Above the river, above the small bird chatter, a woodpecker hammers a tree. An Anhinga shrieks – to my right and behind me, maybe fifty feet away. It's a car door in the parking lot.

Another door.

On my run back to the towpath, from between the trees, an old couple is jerking around on the gravel lot, kicking cramps out of their legs. I tighten the elastic band of my glasses, hood my sweatshirt low, cut through shrubbery to the path.

I pass the thirty-second milestone. With the back of my left foot, I tap it. I circle it, tap it again, run on.

*

Today is the first day of Spring Break. For this week, I will have time to be here, in the Potomac floodplain, every morning.

I teach math at the Blue Ridge School, in western Maryland. We have three hundred kids in middle and high school. There are a hundred and fifty acres of woods at the North end of the campus. When it is not too wet, I run in the trails.

I am also a dorm parent. My son Michael lives in my dorm, and is in my seventh-grade Pre-Algebra class. At Blue Ridge, it is allowed.

Michael, too, likes to see with his eyes shut.

Maybe he learned by watching me. Or he may have always known.

Sometimes I will offer a kid chalk – ask her to write an answer on the board. Michael sits all the way in the back of the class. In my class, he puts his head on his desk, and he keeps it there. At the end of the period, when I am at the door, I look back. His head doesn't rise.

When the year began, it wasn't like this. He just wouldn't look at me. I'd ask him a question and he wouldn't say a thing, just stare back, and the other kids would step in.

One day, maybe a month ago, I drew a few intersecting line segments on the board.

-- Which one has a positive slope?

He's got his head on his desk, the hood of his dark blue, Blue Ridge School sweatshirt pulled completely over his head. His arms hang over the desk and his sleeves hang way below his hands. Michelle bought it for him, three years ago. It was too big, but he wanted one just like mine. He wears it almost every day.

-- Michael.

My voice is soft. Sometimes I am not sure if they can hear me.

-- Which of these lines has a positive slope?

Ellie, on his left, broad shoulders flat on her desk, raises her head. She is painting her nails. Robin says she's got the build to be a lacrosse star but she doesn't care enough. She holds her fingers out, toward herself, out to the class, back to herself. The nails are black on the inside but at the tips they fade into a metallic white. She notices the quiet, looks at me, around. Her face clears. With her left elbow she jabs Michael on the back, below his shoulder. He jerks up – a shock of green eyes, blond hair – settles.

She sighs, rises, shakes the loose blond hair from her eyes. With the back of the nailbrush, she pokes him under the arm.

-- Hey, Michael, she hisses. Which one's a positive slope?

Tony, on his right, black hair falling all over his face, fat cheeks squeezing his eyes into slits, stares at her; his mouth opens, shuts, his knuckles are tight around the front edge of his desk. His mouth opens again, and Ellie ducks. But it's not coming, and she tosses back her hair, straightens her back, and now taller than Tony, she again inspects her nails. With the pointed little brush, she starts on the tips. Little Domenica in front, my bug-eyed little Domenica, goes: That one! I am still, looking at Michael. That one! Her left hand points to the board, the right hand shoots up and down, urgent. Her short hair is wet, and freshly rumped before class. That one! She jumps in her seat. Her hand is trembling. I walk to the window.

Sometimes he draws – or rather, he traces. He's got this tracing book he bought for himself. With his head sideways, flat on the desk, he traces. He thinks he's some kind of artist – tracing on top of pre-made pictures in a coloring book.

Wendy, the counselor, told me to let him be. If he doesn't want to answer, she said, don't push. It hurts me in the chest. To not push.

There's a Stilt on the far side of the canal – a Black Winged Stilt – in the woods between the canal and the houses, fifty yards from me. He is far away, and so he is still small, but I know him from last summer. His legs are straws, long, red straws. He's a loner, a watcher. For hours, I have watched him. I have waded across the canal, in a half-hour I have crossed forty feet, been on the same side as his nest, and sat by him, ten yards away. After many days we have learned to sit together – in peace. And I have seen him shriek and flap loudly away as loud joggers squawk past. They don't see him.

If I am running when I pass, he will scream away.

He was in a good mood that day – two, three days ago. At lunch, Tony Marsala and he were giggling. Michael's short and blond. He doesn't speak much, but he's buddies with Tony. Tony's quiet, too, and fat-cheeked, and dark. He's a day student, not a boarder. His father works maintenance at the school.

They were giggling when they passed my table. I can't remember the last time I saw him giggle. Tony pushed Michael, open-palmed, high on Michael's arm, and Michael bumped our table. I spilled some tea. Gloria, the Spanish teacher, was at my table. "Maybe Sierra rubbed against him," she said, and winked. The make up on her fat cheeks glistened, reflected the big yellow light above my head. I shut my eyes.

-Steve!

I opened my eyes. Gloria's hand was clammy on my elbow.

-- I said, maybe you should be more strict. You have to teach them respect.

I nodded.

The Stilt squawks shrilly, each shriek broken, separated by shaking, driving wind against tree; there is no sound like his – Kyuk! Pause. Kyuk! Pause. Kyuk! He beats his wings angrily. Behind me, I know that his three-foot wingspan waves gently, floats, waves up and down, up, down, lazily, low over the canal. The trees frame him.

There's bile rising in my chest, in my mouth. I have to throw up.

My unshaven face is long in the canal. My bony chin bobs up and down. The trees wave. My glasses hang to my chin; my eyes are huge. My white, two-day beard, my short, white hair – two months since I shaved my head, it all sticks out. I look funny.

The day before yesterday, I introduced Functions. I used Rate of Change.

If we're learning slope, we jump across the square tiles in the porch. For Rate of Change, we break up into groups of two and in the lawn by the pond, we have three-legged races. We measure the distance – it's 20 meters, we clock the fastest team – 20-30 seconds, and we divide meters by seconds, distance by time. And we try to understand what we have found.

My classroom is in a trailer – the school is expanding. The room is long and narrow and the teachers hate it because kids hide in the back. I am always claustrophobic up front. I stand by a window on my right corner, and watch the outside.

-- Does distance depend upon time – or is it the other way round?

The walls are quiet. There's nothing on them, not a single chart, project, or picture. What's the point of a chart? We'll be moving out.

-- Manuel and Sam won the race.

I take Sam's chart – he has made it for homework. I copy it onto the board.

-- They hopped at three yards a minute for the first stretch; on the way back, they slowed.

I walk to the window. The woods are across the soccer field. The sun is behind a cloud. A large cumulus. There are cardinals on the grass. My grandfather used to say that when cardinals are on the grass, it will rain. Now, suddenly it's dark. Maybe it's not cumulus. If it rains, no cross country. I want to run.

-- So their speed – rate – got slower. And rate is just how many yards were covered in how many minutes. Yards per Minutes. Yards divided by Minutes.

Across the soccer field, there are short, early-afternoon shadows at the entrance of the woods. Something disturbs the shadows. A tree breaks open and three birds – fighting – parents and intruder? – burst out. They separate, take off

into the sky, two of them after the third, then two float back into the tree; the third flaps away. The two are OK. The tree settles. All is calm.

The woods are quiet, dark and deep – yes, “quiet, dark and deep”. “Dark and deep” modifies “quiet”. It’s not a goddamn list. They added the comma after he died. Behind me there is a shuffling of desks. I turn, walk to the board.

-- Speed got slower.

I write it on the board. I draw an arrow to the chart to the third row –
Speed.

Behind my back, in the back of the class, a desk is moved. It screeches a little, a protruding nail at the base of the leg? then groans, hinge against hinge. A zipper opens.

It’s ok.

-- On the way back, did we have more seconds – or less yards?

All is quiet. I can hear cardinals rustling in the grass.

-- Did the seconds get faster because of the distance traveled? Or did number of yards Manuel and Sam hop change – as time passed?

There are muddy footprints, beautiful, jagged mud streaks from shuffled desks, on the floor of my room. Muddy floor. I look out the window. Repeat the question. First-graders are playing on the swings. In the distance, the woods are dark. But it hasn’t rained yet. How could their feet be muddy? I chance a look at the floor – it’s muddy – I turn back to the window. I want to lie down under a big, big tree. Something’s behind me.

I turn and some one has thrown a balled up note onto Manuel's desk, in the first row. It hits the front of the desk and falls to the floor, close to my feet. Manuel steps out of his desk, his shoe hits the side of his desk, I wince, his foot steps into the mud, he reaches down, picks up the paper ball, puts it in his pocket. He takes the mud back under his desk. I fold my arms across my chest. – Michael, I say, go wash the mud off your shoes. He doesn't rise. – Manuel, I say again, go wash the mud off your shoes. – but I *like* mud. My shoes are clean, he says, and lifts the bottom of his boots up to the sky. There's no mud. No mud on the floor either.

I lower my head and look at the painted plastic tiles. I listen to the seconds go around the clock face. After two minutes, I let them go.

I'm not closing out people. I'm running into them. I run into them, look up, they look at me, confused. I could knock them down. At the thirty-fifth milestone, I turn around. I circle it, kick it. On the way back, I am fast, not feeling my feet. I see the couple that was behind me, they are walking hand in hand, swinging their hands up, down, up, down, long stupid arches, stupid arches smiling, and I step off the path, down into the floodplain, too soon – it's not my path, it's not a path, I'm sinking into swampy soil. The birds are angry. A flash of orange – a cardinal dart a foot from my face – I shy crazily, duck low, my arm across my eyes, run.

The ducks are screaming on the river. They squawk, beat their wings against water, fly a short distance, land, flutter anew the choppy river.

Somewhere, not far to my right, a woodpecker hammers his property rights. A tree careens in the wind, caterwauls. The wind is cold. Under my long-johns I am soaked with sweat. I leap across a fallen trunk.

Yesterday.

He is smiling and talking to Anthony as he walks in. When they are all sat, I ask them – him – a question. I look right at him.

He is smiling when he walks in, and when I glance at him it is her green eyes smiling, but he is smiling at his thoughts and not me, and I smile back and then I shiver all through.

My heart is jumping in my chest. I breathe in and hold my breath for as long as I can, breathe out slowly.

I ask them – him – if he knows how to tell if an equation represented a function or not.

-- The Vertical Line test!

He yells it out. It is the correct answer. His hood is off. I can see his yellow eyebrows, his hair, and his face. It is smiling. I look at the wall over his head. He knows he's right, and now every one does. Tony grins, raises his hand for a high-five. Michael looks at me, confused, I look back, I can't help it, I have to look, and he turns to Tony. He raises his hand and Tony slaps it hard.

Whoops. A shy grin from Michael. It's a plan. They're all smiling. Domenica jumps up; she runs to Michael all the way in the back and hugs him.

-- Why?

He turns to me. His open mouth shuts.

-- Why, Michael? This time I am soft.

His neck turns to me. His lips turn from surprise to an upside down U.

Like her's.

-- Why does the straight line test tell us it's a function?

-- Because you told us so. He spits an involuntary blob.

The class titters. His eyes are narrow. His lips are straight.

They're laughing at me.

-- Did I also tell you where in real life you could use functions?

The back of my neck hurts.

He looks at me – right at me. Her green eyes are wide and locked on mine. She is bold and calm, but her lip twitches and I know I am going to make her cry.

It is grey and turning darker outside the window. There are fat plops on the window. I can't see.

-- Did I?

The back of my neck hurts. In the bump below the hollow, it hurts.

-- Michael. Did I show you why something is a function?

He shakes his head. I dart to his face – his eyes are wide, green is turning to brown. I shut my eyes, turn around, face the window, my back to the door.

-- I didn't?

He shakes his head again.

There is sudden darkness behind my shut lids. A dark cloud. The window is foggy now – air from the heating vent – and it is wet from the drizzle. I can't

see beyond the window. I can't see anything. There's a flash of lightning and I jerk up.

I make my chest to turn. My body turns to him. I take a step and he gets out of his seat, all the way in the back row, and he runs to the door and I am by where he will pass and he stops, four-feet from me and he won't get past. I grab his arm. His eyes fill. "Michael..." He is sobbing. The jerks run through my arm. I let him go.

There's a fallen tree-trunk, branches around it, a thorny stem trying to wrap itself around my leg. I stop, crawl quickly through. My leg catches, it had to, it had to, I yank and yank and yank and it breaks free. I want to be by river. And I am still forty yards from the river and I know there will be no people; by the river, I will be alone.

There are visions in my head. Michelle praying. It is early yet, and in her eyes, there is knowledge. She knows she will live. She is calm, conversing with certainty. Her hair pulled back, her face dry and white and stretched. I look sideways into her eyes. Go away, Steve, she says. I shake my head. Go for a run, Steve, she says, with an edge.

The foliage clears. Twenty feet from the bank a root catches my foot and my face hits something, bounces into wet mud. I crawl into the hollow of a tree. The tree doesn't stop the wind. In my sweatshirt, the sweat won't dry.

I slide my butt deep into the mud, my sweatshirt over my head, cover my eyes, my nose. My heart hammers my chest. My face is jumping.

The river shush-shushes over the rocks. I close my eyes, try to listen to the river, just the river.

I fold into my sweatshirt. The full river crashes over the rocks. My hands inside my sleeves, my face between my knees.

My knee aches. There is a soccer game, last week? – faculty and students. My kids. I get kicked. It is just the goalie in front and I am about to score, but as I am about to kick, I am kicked – in the shin. So I fall – but I kick with my left as I fall, and I see the ball curling in the wind. But it falls too soon, bounces slowly into the goalie. He walks to his right, kneels on the wet mud. He looks surprised.

It's ok.

The river is so full. All the clouds, all the rain, all gone, all making ready for today. Birds screaming at me. Sun shining into my shut eyes.

Shadows dancing on my shut lids.

There is no god without immortality, she says.

On the couch in front of a movie we are not watching. Crying now, open face and open eyes but soundless, with sealed lips, miserable but not angry, no, never angry at him whom she made for her son. With all her love she made him.

Her face stretched and so dry. I rub moisturizer into it. It moistens, but soon it will be dry again.

Pascal, I say, as I rub more moisture. She is quoting a mathematician to me, so I will listen.

“It is beyond doubt that all morality depends on whether a soul is immortal or not.” From Pensees.

We are moral only if, and because, we believe in immortality, he said.

Only believers – in an immortal soul – can be moral.

-- Everyone believes, she says. Even you. She has grabbed my fingers on the bed. Three fingers. Her eyes wide and strained, her cheeks so dry.

She is stating the converse of the axiom. If you believe, Pascal said, you are moral. You are moral, she is saying to me, hence you must believe.

But the converse of a conditional statement is not necessarily true.

-- This, she says, – is – not – it.

Her hand is crushing my fingers.

Her eyes are closed. Wincing. It’s a child. A child is sniffing. Ours.

She is wrong.

I feel his pain.

-- Everyone believes, she says again.

-- I believe in this, I say, and I open my fingers and dig my hands into the mud. My fingers snake inside the wet.

-- I believe in this! I lift mud to the sky.

And nothing else.

A child’s snuffle.

About fifty feet away, through the woods and down the riverbank.

It's a kid.

He's facing the river, his back in a straight line to me. I see where the branches are parted, where his shoes sank into the wet mud.

He's on hands and knees – on a lonely, flat rock that juts up and three feet out into the water – and he is leaning into the river and away from me, and he doesn't see me coming. He's craning his thin neck out to look over the outcrop, under the nose of the rock. His straight, loose black hair runs free in the river wind; it covers either side of his face. The white t-shirt bulges under his thin frame, runs straight to his knees; his knees pull the thinned fabric tight and sunlight runs through one side and out the other. The sleeves hang down almost to his hands. The brownness is stark against blue-white sky.

He doesn't know I'm here.

I clear my throat. He swings around and for a moment his scrunched face opens. His mouth opens – he's seven, maybe nine, brown, and doe-eyed – Polynesian, I think. His lips straighten over clamped teeth. Seven-year-old eyes look angrily into my forty-two-year-old eyes, and I nod, and he swings back to the mud.

I walk slowly to the bank, but at an angle that leads me off the path ten yards to his right. I lift my legs above the branches, sidestep the twigs. His back is watching me. But looking at him, I step on a twig and his back cringes like I have screeched chalk on a chalkboard and I see what he is kneeling to.

A foot above the water, in the watery mud under the boy's perch, under the angled rock just above the water line a small frog is getting sucked into a long, thin snake.

The snake is thin, the width of three fingers, and he's three feet long. The frog's head is sucked inside the snake and his legs are kicking air. His arms push against the snake's jaw. Snake teeth inside his head.

The snake is holding his meat a clear half-foot above the ground. No leverage for the frog's legs – they're banging away at empty air. He's got one arm on the lip of the snake's mouth and he's pushing down with the other. He moves arms to either side of the mouth and pushes out, sideways. He beats his arms on the snake's head. His legs kick like crazy.

There's a sound in my throat.

The boy's back is arched under that shirt; his body is wound. If I touch his shoulder, he'll spring.

Slowly, hands on the ground, I lower myself, about three feet to the right of his rock, squat, wipe the sweat off my glasses, and turn to the fight. He watches me without turning to me.

-- How long?

My voice is a murmur. His neck begins to turn, stops.

The frog's legs are slow now, a tired kick here and there, his arms are wrapped around the snake's head, loving it, hugging the jaw. The snake slithers wetly, like lightning he opens and shuts his jaw and the arms are gone. The legs, all that still stick out, they still kick, slow but deliberate, drugged; the leg bends,

the muscles of the foreleg wax, pause, jerk, kick a mighty kick, it's the jerk of a dying child, a shudder before the quiet; the frog is sentient. Inside, he rubs the snake's palate. He kisses.

He will bulge when he goes down. – jerking a little, with a little knowledge and a little acceptance, kicking, but only a little, against the walls that he opens.

I bend from my knees and from the mud beneath me I loosen and pull out a soggy four-foot branch.

He's going to die.

He looks up at me. I don't know if I've said it out loud but he knows. Maybe he shakes his head, but I don't think so. But I know his answer.

I walk around the rock, to the river side of the rock, the blind side of the snake, my shoes sink in the silt, the water swills inside, and I bring the stick up from my side and put a hand on the rock, stretch my arm straight, five feet away and it will down upon the snake; and I stop my arm six inches above his head and look at the kid.

-- No!

I wanted it to hear it.

In my arm, the stick jerks. But the snake's not facing me, and the wind is blowing out to the river now. He won't scare.

His eyes are pleading.

-- Wait. His outstretched fingers are so thin.

-- Five minutes.

The stick shivers over his head.

-- Please. His hands come together, fold in front. His cheeks are flaking.

On the mud in front of us, twenty yards away, a fat duck steps out of the water, walks, hips, back, dancing stupidly from side to side, toward us, deliberately, stupidly. Behind him there is another. They're walking straight to us. For food.

He looks up at them. He sees what I see. The ducks waddle on. They are six feet away and they stop – because of the stick? In a slow, straight-armed arc I pull it around, and fold my arm behind my back. – No more stick – see. But a frog is dying here; a long pause follows each kick; and the ducks don't even see. The ducks plod forward, a step, two feet away, they are right at us, the snake pulls further under the rock, the stupid ducks still haven't seen him, they're looking at us and not the frog – crumbs?; and the snake drops him, darts under the rock. He falls to the mud and they see him. But in a second he jumps a huge jump, three feet and into the water, he's in wet mud and rising water, but only for an instant. A small hop to mud, a turn, a huge leap and he is away from the tide, on the left foot of the first duck. The duck squawks, shocked, angry, his feet rise into the air, the neck flips back and then jerks down, pounces, grabs him between its bill, his head on one side, feet on the other, duck wings fluttering mad, feet still off the ground, a flip of a neck, he's gone. The duck settles. A blimp rises down the duck. It's slow. It jerks.

The water is cold in my shoes.

He is still bent on the rock, on hands and knees, facing the ducks, necks darting at the mud, swelling up to look at us, waiting. I drop the stick.

I extend an arm, a hand to his shoulder, and he shrinks into the rock; his length curves into the rock. His face turned up at me, he is a twisted crescent, his eyes are scrunched and tearing, and I step back, raise both hands in the air – peace, and I crunch something. A duck's black, webbed foot. I jump off the squawking beating animal. He screams. It rolls in the river, across the river, in the woods across the river, bounces back over the water. He screams again. He's up on the rock on his knees and straight into the air he screams again and it's long and pitched so high it shakes my stomach, it's like I'm tearing him in two, driving a needle into his brain, like his mother's dying.

I wait till he stops. Step back.

-- Hey, I say. I'm Steve.

From three feet away, I put out my arm, my hand a foot away from him. His little hands are muddy – he's been playing in wet mud. He looks at my hand, and his face is blank, no expression in his eyes. Then he slips lower on the rock, wipes his hands on his white shirt and takes my hand in both of his. He turns my palm up, opens it, and lunges. With his incisors he bites into the ball of my palm.

The wind whips the trees, beats the hood on my face. My palm presses deep into the sharp. A branch cracks above my head. The wind howls in between tree trunks behind me, whistles inside a hollow.

Ducks squawk low over the choppy river.

Stop Sign

*A filial tug, a barely ripple
A dead branch, one green sprig
crack from a dead birch,
spin in whitewater toward mindless sea*

*Reach
green sprig
for warm, wet mud.*

On your open lap I am earthed.

See her, visualize her, meditate on her. Before you write. Walk on her belly.

It's hard to mix tenses here. It's not the same effect as in Saramago's *Blindness*. Saramago's start is far more serious. Attention! The man is going blind. The language recedes. The story becomes more important; the awkwardness of the language makes the seriousness more serious. Language makes itself secondary, or tertiary, or not worth attention – by its awkwardness. I am not important. THIS is important.

But this story is just porn.

I

A boy. A boy. A floppy, floppy boy.

Then it was the end of the month and I had no money for rent or food. I went to Phil and he hooked me up with a one-week job. In the backyard of a small church, I was to build a shed for the priest -- for his lawn tractor and tools and storage. Two thousand for everything -- wood, paint, wiring and my labor. At Home Depot, I could get it all for less than five hundred.

The church was in north-west Gaithersburg, where 124 meets Airpark, in the industrial area. A solid little white church, made of brick and plaster. In the morning when I came in from the bus stop the steeple was at the end of the straight road and behind it was the rising half-sun. There was no sidewalk and the long green grass would soak my feet and I would squint at the shimmering steeple to keep warm until I was suddenly in the shadow where it was cold and I could see nothing. Then I would see all the cracks in the white walls, filled with green and black moss. There were tight clumps of grass in the churchyard and in big circular patches there was no grass at all. And there were more weeds than grass.

I would start before seven, have lunch at 11. After lunch I would lie under a tree and squint at the tip of the steeple and feel the wanting to climb in my arms until I fell asleep. I'd be done by five, and I'd be packing up when she was leaving.

The first day I got there at six-thirty and planned for half-an-hour and soon I was flowing and happy. She gets in at nine, tall and thin and short blond hair

falling on her forehead like a six-year-old boy, and she walks fast through the path in the middle of the backyard, her chin stapled to her chest, eyes focused on the books she's hugging to her chest. Ignoring me like I am dog shit on the side of the walk. And I say fuck you bitch and lob a spitball at her disappearing back but five minutes later I am flowing again and I don't give a shit.

Every day I watch her come in. From the lines at the corners of her eyes and lips she is twenty-four or twenty-five but her face is clean and her eyes wide and pure, like she is sixteen. Baggy blue jeans and washed-thin t-shirt pulled tight over tied-down boobs and the shirt hanging low on her thin arms. The shirt and the jeans almost the same shade of dull blue. On the back of the shirt, in big dark blue letters: 'GOD LIVES WITHIN'. Underneath, in small blue letters, the name of the church. And on her left breast a logo of something I forget.

I was nineteen.

She worked until six or seven. Every now and then she had a visitor, always a woman, and she'd walk her to the back door and outside, to the porch and through the path in the middle of the backyard where I was working in the corner. Thin girls, plump girls, all white girls, all girls I wanted to fuck. Sometimes they were teenage girls, my age, or even younger. And sometimes they were older, in their twenties and thirties. Before they left, they would all stop all and thank her and their eyes would be lit, like they'd been blessed. And she'd take off her glasses and hug them, hold them to her breast like she was feeding them. Her neck on their shoulders, facing me, her eyes soft and grey like sand but with the light in sea water. Little lines of concern in the corners. She'd

smile, and *her eyes would slope into the lines.*

And the girl would walk away she'd stand there in the sun, drawing circles on the concrete with her big toe. Arms wrapped around her breasts like she was hiding something, grey eyes staring into the burning concrete like they were trying to beam through.

II

A little uncertain. And a little glowing. (I like this one.)

Or, maybe:

She says it because she knows I will ignore it and be the man anyway.

At lunch I'd go inside to the water fountain and the bathroom and her door would be open, she'd be at her desk, round glasses and messy hair falling on her face, handwriting on letter paper and ignoring me. The third day I went in the corridor and stopped outside her office. I was in my wife-beater, all black and wet from the sun. I pulled off the headphones. It was a long narrow room. Tapping my foot on the metal doorjamb. Tap, tap, tap. Look up, white woman. Her desk in the far corner, her chair on the end of diagonal from me. An old armchair behind her, and on her left maybe six plastic chairs with their backs to the wall. I make my chest tight. The bathroom is down the hallway, she says, not looking up. Her hand and the pen waiting above the paper. I'm quiet, looking around her room. A whiteboard on the wall opposite the plastic chairs. Sunday

school classroom? A bookshelf as high as me in the corner opposite her. She looks up and into my eyes. Yes? Light eyes, not cold, not angry, but not warm. Not a blink for me. In the glasses she looks like an owl. I make circles with my thumb and forefinger and put them on my eyes and make like I'm bugging out. She just keeps looking. Shit man, I say, and I make like I don't get her. I turn around and go to the bathroom.

This is a story about her.

About Teresa.

About fucking Saint Teresa.

Or about Fucking Saint Teresa.

Mystery about him is ok. Leave his story out of this.

That's sad.

I wash and put my shirt on, and get a plastic cup of water and stand by her open door but she doesn't look so I walk inside, to the bookcase.

Christian books. The Confessions of St. Augustine. Thomas Aquinas.

C.S. Lewis. I don't read that shit.

You got a book I can read?

She just sits there, behind me, not saying nothing. Me facing the bookcase.

What kind of book do you want? So soft.

A story. I turn to her. I can read anything with a story.

She steps out. The nails of the chair are loose and wood sounds against wood. Her arm brushes my arm and I go zing. Fucked up. A chick that looks like a nerd boy and I go zing. She's bent over, looking at the books, her butt sticking out. So fucking lovely I want to lick my finger and stick it in. From the third rack from the top she pulls out a thin, brown book, an old book bound with cardboard and brown cloth with the letters on the side faded and the seam split and spilling a white fuzz. There are three books just like that, side by side. Inside the binding, on the front cover, it says: *The Life of St. Teresa by Herself*. A woman in white clothes. A nun. She looks like she's having an orgasm.

She's my favorite writer, she says.

Wow, I say, looking at the picture.

You're a fool, she says. Her face tight.

Hey! I say, all injured. I put my arms up.

But she's back in her chair and rifling through her papers.

I open the book. It is underlined all over. I turn to a page in the middle. I read for a bit, then I read this part (it is underlined), out loud.

For the love of God, let me work at my spinning wheel and go to choir and perform the duties of the religious life, like the other sisters. I am not meant to write: I have neither the health nor the intelligence for it.

Her eyes are big. Maybe a little wet.

Ok, I say loudly. Thanks for the book.

She nods, not looking.

At the door I turn. I'll let you know what I think, I say.

She flashes a quick smile.

I walked her to her car that night. And every night, for the rest of the week. It's not even dark, she says. I've walked to my car alone, you know. Before you showed up. But I don't say nothing because I know she's just saying it because she knows I will ignore it and be the man anyway.

III

At the corner of North Summit.

Show what she does.

God help me.

It was the last day of that week and the shed was done and I was tired and happy. I walked her to the car and she stopped and looked at me with the light in her eyes and I looked away. My shirt was stuck to my chest. She put her arms around me and she held me and my arms went up and around her and I felt her breasts on my chest and my mind quit. I was hard as rock. And she held me still and the warm in her flowed into me and I felt clean. Like a dream. I opened the door for her. Her dark brown Jeep Cherokee Laredo. She climbs in carefully, and gently I shut the door. A purr and a click. I am lost like a little lamb. The window rolls down. Come, she says. I give you a ride home.

It is leather seats and wood panel, new and shining. I run my hand on the

shiny wood and I whistle low between my teeth and her cheeks turn round and red. My father bought it, she says. I didn't want it, but it's impossible to say no to my father.

She doesn't run the AC. It's a still summer night, and humid, but the windows are down and when the car is moving the wind is good. The town has emptied to the beach and she drives smooth on wide open 124 and there are no cars and no moon and no stars and high in the holding seats it is warm and lovely. No bumps. I like Tolstoy, she says softly. No, I *love* Tolstoy. I love Dostoevsky because he is all conflict and always wrenching, but Tolstoy I can live inside.

Yes, he says.

Because, I'm old fashioned, she says. I like to hide in an older time.

Yes, he says.

No, she says. She smiles. It's not only because I'm old fashioned. I'm being too humble. And that can be dishonest. She puts her hand on his knee, so that he is not offended by her show of wisdom. She is smiling with warmth and no condescension and he couldn't really care anyway. Her hand is warm on his knee and the warm is spreading in a slow circle. She takes it off. I want Tolstoy inside me, she says, looking straight ahead at the empty road. I want to love. She looks at him, eyes penetrating, trying to make sure he understands. I want to love. Every - single - person - in the *whole* - world. Between the words her long neck pokes out. Like a goose. Then she starts laughing. The who-o-o-o-le wor-r-r-ld, she says, spreading it out, and she opens her arms out to the world, still laughing, and the road curves away. At the edge of the grass median she grabs the wheel

and he fakes wide-eyed fright and she looks at him smiling and teary from laughing and when she sees his face she laughs again. And partly of course she is laughing because she is cheesy. But also she is crazy enough to not give a shit what any fuck like him would think. And he laughs, too, like a child who feels it is time to laugh. And his little gold cross, left outside his shirt for her sake, wobbles on his chest, shines in the light of a car. She looks at it and smiles and he glows. After a moment she says: I pray a lot, she says softly. I pray little prayers when I get into my car in the morning, before I drive, before I eat, before...

I pray, too, he breaks in. Child make teacher happy. She looks at him, smiling that inward and testing smile. When I'm in trouble, he says, with his cute grin. She laughs. Its sweet and friendly laughter, and a little grown up but not too much, so he is a child yes, and it is working -- his game of being a cute kid.

When I was small, she says, smiling, speaking soft and to the road, I could pray and get what I wanted. If I really, really, really wanted something. If I could believe it was not selfish. I would pray for it really, really hard and I'd get it. She swings to face him and blond hair bounces on her forehead. It's true, she says to his eyes, nodding earnestly. You don't have to believe it, but it's true. He shrugs. The sky is blue and red in the distance. It is stark, so stark. It is never blue and red where he is from. Not like this. Too warm. Maybe too much pollution. I could sleep here, in this car, he says suddenly. And wake up in the morning sun.

Every day he could sleep here.

She sighs. A long sigh and a look of tenderness. I'm not normal, she says

softly, talking to the road and to herself. She's sad. I'm not like other women. Her voice is soft, so soft he wants to tell her he can't hear but it is all too mellow. My brother was sick, she says. Ever since, I'm not abnormal.

Normal. He says. He shouldn't have. I nursed him for four years, she says. Then she is quiet, looking into the distance. Waiting. He clears his throat. He gets it. Of course he gets it. It is so sad. But there's nothing to say. There's nothing he wants to say. Then she shakes her head, pops out of it. Her neck is straight and she's up and defiant, talking to a fixed spot on the moving road: He had AIDS, she says. Loud and clear she says it. After a moment she looks at him real quick and away. He is sad. Since then, I'm different, she says. I look for pain. With the word 'look' her neck juts out at him. I can't live without pain.

Right at the light, I say, and it is sudden, jarring, like a break in the story, twenty yards away and she brakes and turns. A little screech but she's very confident. We are on 355 now, and still in an ok neighborhood but soon we will be at my filthy apartments.

Drop me at the corner, I tell her. At the corner of Summit. But she turns the corner and she's still driving.

I don't want her in my shit apartments.

I really didn't want her in my shit apartments.

*

IV

My shit apartments

From 355, Summit climbs up a hill for a half mile, runs past the old post office and under the railway tracks and then you're at the intersection with Diamond, where now they've made a brand new red brick Old Town, where it used to be all seedy and Spanish. Past Diamond is the Elementary school and then the mile-long stretch of apartments.

The streetlamps are broken. There's clusters of little Spanish guys and big black guys drinking Coronas and 40s and watching each other from across the space of a parking lot. Laughing at nothing jokes. At nothing at all. There's two forty-dollar Spanish whores on the balcony of the building next door to mine, laughing. Always laughing. One laughs a cackle, the other hiccups when she laughs. And they cuss and cuss and cuss. So loud it's stuck in your head for ever and even now you'll have dreams of them. Sweaty tits hanging loose underneath dirty, thin, white, loose, half-open nightgowns, laughing at nothing, at each other, at us who fuck them, and in between laughing looking around, looking sharply out and around, trying to catch an eye. A nothing eye. And if they catch your eye, to give you a look of loathing. Pure loathing. All plump tits and ass and a laughing belly under the naked balcony bulb and the apartment inside so dark you can only hear your buddy going slap slap slap in the bed five feet away and you want to kick out at the fat ass fucking your buddy and cussing in Spanish, fucking your buddy and cursing his blackness.

Your six roommates. Playing Bob on the balcony. Reggie, the

Americano, taking bong hits on the balcony and holding it in until his eyes watered and laughing and blowing like a steam engine.

V

Why am I writing this?

It's time I have to address this. I want to give your watching mind a break, let you into insight, fill in some of the background. And I want to know it for myself. If I don't, this is a nothing story, a contrivance. A nothing guy fucking a beautiful woman. And I am losing interest.

See, I used to be this guy. Or a guy just like this one. I lived in this town. I chased this wonderful wonderful woman and after a lot of chasing I fucked her and then I left her.

She was cultivating purity. For six years after college – she was actually thirty when I met her but I initially thought she was younger – she had nurtured her purity on a daily basis. Every day she prayed to Christ like I used to when I was a child and I was going to get beaten like you've never been beaten.

So is this a confession?

You could call it that.

But that's not all, I think. There is something else.

VI

Carmen and Maria-Teres

At Diamond I say it again. I'll get off here, I say.

No, you say. I'll take you home.

You don't want to go there, I say.

I do, you say.

Then we are pulled over and it is dark. I open my eyes. We're in the dead Amoco gas station before Old Town. It is so dead, for a moment my eyes don't know where we are. Where now? you say. All soft and docile.

I shake my head, but I don't know if you see.

You sit there. All is quiet. The lights of old town are a quarter-mile ahead, on our right, but here it is dark and peaceful.

She is looking at me all open and no I won't kiss her or hold her or reach out. And she lets go. Hands on the wheel and she slumps, arms sink at the elbows and her head falls between her arms. I screwed it up, she says. I reach out but she rises anyway and pushes the back of her hand against her nose and pulls in snot and her face is white and stretched. A tight little knot of anger in my throat. She smiles a wan smile. Like an old woman. She puts her soft, warm palm on my bare knee and my knee is so tight I want to kick in the dash of the fucking car. And she squeezes gently and my leg opens and the whole fucking anger flows out my toes.

And then I love you.

You are so quiet, you say. Maybe that's why I'm speaking.

I don't speak to anyone, you say.

But I am looking straight. Arrow straight.

I'm sorry, you say. You start the car. I look at you and shake my head but you are back on the road and driving. Where? you say. All cold now. I am just like the others, you have decided.

No, I say.

We are selfish, you reply. You look at me, all calm. We always want. For ourselves.

You look at me. With meaning. But I am pissed because you are too good for me. And I am afraid because I think you know that I am just a fuck. A fuck. A fuck. A fuckity fuckity Fuck. And I am afraid of your wisdom and your knowledge and your distance. And I am afraid my dick is nothing. That I am nothing.

I want to see your home, you say quietly.

I shake my head, but you swing back on the road. Then we are at the apartments. I motion and you pull over, still on the road but to a side. All dark. No live street lamps for a whole block. I can see the apartment, dark and behind two other buildings. I think I can. You turn the engine off and breathe in and there is silence because you want silence before you can say what you want to say. A flash of red. There is a fat whore on stilettos, twenty feet away, wobbling up to the car. My neighbor whore. I turn to you, say thanks for the ride and get

out and shut the door. All soft and careful. You look at me across the open window of the closed door and elbows on the windowsill I lean slightly inside, projecting myself. Erasing the outside. I smile. A hole in my stomach knows I'm fucked so bad. Hey, I say, all casual, you want to get dinner tomorrow?

Maria-Teres, you yell.

You're shouting it past my shoulder.

Maria-Teres, you say again.

Behind me the whore yelps, starts jabbering her Spanish.

And you step out of the car and you run to each other and hug. And you hold her. And you're chattering away in Spanish and you look like you're both gonna start cryin.

*

VII

She tells girls who are raped not to have abortions.

OR

The yellow light makes circles on the river.

She meets him at the Amoco, in the evening while it is still light, where he is sitting on the metal railing in his designer Levis and a faded white t-shirt that is loose on his stomach but tight on his chest. She steps out of the car to hug him and she is wearing a green dress with straps on her shoulders and she is so thin and tall. And simple. And lovely. Her hair is fresh and washed and falling on one side of her face and her eyes are looking for trust and he can't look and he is so angry in his chest. Then her cheeks are red.

I read some of the book, he says in the car. It is tucked into his jeans, against his waist and digging into the top of his thigh. If they had nothing to talk about, he figured, they could talk about the book. He pulls it out.

It feels good, he says. To have a book with me.

At the light she takes the book from him. She opens it and reads:

‘Since I could not meditate intellectually, I would try to call up the picture of Christ within me, and I found myself the better, as I believe, for dwelling on those moments in His life when He was most lonely.’

She looks up at him. I was born on October 15, she says, in a Catholic hospital in Madrid. The feast of St. Teresa. Of Avilla. In Madrid it was a big

deal.

I was two weeks early. When my mother woke up the nurses all came to kiss me. They made a line by the bed and came up and kissed me. My mother didn't know why. She was Catholic, yes, but she didn't know. She was just an army wife with her husband, on furlough from Germany. They told her, and it made a huge impression. When I was growing up she would tell that story a lot. A little different each time. My father tried to stick to detail. But she would improvise.

Wow, he says.

It's not a big deal, she says, red in the face. There were eight other babies born on the same day. In that hospital alone. Thousands of babies born around the world.

But she is smiling with embarrassment.

Every birthday, she would tell all the moms about it. Everyone knew about Teresa whose mom couldn't stop talking about how she was a saint. Every birthday party we would do a skit on Teresa. Saint Teresa. I would walk around barefoot, eyes to the heavens. Talk with a lisp. She lisps the word lisp. He laughs. The light changes. You don't have to read it, she says, shutting it and handing it back to him, looking into his eyes. But it's a keepsake. Please take care of it.

Yes, he says. He puts it back in his pants.

Dinner is in DC, in Georgetown. She takes the long way. Up Falls Road then by the river, on the Clara Barton Parkway.

I didn't know then that it was the Clara Barton. Then, I didn't drive. It smelled clean, like air close to water. The trees were shush shushing and I could hear the water on the rocks.

My friends are having a party, I say. Tonight. Then I am sorry for saying it. I'm hoping she doesn't want to go.

I have no friends, she says. When my brother fell sick, I lost all my friends.

She is sad again. All serious.

I made my friends miserable, she says. She is in trance mode again. I tried hard, she says. They would be kind and I would be miserable. And they would be understanding and sympathetic and I would be miserable. And they would try to talk about other things, but I'd be miserable.

Then she is quiet. I stick my head out the window and the wind is popping my ear. Something's dead in the water. But I keep my head out.

So they quit. She says it loud and I am surprised and look at her. She smiles at me and it is a sweet and sad smile, her eyebrows are down in the middle and up in the corner and they're saying: life. that's how it goes. She raises her thin shoulders, turns up her eyes, aping one friend's gesture to another, shrugs 'what can be done?', and she does it so there is no malice, so I feel truly, what, after all, could be done? What *could* they do? I poke my head back out the window. Why do bitches talk so much? The car is at a light and I am sure that if I lean far enough out I will see the water. There is a peacock. A fucking peacock. I have never seen a fucking peacock in America. Hey, I say, but it took me so

long and now the car is moving. Hey! There's a fucking peacock! But I'm half saying it to the wind, still trying to get back in. I look back at her and there is a glint in her eye, like defiance. Her hands tight on the wheel. She is inside: stuck inside her head, caged, and charged with stuff that's buzzing inside. If I brush the back of my finger on her arm, she will jump. Then I see how she is fighting and I close my eyes.

Dinner is in D.C., at a chophouse in Georgetown, and they finish a bottle of wine and he does not let her pay. Afterwards she parks on the waterfront and puts in a tape. It is just guitars. Lazy strumming, then fast. Jazz kind of music. But no drums. An African guitar ensemble, she says. She leans her head against his arm and he puts his arm around her shoulder. After a while, the weight of his arm sinks her and she lies down, across his lap and the back of her head against his window and her legs stretched out on her seat. Her eyes are shut. He puts his right arm around her neck, like a pillow. Her shirt rises on her stomach and his left hand is big and black on her breathing white stomach.

There is a bright yellow light above the water and it is shining in the water, but not on them. It is blocked by the roof of the truck. The guitarists are all fast fingers and wrestling with each other. Up and down. His fingers are playing her stomach. White like it never saw the sun. His palm is too big on her stomach. Her eyes are a little open, and her mouth is a little open and her lower lip is drooping and on the inside it is wet.

He is hard against her back. He lets his hand circle. Lazy fingers inside

her belly button. Fingers slip inside her jeans like it is casual, innocent. A tickle of hair and out. Her stomach rising and falling like water. Rising water.

She makes a sound. She nuzzles her head into his armpit and then her face is in his chest and his chest is hard. She rubs her nose into his chest and his hand goes down over her jeans and between her legs and around her butt and his thumb is against her pussy and four fingers around her butt and he picks her up from her butt and she opens her mouth and bites into his chest and he pushes his thumb in, into the soft. She pushes him away.

She sits up straight on her seat and with her palm she brushes back the hair on her face. She is facing straight ahead, above the wheel. Her eyes are closed. He tries to be calm. She kicks her shoes off, folds her legs under her and turns to him. She pats her hair down. I'm thirty years old, she says. Her eyes are still closed and the line of kindness stretches an inch down from the corner of each eye. A little something bobs in her chin and inside him something is shaken. And he puts it down with anger and to himself he says: So what? But to her he doesn't say nothing. She opens her eyes. Watchful.

I don't care. He says it soft, and steady. He puts his arm out, his hand on her hand, on her lap. He pulls, gently.

She comes. She lies down again, head on his lap, arms crossed across her chest, looking up at him. Her soft brown eyes moving from one of his eyes to the other. Like maybe one will be kinder than the other. He puts his hand on her tits. She puts her hand on his, holds his hand. His hand is breathing with her. He is so hard. Then she lowers her eyes.

I work for a pro-life organization, she says. Her eyes lowered, not looking at his.

It's ok, he says. I don't care.

I tell girls not have abortions.

His hand presses her breast. With all his love. No worries, he wants to say. I don't want just this, she says.

Ok, he says.

She looks into his eyes.

I haven't been with a man in six years, she says to him.

Ok, he says.

She keeps looking at him so he says softly, into her eyes. We don't have to do nothing, he says. His dick rubbing against her back, her tit soft in his hand, beautiful eyes looking up at him, and he says again: We don't have to do nothing.

She kisses him. Leans up, elbows on his thighs. Softly, with open lips. Her soft lip opens his lip. Inside, her lips are wet. With one hand she pops the button of her jeans. She looks into his eyes, soft luminous light grey eyes searching for something to hold, and she takes his hand and puts it inside and her soft voice so pure it makes him want to crush her against his chest: Feel, she says. This is what you've done, she says.

VIII

She likes, he wants to say, because I fuck her up the ass.

The first person he has to meet is her Frank Byrne. He is her friend from work.

They see him at the community pool in the condominiums where she lives. Nice, neat condos with manicured gardens and a community pool. Oh, what a coincidence, she says. And then she flushes red.

Frank is probably forty. For twenty laps they wait, and watch him swim. He is married, she tells him, has two beautiful girls. He would be a priest, except he fell in love. She holds his arm lightly, just inside his elbow. She fixed this meeting, and she didn't tell him. She is high as his shoulder, holds his arm light, fingers light inside his elbow and her head light against his arm. She is so good and he is so tight and strong he wants to bellow, to growl, to beat his chest and scream from his chest into the hot sky.

Frank is actually her boss, she tells him softly, but he is a friend more than a boss. It is a small organization, and they both have been there for five years, since Father McKenna started it. He swims very carefully. When he turns his head to the side to breathe, it is slow and careful, when he stretches his arm out it is very straight and tight. The body moves with little, barely noticeable jerks. Like a person who has forced himself to learn and then practiced very hard. Then

he is done. He knows where they are of course but he doesn't wave hi. He puts his arms on the bank and does a pull up out of the pool. He has twinkling eyes and he walks quickly up to them, like from his walk he is saying (with all the exclamation points): Hey there! Look! I'm a guy who's in happy and good and in great shape! and he takes his hand quickly and firmly, and he smiles straight into his eyes. Joseph, she says, this is Frank. Frank, Joseph. You guys talk. I'm going for a quick swim. Frank nods. That's great, he says, Joe and I will be just fine, and he puts his hand on his shoulder. Joseph, he says to Frank. My name is Joseph. Frank nods, smiling, no sign of nothing. I've heard a lot about you, Frank says. Me too, he says, angry. Not wanting to be angry. Frank is smiling, nodding. She talks about you a lot, Frank says. She likes you, so you must be a great guy. She likes, he wants to say, because I fuck her up the ass.

He doesn't fuck, actually. He can do everything, but not that. Stop, she says, if he is pushing. She cups her hand around him.

They stand by the shallow end of the pool, watching her swim, and he is two inches taller than Frank. He takes his towel off and throws it onto the deck chair, and stands erect in his Speedos. Frank looks quickly at him, at his chest and down at his Speedos. There are teenage girls in the pool.

She's a very special person, Frank says, looking straight at her. Yes, he says. They both watch her swim, steady and smooth. There are three teenage girls, maybe fourteen, two white and one black, in the shallow water just beneath them. They are loud and splashing each other.

I've been very lucky to work with her, Frank says.

The girls switch positions. They have made a triangle, so that at any time two can be facing him and one has her back to him. The two facing him, as they push water on to the girl opposite, they yell and avert their face from the water and scrunch their eyes and peek up at him. Between water in their faces and getting dunked, they blink and look up at him.

She's at the age, Frank says carefully, when a woman wants a baby. Frank looks at him quickly, and turns to face the pool again. Frank is looking straight, his neck following her, gentle in the water. The girl right under him, she is blond, he can see down into her little bikini. Then one of the girls opposite her, the black girl, lunges at the blond and the blond goes down and when she comes up her bikini top is off one small breast. The blond looks straight up at him and puts the strap back on. Then she jumps on the black girl, and both girls go under.

Do you want to go sit down? Frank is looking behind them, toward the kiddy pool. There are chairs in the shade, he says.

The blond looks straight up at him and puts the strap back on. Then she jumps on the black girl, and both girls go under.

Do you want to go sit down? Frank is looking behind them, toward the kiddy pool. There are chairs in the shade, he says.

I want to swim, he says. It comes out thick and mixed with the mucous in his throat. He clears his throat. I want to swim, he says again. And he smiles at Frank and walks away carefully and dives neat and shallow into the shallow water and breast-strokes the length underwater. It is warm and he wishes it were colder.

IX

O, my human saint!

'One of the things that makes me happy here is that there is no suggestion of that nonsense about my supposed sanctity.' - *St. Teresa of Avila, circa 1575, aged 60.*

He puts the book in his bathroom. *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila by Herself*. He reads a little bit, while he is taking a shit.

St. Teresa of Jesus who spoke to Jesus. Who, as a child of ten, ran away from home to be beheaded by the Moors -- so she could die for Christ. Who, as a young nun, cultivated a deep, blissful love of God. Prayer as love. *The passion*. Who, as a nun in her forties, began to hear voices and see visions and experience revelations. Who would get levitated in the middle of communal prayer, with everyone else watching, and she'd say, embarrassed: Put me down! She'd order Jesus. And he would listen. Teresa whose dead body did not corrupt but became fragrant. Whose dead body was torn apart, limb by limb, by her eager followers, led by her beloved friend Father Gracian.

Who often confessed to fleshly attachments. Who confessed, just before her death, in a letter to Father Gracian, that 'the flesh is weak', that, although she wished it weren't so, she wished he had accompanied her on her last journey.

Unlettered Teresa. Teresa who thought of herself as dumb. Who as a

teenager fell in love with her cousin and had to be sent off to a nunnery. Who loved her father so much that even at his deathbed she couldn't tell him she had stopped praying. Who was practical as shit, doing anything to get what she wanted. Who'd get visions. Who was painted by a pervert Italian Bernini like she was coming.

What did Bernini want to show? That faith is corruptible? That divine union is just like sex?

X

She doesn't let him fuck her. He can do everything. But not that.

In the morning, after her shower and before breakfast, she prays. In her living room wall there is a Jesus on the cross. Not a big one, just ten or twelve inches long. She folds her hands and stands in front of it with her eyes shut.

She never once asks him to pray.

Then one day he is still in bed and beating off under the sheets and she comes out of the shower in a cloud of steam and he rolls over onto his stomach. She looks at him and then quickly away.

Hey, he says.

She turns.

What... what do you do?

She inclines her head.

I mean, what do you do when you pray? How do you pray?

I meditate, she says. I meditate on Jesus. She is looking at him all strange.

Ok, he says, and smiles a large smile. Maybe I'll join you today.

Her hair is still wet and parted and combed to the side, like a boy's and there is water rolling down the side of her face. He is sitting on the couch, behind her.

I visualize, she says to him. She is looking at Jesus. I meditate on parts of Jesus's life. When he was miserable. I concentrate. And I take in the misery.

The crucifixion?

She nods. Yes, she says. Sometimes I meditate on his body. I meditate on the pain. I draw in the pain. I feel it.

The passion! He says.

She looks at him keenly.

Then she folds her hands and stares straight at the Jesus. After a minute she closes her eyes. After a few minutes she is crying. Soundless. But tears rolling down her face.

He is good with his tongue.

He can tell her it's hypocritical, but it won't matter. She won't fuck. Not until her wedding night.

He is good with his tongue but he doesn't like her hand on his dick. It feels wrong. Wrong. He takes her hand off when she tries to masturbate him. She is sad, but he shuts his eyes and fingers her and masturbates himself and comes all over himself and he tells her she is so beautiful and it is ok.

Then he is tired of licking her. And beating off.

In college, she tells him, I had a boyfriend. I thought we were going to get married.

So you let him do it?

She looks at him steady, but there is water in her eyes. Warning water.

Then he left me.

Because he wanted to do it?

Because I wanted too much. She is sitting on his chest. In his red-check flannel shirt and nothing else. Her pussy wet on his chest. I wanted too much, she says again. She is rocking on his chest.

I want unity, she says. Just unity. Unity. She is rubbing on his chest. Her eyes are closed and a little scrunched. She's got little lines on the corners.

Do you know Teresa? Rubbing on his chest.

Teresa, he says.

I didn't want to become a nun, she says. I knew I wanted to get married. But I wanted more.

I wanted to be one.

I wanted a holy union.

Teresa, he says. Saint Teresa! She opens her eyes.

Fuck me, Sainteresa, he says to her.

She slaps him.

Sainteresa, he says. And she slaps him again. He pulls himself to her ear. Sainteresa! he whispers, and he pulls her onto his dick but she slips off.

Saint Teresa.

Afterwards she is angry. You're making fun of me, she says. And you're making fun of her. I don't care what you think of me, she says. I'm a slut. But don't make fun of her.

Ok, he says, Saint Teresa.

He keeps doing it.

Once he calls her Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa, he says, how do you like this Mother Teresa. She's on the couch, her back against the backrest. He's holding her, his arms around her back, and stabbing into her (with her panties on). Mother Teresa, he says, how -- do -- you -- like -- this -- Mother -- Teresa?

I--love--it, she screams, and she's pushing back. And she's crying.

She hates it.

She teaches him to pray.

Why so dramatic, he says. Why not pray inside?

I am imperfect, she says. I need Christ. It is impossible to focus without Christ. It is impossible to grow without love for Christ.

I am a Christ-ian, she says, and her face clears up suddenly, because I'm imperfect. Because I need help. The light in her eyes. It's back.

I started to pray. I'd stand there, alone in her house while she was at work -- I had the run of the apartment -- and focus on the Jesus statue on the wall. I would stare at it until I was thinking about Jesus. I'd start with his face. I'd re-create the man, the suffering. Sometimes I felt an immense love for him. Sometimes I got distracted. But I'd bring myself back to him. I tried to feel for him what he felt for me.

Sometimes I'd enter his pain. My arms would go out sideways and I'd feel the nails in my palms, in my forehead, my feet. I'd cry. I cried a lot.

XI

They fuck like rabbits. Always in *her* apartment. They (almost-)fuck like rabbits. Five minutes after he gets there, she is on the edge of the bed with her butt up to the ceiling, or on the couch, or the floor, or the kitchen counter. (It is the perfect height for him.) He digs into her jeans, dry humping her.

Afterwards he carries her to bed and lays her down, gently. He lies on his back and she snuggles into his chest, folds both arms close beside her breasts and he wraps his arms tight around her. He loves her breasts flat against his chest but even more he loves thinking about her breasts against his chest.

I think you're a gift, she says. He on his back, she above him, hands on his shoulders and pushing herself up, blond hair all on one side of her face, her tits hanging low over him, almost touching, she looking into his eyes. Letting her fingers run down his chest. I treasure each moment with you, she says. She's looking into his eyes and he loves her. And I don't think about the future, she says.

In the morning he sits her on his back, all naked, and he does pushups. Then she rides him around the room.

In my mind, I'm married, she says one morning. I decided it already. It doesn't matter, what you think.

XII

She's talking on the phone one day, when he comes in to her apartment. It's her mom. She hangs up, and kisses him. Then she says: my parents say we should come over sometime.

He breaks away, goes into the kitchen. It's ok, she says. We don't have to go, she says.

They go to Luray Caverns first. It is a Friday. Her bosses are out of town at a pro-life conference somewhere and he doesn't have a job that week and he drives them to Luray Caverns. She says it is ok to drive her truck. I don't care, she says. It's just a car. He loves driving her truck.

It's a nice drive, after they get out of the morning rush hour. He's very careful. He loves driving the car, but he drives it only because she says it's ok. You drive, she often says, as they walk to the jeep. I want you to.

Every few miles there is a huge garish billboard for Luray Caverns. It seems strange to him. To advertise nature. So garish, he thinks. Lurid caverns, he says. The Lurid Caverns of America.

It is just the two of them, and the old man who is their guide is ingratiating to her, super polite and smiling, and not talking to him. Not even looking at him. When he asks a question, point blank, the motherfucker answers *her*. He is a black man with a white bitch, he realizes, and he is in the South. He hadn't known. And maybe it is worse for him, cause he speaks with an accent. An

accent like he's trying to be American.

On the way back, he is still angry. He doesn't want to go see her parents. It is half an hour from here, she says. We should say just say hi. He doesn't look at her. They're good people, she says. You'll like my father. You're a lot like him.

He flips the lights off. It is a one-lane road and no lights and woods on both sides. He can see nothing. He is grinning in the black and there is something in his balls that feels so good and he knows she is tight. He looks across at her and she has her eyes shut. Please, she says. Please. He looks back at the road. There is nothing, no light, no nothing and when he can't take it any more he flips the lights back on. She is crying. No sound but tears rolling down. He feels the power, and it is all good.

XIII

Her mother is nice, he sees. She wants to be nice. The father says hi, and shakes his hand, but does not smile.

We like it here, he says. No traffic. Not like Detroit.

He worked at General Motors. He was a transportation expert.

What's the traffic like in Kenya? The roads aren't too good, are they. Too many cars for the roads?

Yes, he tells the father. If you're in a car, you can get stuck in traffic. But

many people have scooters, and motorcycles. So it's not as bad as it would be if everyone had a car.

No, the father says, that's not how it works. Traffic studies show that a motorcycle and a car take the same road space. Cars keep more distance from motorcycles than they do from other cars.

Road space. He's driven a scooter. In Kenya, there is no road space. In traffic, scooters will touch cars when they pass. Sometimes you lean your foot on the car on one side, to steady yourself, as you're driving between two cars. Three scooters fit into the space of a car.

That's not the way it is in Nairobi, he says.

No, he doesn't. He wants to say it, he wishes now he *had* said it. But he doesn't.

The mother says something about the food. A question. Her daughter responds. Forks are clinking somewhere, knives too. He has his head down and all noise is background. Clink. What do you do? Father.

But he doesn't answer.

What is it that you do for a living?

He shrugs.

He's a landscaper, she says. He thinks she says it. He builds roads. He reads, she says. He reads a lot.

Have you thought about going to college? This is the father.

No, he says.

XIV

On the way back, the road is single-lane and curvy and wet from the storm. He drives fast, not braking on the curves. She says nothing. They come to a bend and around it the road is curving up, and beyond the top of the hill is dark nothing. He flips the lights off. It is completely black. He climbs the hill fast, seeing nothing at all, feeling the tickle in his balls. She doesn't say nothing. And this time it is he who can't take it anymore, and he flicks the lights back on and he turns to look at her and her eyes are open wide, her hands are on her lap, she is sitting back in her seat and staring straight into the black, not straining to see through it like she is scared, just wide-eyed and hands in her lap, not holding onto nothing, trust, he had said to her, you don't trust, and then he crests and it is the end --a T-junction and a cross street and a stop sign stuck in the middle of the asphalt. And the stop sign is in his face, and he swings to the right, hits a bump and takes off. The mirror on his side swipes the stop sign and flies inside and cracks against the side of his head. The truck lands and bounces and races across the cross street, and he swings to the right, the tires scream and hold, and they swivel and race to the other side, and he swings back on the wheel and yanks the emergency brake. The truck spins on the wet asphalt one, two, three circles and he loses the wheel and they slow. Then they are stopped and their lights are shining on a tree trunk.

He unhooks his seatbelt and leans back into the seat. His ear is ringing

and it stings like hell. He flicks on the inside light and turns his body to her.

I'd like to meet the guy who put that stop sign there, he says. His voice sounds tinny.

She laughs.

You can't stick a stop sign in the middle of a street, he says with anger.

She shakes her head. She is looking straight -- not at him, and she is smiling. And she is shaking. In the half hour since they left her parents' home, after dinner, she hasn't said a word. There is a one-inch cut on the brow above her right eye, but it isn't bleeding and she doesn't know. The eye is turning blue. It'll be closed tomorrow, he thinks.

I'd like to meet the asshole who put that stop sign there, he says.

Wow, she says. She is shaking. She is still looking straight, into the black nowhere. She is gonna cry.

He puts his hand on her shoulder, on the red dress he likes, the one she'd worn for him, for the dinner. It's ok, he says. He presses down on the shoulder, and it settles. He turns around and starts the truck. The steering wheel is turned upside down, but the wheels are facing straight. He pulls back onto the street. He drives slowly forward, then puts the truck in reverse and drives backwards. Then he pulls over.

Your truck's fine, he says. The wheel alignment is fucked, he says. That's eighty dollars. I'll fix the mirror. She is shivering again. Her eyelid is blue and swelling. Take it easy, he says. I'll take care of it. He puts the truck in gear, swings back on the road and stops. Then he puts it in reverse and he revs

the gas like he is going to drag race and he looks at her and smiles. I'm gonna take that stop sign home, he says out loud. Put it in your bedroom.

*

XIV

Somewhere in the land of truth and beauty, babe, we will be together. Somewhere. Somewhere I will know you and you will know me. Somewhere in the land of truth I will be honest enough for you. Somewhere in the land of beauty you will be young enough for me.

*

Deleted Scenes (For the DVD version)

PART II

My mother is an English teacher, I say, after a moment.

She is staring straight.

I read all her books.

She is staring straight.

She thought I was her true son. A reader. Not like my father. I laugh.

But I just read for the good parts.

Why Anna Karenina, she says? Not looking.

I saw the back jacket. And I thought it would have sex.

Between PART II and PART III

And maybe you CAN write it so there are no questions about his education (how come this guy has read these books), about why she likes him, about anything.

There will be no questions because it's true.

It is true.

PART IV

Teresa says this:

Back in Michigan, mom made my father put me in Catholic school. My father

was working in Detroit then. He had become management, he had the money, but he didn't want private school.

Somewhere between VIII and the end

The first time I fucked, he tells her, I was in ninth grade. Back in Nairobi, they called it the ninth class. His older sister's classmate, at St. Mary's school for girls, where his mother taught English. He went to St. John's. She had big glowing eyes that were mad and she had a deep, one-inch scar that hooked down from the right side of her lip and the girls called her *Sura Baka* (Scarface). That year she would come to their house often, even though his sister didn't like her too much. She'd come over and she'd stare at him like crazy, and he'd hold her stare as long as he could. Scarface. He didn't even remember her real name.

Then one night she came to sleep over. When she came out of his sister's room, he was on the living room floor, where he slept, and his eyes were closed. With her toe, she touched his bare shoulder. He opened his eyes and she sat down on his bare chest, her skirt spreading like a burqa around his head and under her skirt she wore nothing. Her eyes were burning.

Then he hated her. With his pen like a knife, he scratched into the cover of every school book: Bitch. But he said nothing to no one. Just stayed away from girls. He'd steal a book from the library, or his mom's shelf, one with an adult sounding name, like *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Or if it had something about love or passion on the back jacket. He'd read at night, before sleeping. He'd read

the best parts first. After he came, he'd read the rest, until he fell asleep.

He is running away. He is running. Drop that somewhere.

After Part X

See how even this guy is impelled toward good? How every 'I' is driven to God.

*

Old Man

(Novel Excerpt)

– for Jane Bowles

Chapter 1

I'd say he was about seventy, give or take a few. He was very thin. He had high, protruding cheekbones and sunken cheeks, and you could see, as in a skull, where the cheekbones met the eye-sockets, and how the bone cups held the eyes. But you never saw his eyes because his eyelids were always almost shut. He had no teeth, and his jaw hung low and his mouth stayed open and if you came up on him squatting on his haunches with his feet disappearing into the sandy mud, his water coconuts to his left and his cream coconuts to his right, you would think he was sleeping. An old man in the middle of his wares, sleeping with his mouth open.

Maybe that's why the urchin yelled at him – to wake him up. But he wasn't sleeping. His lids flickered, and began to rise slowly and his jaw came up to shut his mouth. But before the eyes could open the lids settled again and the jaw muscles gave up and his mouth fell back open.

It was about 11 in the morning. I was on my way to the beach. After breakfast in the hotel restaurant, Jennifer and I had had a talk, or actually, she had spoken and I had listened, and she had made herself clear and I had become sullen, because I of course could not be clear. So, as she read in bed, I walked out of the room without telling her I was going to the beach. She would guess – the 12 pm swim had become my routine over

the past week. My head was full of thoughts and plans. Of staying on in Mahabalipuram, of living with the hawker woman, like a local, on fish and coconuts.

We'd been in Mahabalipuram for a week, after three weeks of traveling in southwest and south India, doing all the things that the funky Europeans did for their exotic winter vacation. We'd spent the New Year partying in Goa, and then we'd gone to Kerala where we'd canoed up the Periyar river, and watched the Kathakali dancers dance all day and all night for three days. And we'd gone to Kanyakumari, the southern-most tip of India, where we watched the sun rise from and die into the Indian Ocean, and late, late that night we made love on the empty beach. It was beautiful. The people were friendly, the girls – golden brown European and Israeli women with wild, searching eyes – were beautiful, and it was all so, so cheap.

Mahabalipuram was a tiny beach town in the state of Tamil Nadu, on the southeast coast of India. We heard about it at a party in Auroville, an international commune on a beautiful beach, set up in 1958 by followers of the mystic Aurobindo. Auroville seemed to be a working dream. Hardworking ideologues trying to build a society without a power structure or money. A rigorous admissions process. I went to a school and met a couple of teachers and both were serious, bearded guys with sincere eyes and they spoke about mutual respect and hands-on learning. But every teenager I saw was angsty, and angry, and pissed off with ideology. The party was on the beach. It was early in the morning and the music was dead. A totally stoned Israeli guy (not an Auroville resident) with a wispy little beard and fat ugly pink nipples and no hair on his chest, he looked like a kid but he said he was twenty and had served in the West Bank for two years, was talking about how he'd been sooo bored in Mahabalipuram, about how there were no women and no drugs and nothing to do but lie alone on the beach. I was so angry I wanted to hit the little fuck.

So we found Mahabalipuram, a small strip of beach an hour north of Auroville,

with dozens of ancient rock temples dotting the hills behind the beach, and in the middle of the beach an eighty-foot high, seventh-century shore temple gradually being taken over by the rising sea. In early 2000, Mahabalipuram was not yet fully discovered by westerners. There were Indian tourists, but they came to see the temples, to propitiate their gods, and perhaps to walk along the beach in the evening. They were either families vacationing with children or retired folk pilgrimaging through the temples of Tamil Nadu. They were all from South India, where it is always hot, and people from South India don't understand why someone would lie down on a beach in the hot sun. I am from the North, and I look like it, and I was with Jenny, so I was a foreigner.

Most of the town was settled around the main thoroughfare, about a half mile from the beach and parallel to it. The main street had the bus stop, the prominent hotels (including ours), and the bigger shops. On its ocean side, there was a street that led to the shore temple and the beach, and around it very narrow side-streets with small two and three-storey private homes. Inside some of the homes were tiny restaurants or hotels, or shops renting motorcycles and selling knickknacks. The seventh-century shore temple was the center of the beach, and the glory of Mahabalipuram. At night, because it was the holiday week, they would turn on the flood lights and I would swim out and float on my back on the choppy water and look at the white triangle of the temple and the tiny stars in the sky and on the hills. And I would close my eyes and try to imagine the absence of everything, the all black.

Behind the main street, there is a hill with a network of mountain paths. Along the paths, and occasionally nestled in a dead end node, there are dozens of ancient rock temples. Sometimes these are only eight or ten feet high. On one plateau top of the hill there is an old, unused British lighthouse and a quarter-mile past the lighthouse the path leads to a village of craftsmen. By the old lighthouse, there are usually some tourists. Two days ago, at the intersection where the mountain trail branched into a path to the

lighthouse, I'd met a woman selling salted nuts in newspaper cones. She was squatting on a low rock at the curve, and tourists going to or returning from the lighthouse had to pass her. She was the only *woman* hawker I'd seen in Mahabalipuram. She had a smooth round face and she wore a bright red blouse and the blouse was full and tight and as she squatted on the ground her sari was pulled up almost to her knees. She was well-fed. And she called out loud to the tourists like a man would, and when they came up she was friendly and frank. She was the craziest, proudest woman I had ever met.

I bought some nuts from her, and settled on a rock beside her. She smiled. When it was slow, I asked her about business. She said business was slow that week, but it would pick up next week for Pongal, the big festival. She asked me where I was from and I told her that I was from India but lived in the States. There was a child hawker, maybe ten, walking around with his nuts in a basket hanging from his neck. A ways behind him, on the hill, there were two runny-nose children, maybe three and five, playing in the sandy rocks. I asked if they were hers. She shook her head, a little disdainfully. She had two girls, she said, twelve and nine, and both were at school. That was good. Only two kids and both girls and both still in school. She spoke intelligently and with confidence. It was strange to see her selling nuts, because she spoke to me so casually – she was able to be so open. That class don't usually talk to you, and when they do, they're clipped. And deferential. If you try to talk, first you have to open yourself, and then you open them. And you don't want to open them because you know without ever saying it that it's safer if they stay on their side, if they don't know how much you have.

Somehow we got talking about living arrangements. She offered me a room in her house, with two meals every day, for 800 rupees a month. Less than \$20. I had four hundred dollars in the bank. I knew how to live cheap. Room and board for three months would be \$60. Add fifty for the occasional joint, for Old Monk rum, for

emergencies. Two hundred would cover the minimum payment on my credit cards. That left \$90, enough for the first week when I got back to the States.

I was doing these calculations as I walked to the beach. I was thinking about three months of freedom. I thought about my roommates in Queens. They would bitch. But Jennifer could move my stuff out. Or maybe someone else.

The road that went to the beach, and also to the temple in the sea, was lined with shops on each side, but as you got closer to the sand, there were no shops, only coconut hawkers and chick pea vendors. And the coconut sellers were yelling at me because at this time every afternoon, for the past week, Jenny and I had bought two fleshy coconuts, the kind that has both water and cream. We always bought our coconuts from the same runt, the twelve-year-old with flashing eyes and a ready smile and yell of “How you doing?” (He had asked us how we say hello in the States.) But “How you doing?” wasn’t around, and after staring for a whole minute at all those guys yelling at me I decided to not decide, to pretend that I didn’t want one, and I started for the beach. Then I sensed something and turned around and Jennifer was rounding the turn, about fifty yards away and walking fast toward me, with the oily little tour guide behind her talking non-stop and ogling her ass. We looked at each other and both of us smiled, in relief and with happiness, and we forgave each other. Together we rolled our eyes. Like always. And she came up quickly until she was close, and then slowly she came up closer, closer than she had to be, until her breasts were touching me and I felt her heat and saw the love in her eyes. And she took my hands at my side, wrapped her fingers in mine and pulled them behind her back and stepped onto my shoes and leaned up and onto me until our lips were touching but not touching. And then she lowered her eyes and burrowed into my chest.

And without my telling her, she knew that I was standing there because I was lost and I couldn’t make up my mind.

“Why don’t we go to him,” she said, and pointed to an old man sitting in the corner, with a small pile of green coconuts. He wasn’t yelling. I wouldn’t even have seen him. He was just sitting, his eyes facing the ground, a little farther off from everyone else.

“How much?” we asked, and there was no reply. “He’s sleeping,” I said, staring at his bald head. There were hollows in his bald head. I had a crazy vision of the lazy old guy not able to climb anymore falling asleep under a coconut tree and coconuts bouncing on his head.

Just then someone tapped my arm. My little regular.

“No talk, brother,” the kid said, smiling merrily. “He cut – ” and the little bastard opened his mouth pulled out his tongue, and with the forefinger of his other hand, made a slicing action upon his tongue. Then he made as if to throw his tongue away, into the sand. And he laughed, a small laugh, and looked and down at the sand, and he kicked some sand into the old man’s face. But the wind blew it away onto the coconuts and toward the beach and still the old guy wouldn’t move. He bent down and yelled at the old man. Then, without looking up, the old guy held up five fingers once, twice. 10 rupees.

“For two? Jennifer asked the old man in English. He nodded.

It was half the price we had been paying.

“Are you sure?” Jennifer asked.

“No talk, sister. He cut.” This was our little bastard, yelling at Jennifer, as if she were deaf. He bent to his haunches so the old guy would see him and he said something to him, and motioned to his mouth and opened it. Without expression, the old man opened his mouth. It was dark inside, but then I could see. As I’d known from the way he held his chin, there were no teeth. The gums were knobby and red in places, and dark in other places. There was no tongue. Just a red stump, about two inches long, and it

was dancing up and down, and around, from his gullet.

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