

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

Monsoon caught in Gulmohars

Jesal Kanani, Master of Fine Arts, 2005

Thesis Directed By:

**Merle Collins - Professor
Department of English**

Monsoon Caught in Gulmohars is a collection of short stories that seeks to explore how otherwise perfect characters find themselves flawed as they try to reconcile with change in their life, and how they view themselves differently, as they try to settle in their new skins. Some of these stories try to understand how they respond, ignore or adapt to change. Other stories function as mirrors in which a certain way of life, a certain place, is magnified. The stories set in US are interpretations of a new environment from the eyes of an immigrant community that is close-knit but insular. Stylistically, a variety of voices, of points of view and identities have been adopted with varying syntax to heighten the manner in which characters perceive their individual realities, their individual stories. The stories have been arranged in the order of their achievement in realizing this vision.

Monsoon Caught in Gulmohars

By

Jesal Harin Kanani

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts
2005

Advisory Committee:

Prof. Merle Collins (Advisor), Chair

Prof. Howard Norman

Prof. Maud Casey

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To:

All the people in the world, whose stories are being silenced in the name of gender, nationality, beliefs, profession and religion; for everyone has a story, a story that has a greater need to be heard than be told.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to,

Mummi for showing me how to sense, how to perceive;

Harin for nurturing that sensitivity;

Pappa for buying me my first books and understanding that it's okay to buy

books than a new dress;

my professors at the University of Maryland for patiently reading and re-reading

my work with kindness, and for instilling the patience and discipline that writing

needs;

Anu and Erin to read whatever I give them at midnight and send their feedback

the next morning;

my family's unofficial Fellowship Fund that gives me time and space to write;

and my 1995 laptop that still hasn't let me down.

Table of Contents

SUMMERS IN AGAAS	1
IRISH COFFEE	19
FOREST LIGHTS.....	42
A FAMILY CELEBRATION	60
A WALK IN THE TWILIGHT.....	86
WHEN VARUN ARRIVES	104
F-1 SNAPSOTS.....	128
FLAME OF THE FOREST	135

SUMMERS IN AGAAS

All I knew was I had to pocket some lemons in my favourite sky blue dress before the scrawny old women realized. The objective of our gang, “Nimbu chinenge, pakad mein nahi aayenge!” Pia had thought up that line and in my six-year-old mind that seemed the cleverest thing one could do. At a distance, the lemon trees appeared in a blur, and we ran cutting through the light, vaporizing air, the sunrays springing from a blue blue sky, splashing on our hair. Today, it’s the same smell of summer that reminds me of the lemon raids: of new chrome green grass and baby leaves lighting up fluorescent under the afternoon sun, outside my suburban apartment in Greenbelt, MD.

What stays with me is the sound of my heart pounding in my ears and the bright yellow lemons hanging low, waiting to be picked. We were twelve of us: Reema, Medha, Pia, me and the rest of Pia's brothers and sisters and I think Ankur too, though I am not sure, right now. When one of the lemon-tree women saw us, she shrieked, "Aee! Aee! Chokrao," but we knew it would be some time before she would catch up with us, hobbling on her cane stick. We continued picking a few lemons and then made off. Barefoot. Because I wasn't sure if my oversized Kolhapuris could keep up with my speed. The small sharp stones in the red earth didn't hurt our feet as we ran. We just ran and ran. We ran blindly following each other, without a sense of the distance covered, without making the decisions to change direction; we just ran and ran as if that was the only thing to do, as if our very lives depended on it; we ran till our cheeks were so hot, they burned to touch, till our pounding hearts threatened to burst, till we could not speak anything for the want of breath. And then collapsed under Pia's bungalow gate listening to Megha's rasping breath.

Pushing, jostling we burst inside the cool kitchen with the matka balanced on the thick square of folded cotton. There were never enough glasses for all of us and patience was hard to practice. "Jaldi, pi ne!" I would urge Pia's elder brother. As we drank thirstily, in loud gulps, we couldn't even feel the taste of

water – only its coolness cascading in torrents down our hot cheeks quenching parched throats, tongues, lips.

Pia's Dadi hardly spoke to us – or for that matter – to anyone. But I think she liked us coming by droves to empty the matka. Maybe she liked children but I am not sure. She watched us through her soda bottle glasses, from the adjoining room, draining away the matka and that day, for the first time she gestured, inviting us in. Surprised, Pia wondered if she needed anything. "Dadi paani le aavun?" she asked and then noticing that her Dadi didn't have her hearing aid on, "DADI, PAANI LE AAVUN?"

What we heard in reply was a torrent of broken Hindi and Marwari in a furious white water force. She thought Pia would burst her eardrums one day and insisted that she had heard her all along. Pia looked at me, amused; we both knew it wasn't true.

Pia's grand Mom was old, very old. Pia thought she was eighty, I thought she was at least a hundred. She didn't remember her year of birth exactly, but Pia said the British still ruled then because Pia's father was born in 1947 – the year of Independence. Most times she was quiet, rarely out of her room, except if she had to go to the bathroom. On cooler evenings she sat on the verandah watching

children play on a small mound of black soil that the construction workers had off loaded near her home.

She told us to sit around her and we formed a skewed semicircle as we settled in. When Megha had stopped picking her nose and Reema had pushed back her hairband enough to create a perfect sized puff, she told us a story about a pale, white peacock whose color drained away in the rain. It was hard to understand her; she spoke in a mix of Marwari and Hindi. Words escaped easily, without being formed into distinct shapes in the absence of her teeth. After some time I gave up, and instead looked at her large ear lobes extended and weighed down so much that they turned into two small windows beyond which I could see her white cotton saris hanging from the clothes line. The eight inch speaker high up on the wall crackled into life (Pia's father had a speaker fixed in her room that was connected to the audio system of the temple). Bhakti began and her Dadi joined in singing – her voice deep, disappearing at the base.

* * *

The first time I came to Agaas, I hated it. There wasn't much I could see the first time I arrived. I thought it was terrible to waste my summer holidays in this quiet, dull place where there were restrictions to even play radios. There were no fans or phones. Agaas was the place where only old men and women

(that too all dressed in white) came to pray and – to die. Thankfully Mom and Mami came only to pray; I was pulled along since Mom thought I should learn to live away from the TV, video games and Barbie dolls of Bombay. Agaas was a huge sprawling area with a white limestone temple at the center, and here, this place she trusted, Mom let me roam free. On its left side stood the smaller temples, and on the right was the bhojanalay. Small bungalows dotted the temple in concentric circles. The oldest, disabled people got to stay in the nearest concentric circle to the temple and so on. Everyone was supposed to attend all the temple ceremonies and they started from 4 a.m.! Some people slept in the temple. We were young: my Mom, Mami, cousins, and so we were relegated to the realms of the last circle. I would go with Mami for her morning walks, accompany Mom to the temple in the late mornings and move around quietly or draw or read in the afternoon while everyone else slept. On hot afternoons, Mom and Mami strung damp saris on the windows and doors to cool the warm Westerlies breezing in the baked rooms. Beyond our home there was nothing except some dry shrubs and grass; half a kilometer away, the tall compound wall and beyond it – the crematorium. The wall was the gym of the monkeys.

I was drying my hair under the sun when Agaas brightened up for me. A young girl with a bindi, dressed in a red skirt and a white tee shirt, her hair tied in two plaits, stood outside the gate, red ribbons bouncing.

She called out, "Do you want to initiate friendship?"

I approached her, across the verandah; I don't think I opened the small gate; I was surprised at her presence, her important sounding sentence, her choice of words.

Initiate friendship?

Of course I wanted to, but I quietly said, "Yes".

"Are you a foreigner?" she asked, her eyes squinting. I was excessively fair when I was young.

"No," I said, "am from Bombay."

"You have big teeth." I felt my bunny teeth with my tongue, upper lip stretched. They were big.

"But they are ridged, so you will be lucky in life," she said looking squarely at them. "I am Pia, what's your name?"

"Kashvee."

"Want to play?" she asked, swinging her arm over, opening the gate.

"Yes, but I have to tell my mother." I dashed inside and found Mom.

We ran out together, beyond the ice cream green and pink bungalows, beyond her Dadi sitting on the verandah, past the mound of black soil, till a brown skeleton of a building in timber poles, iron rods and red bricks came within sight. In it, I saw a motley gang of children. "Our new team member, Kashvee and she is not a foreigner," Pia introduced me briefly. There were fifteen children at least and they came forward curious, examining me. I heard their names in a flash. Reema, Sneha, Ankur and the rest I didn't remember. The girl who sweated the most was from Baroda, her name Megha. She had a younger sister, Medha, who had two fountains of dark black hair that sprang forth falling into coils. After that day, I returned home, from our play only twice in a day. Once to meet Mom before going for lunch to bhojanalay and later, in the evening.

In the blazing afternoon sun when the temple and its members slept and the Charotar farmers rested under mango trees, Pia and I would be at the small railway station of Agaas, chipping away marble stones. All around the hot metal tracks, and in between lay marble stones. From where they were brought, how long ago, no one knew. They were probably as old as the train.

Once Mom, Mami, Vama and me went to Anand by train. Farmers and their families in bright saris and turbans, tattoos and silver jewelry sat peeling oranges and cracking open groundnut shells in the train. The train was steam-driven and fed with hot coals, black and monstrously huge; the engine spat out so many coal flakes that by the time we reached Anand, we had soot all over our face and hair. From Agaas there were just three stops to Anand. The first was Karamsad, known for the craftsmanship of its leather shoes. A farmer with a bandhani turban and flowing moustache said that the shoes of Karamsad claimed its owner. On the first few days, they would hurt awfully, creating giant sores, but after a few days the leather closed in perfectly with the contours and the frame of the foot, the sole sliding in at the arch of the raised foot only to flatten again when brought down. They turned into an extension of your skin.

The next was an obscure station, where the train stopped only for a while. No one ever got down or got in. I wonder why the train stopped there at all. Next Vallabh Vidyanagar, the university town and then the dirt and squalor of Anand with its small restaurants and colorful bazaar where Mom and Mami bought cotton nighties for thirty rupees.

At Agaas, the train chugged in only thrice a day. At 6.15, 4:36 and 9:32. It was interesting to see the kind of people who alighted at the station. Even so, we always felt a little scared playing on the tracks, searching for the perfect marble stone, for too long. “What if they scheduled an emergency train?” Pia asked me once. After that we would just dip down, fill our pockets with some marble stones and climb up on the platform again. Our pockets and hands full with marble stones, our magic tools, we chipped them against the other, competed to create magic sparks. Pia had two marble stones in her room behind her Dadi’s books. In the dark, she claimed, she could start a fire with those stones. Her brother scoffed but I know it was true.

There was only one small problem with Agaas, a thing which bothered me and gave me endless worry – the time after dusk, when the sun sank in. There were very few lights, because I think the government at that time had electricity quotas in villages. After the sun set, the whole place looked as if someone had covered it with a giant black bedsheet. Outside, there were very few lights at huge distances from one another. There were pockets where you could only make out blurry shapes of buildings and worst of all, beyond our home – the crematorium! I wouldn’t ever go out, nothing in the world would ever persuade

me, not even someone offering me a ticket to Bombay. So, after dusk I would be confined at home in our two room house; all we had was one low watt bulb around which insects buzzed. Shutting the windows to keep the insects out was impossible, because there were no fans. Just beyond the two rooms lay the extension, sort of an inner courtyard, our own sky light from which monkeys would swing during the day, and next to it, the small bathroom. After dark, I would not venture out to go to the bathroom. Mom would see me shaking my leg or walking up and down and would lead me to the bathroom and stand there till I finished. I would leave the door slightly ajar so that I could see her sari while I was inside.

One evening, Mom didn't return home till eight; it was pitch dark outside and I was worried. Mami said Mom would be at the temple – tonight the Aatmasiddhi reading was supposed to extend till 9:00. But then I thought Mom would have told me if she was to be late. I busied myself with some cowrie shells flipping them in the air and counting as they dropped clanging to the floor but I couldn't stop thinking about all the ghosts that stalked the temple complex. Pia swore that she had seen one outside the water cooler, next to the Peepul tree, drinking its fill. She had even seen the water coursing down to its stomach. Mom said God protected his children; nothing bad could happen. But what if God had

forgotten my Mom? I peeked outside, it looked dark, sinister. I looked at Mami, “Mami will you come with me? Can we go check?” but she was feeding Vama, the Farex drool dribbling on her bib.

I couldn't sit at home worrying any longer. I stepped out. The gate opened slowly; it needed to be oiled. As soon as I was out, I yanked off my kolhapuris, held them in my hand, bunched together, and ran and ran. Darkness quickly fell back behind me and the cool night air rushed past my face. Breathless I reached the temple, climbed up the stairs. Suddenly I realized I was wearing the same sky blue dress and was afraid of the lemon tree women identifying me. I looked around till a few old people shushed me. I flew down the marble steps with a heart that suddenly seemed to be throbbing everywhere in my ears, my wrists and in the veins of my throat, my knees. Outside the temple compound the black soil felt cool, metallic under my feet. The broken moon, cast a deathly pale light on the dark trees, the small cement structures and the tall iron gates.

All of them had a strange whitish glow and it glimmered and shimmered, a vaporous white, sometimes near, at other times far away. It was silent, deserted, devoid of human voices, the further I walked from the temple towards home. Only the dogs howled, sometimes far away, at other times closer. Black clouds seemed to be marching away in a solemn procession and the moon was

soon abducted in a black cloak. Visibility suddenly decreased and I stumbled over some bushes; only the cicadas sang. I walked on till I reached a dull lamp that cast a miserable soft circle of pale light.

Suddenly I felt a cold hand holding my wrists tight. I looked up to see Pia's Dadi smiling toothlessly: her face white and pale under the lamp light, her white widow sari against her ashen face. She spoke to me but I couldn't understand. She gesticulated in the direction of her home. A bit of the moon escaped from the black cloak and moonlight fell lightly on the bushes. I realized we were not far, just a couple of bungalows away. But she walked slowly, excruciatingly slow and she spoke something that was a murmur once, and at other times loud and breathless. Her moon-lit hair floated, scattered around her face, defying gravity. Her white sari ruffled by the breeze, her steps slow but sure, her tone breathless. She laughed noiselessly over something. Her wooden cane made a dull thud against the asphalt. She held my wrist tight and I looked straight ahead towards our apartment, afraid to look at her even askance, wondering what she was doing so far away from her home and at this time of the dark night. It seemed like several seasons had rolled by when we reached her verandah. She opened a knot tied at the pallu of her sari and gave me some

prasad (actually mohanthal) which had melted into a thick paste. I grabbed it, eager to get away. She ran her hand through my hair – her fingers felt cold.

Running, throwing the brown paste in my flight, I reached home. Mom was sitting with Mami planning the trip to Anand. Quietly I went and sat close to her.

Stayed there.

A few days later, after Gyan Panchami, we were walking back home: Pia, her mother and me from the bhojanalaya. We were on the foot trail that passed bungalow 153 (Pia's brother said a mad old man lived there) when Pia's mother pointed to us a small tree in the garden. "There's a henna tree". It wasn't a tree actually, more like a large plant, fan like, with many tiny compound leaves. Later, in the drowsy noon we made our way quietly to the plant and quickly broke off some twigs and fled. We ran off to borrow a stone and pestle from Pia's home. Only her Dadi was awake, counting the prayer beads. We showed her our leaves and she showed us where the grinding stone was kept. I was afraid she would call me and talk about our walk in the evening so I stood in a corner. But I wanted to know why I had seen her there. How did she manage to reach so far from her home? Instead, I just stood at the doorsill. Pia showed her the cluster of

leaves; squinting, her Dadi confirmed they were henna leaves though she didn't have her glasses on. She didn't mention the incident at all. I was, in a way, relieved.

We ran back to my verandah where we ground and pounded the leaves in a fervor, adding water drops at interval. We ground it to a thick paste, and I wondered all along why Pia's Dadi never mentioned meeting me, as though it had never occurred. Mom gave me an old plastic bowl for transferring the mix. It had to be soaked overnight and we were disappointed. After much argument Pia agreed – only after flipping a coin – to have it kept at my home.

The next morning I finished everything in a rush. Brush, bath, and breakfast later, I climbed on suitcases and a stack of books to reach for the plastic bowl laid away high up in the wooden closet. Pia was already waiting for me in the verandah. With a blunt knife we smoothed over the paste on our hands. Pia smeared her left hand with the paste; on her right hand Mom put five large dots of henna, four on each side of her palm and one in the center. I put a coat of henna on my nails and Mom applied the rest on my hands. Opening the small gate, we sat on the steps, drying the henna on outstretched palms. The warmer the body, the stronger the color. I wanted a dark maroon and Pia an orange red.

We sat under the sun, looking at a long line of ants going from one end of the lower step to another. It was always like this in Agaas – the insect factory. Big black ants and small red ants. Dragonflies and grasshoppers. Bees and wasps. Mom said it was the farm soil. We watched the squirrels go up and down the tree trunks, and the dogs rolling on the cool mound of black soil. “Lekar Prabhu ka naam...” we played Antakshari with our outstretched palms on our knees, facing the sun. By the time we reached songs beginning with Pa, it was getting difficult to sit still without moving our hands. We shifted our bodies a little while trying to keep our hands still. The henna had almost dried and I couldn’t resist checking. It was turning dry and flaky when we saw Megha coming in our direction. “Mehendi, mehendi!” I yelled out, but she wasn’t impressed. She brought my hands closer to her nose and sniffed.

“It’s not Mehendi!”

“Of course it is!” Pia and I exclaimed.

“There is no fragrance!” Megha said resolutely.

Eager to prove her wrong, I scratched off a tiny portion at the base of my palm. There was no orange undertone. Impatiently I scratched off more, it was just a dull green of the leaves. I glanced over at Pia’s hands. They bore no color either.

Our palms remained the same - pale and unresponsive. "I told you!" Megha said triumphantly.

* * *

Even though the henna incident was nearly two days old, Mom knew that I was disappointed. So when I insisted, she read to me from a library book (borrowed from the temple's meager book collection) the story of the pale peacock whose color had drained away in the rain. When we reached the end we discovered the pages were torn. I had to know if the peacock got his color back, I had to ask Pia's Dadi. Dressed in grey and white, enveloped in a cloud of talcum powder, I ran across the ground to Pia's brown and white bungalow. Several people in white had gathered around the gate in a semicircle; I followed the direction of their gaze. On a stretcher Pia's Dadi lay still, her nostrils and ears stuffed with cotton, her face a little swollen. For the first time I looked at it closely. I made my way to stand close to Pia. Her eyes were red, she had been crying because she had seen her mother cry. Her Dadi lay on the stretcher, motionless. A fly buzzed around her face. I stood quietly next to Pia not knowing what to say, my toe tracing doodles in the soil. There was something about so many people meeting, talking that was comforting. I forgot all about the peacock. It was strange to see the adults – even the lemon tree women without their sticks

– cry. I stared and stared at the older people till Mom tapped me lightly on my head and told me to help Pia’s Mom. I was proud of being told to serve water, replenish napkins, light incense sticks and check on the oil in diyas. But by the time the prayer meeting was over, Pia and I were quite forgotten, so we played Saapsidi till someone spotted us and scolded us. Outside we could hear the men preparing to carry off Pia’s Dadi, balancing her on their shoulders, and so we ran out and watched them from the verandah. The men marched off to the crematorium in a white line, moving slowly, chanting along the way. “Mom, can I go watch?” I asked eagerly. She closed her grasp tightly around my wrist. When she was comforting Pia’s Mom her grasp loosened and I motioned to Pia; we slipped out. We knew where we wanted to go and made off at once to the old mango tree at the end of the compound wall.

On its branches hung low dried fruit that no one had picked. We kicked off our chappals and I climbed, one foot securely lodged on the branch the other in Pia’s hands – joined like a yogi’s – one on the other, pushing me upwards. I climbed on the brittle branches which creaked slightly under my weight. No birds chirped here, no insects climbed up its shriveled bark. The tree smelt of old dehydrated leaves and abandoned nests. My arm stretched down and it was strange it didn’t fall off when I pulled Pia up.

From up above, past the broccoli like trees, we discerned the white line and Pia's Dadi being burnt by the white indifferent sun. The thin line moved slowly, the sun glaring on her Dadi's still-warm body, singeing her, scorching her. The line moved through the gate and marched inside the crematorium. The line stopped and dissolved into four or five circles. Two moving white dots carried her to the pyre and placed her on the firewood. Pia's dad lit the furnace. As we watched, they joined wood to wood and in the white heat of the fire her body lit up, aflame. Pia slid down and ran off. I hesitated. The fire consumed her Dadi in its orange-blue arms and I watched her melting in them. The men made off, leaving her melting.

Afraid to be found out, I quickly climbed down the tree, eager to make it home before they returned. I ran away from the old tree, ran beyond the dried shrubs, just ran and ran through shards of broken glass, past the brown skeleton of the building till I reached the black mound of soil, now broken.

The next morning, Pia and her family left for Bellary by the 6.15.

IRISH COFFEE

“Keep the front rack filled with bestsellers. Yes, this one, as soon as the customers walk in... I want it to be the first thing they see, okay? Many will not browse beyond this shelf. And those hardcovers and the high margin ones, keep them on eye level. Easier to notice, to pull out. When you pick up the phone always say, ‘Crossword, good morning, how may I help you? Never a hello, okay, never a hello. I’ll be calling in between — you know to check — so be prepared. You see that corner there, yes, that one, get some plants, cover it up, till the painter comes.” The franchise lady sighs. She talks as if Deven Sir and me don’t exist. As if she is the only one in charge of the store. As if she is Hanuman and her arms are now tired holding the store up, afloat. “As soon as you swipe

in, in the morning, put on some music, Mr. Deven you showed her to operate the CD thing right?"

"Play something soft okay, Kenny G kinds. Mornings should start with Kenny G. Don't play anything loud till afternoon, alright? The website orders, keep them all here, in this folder and they have to be shipped out the same day."

"Shouldn't we also have a phone line for ordering?" I ask.

"We already do, but the web address will be mentioned in all our ads."

"But Madam, it's easier to pick up the phone than log on the Internet."

"No, Internet sales are picking up everywhere, across the country, across the globe."

I don't want to come across as difficult and so I don't point out to the franchise lady that all our customers own phones, not all own computers.

"And Madam, instead of keeping the plants there, we should keep a book rack, in Vishwa customers used to go to corners to read a book."

She purses her lips. I wish I hadn't said that, now she must think I'm being oversmart.

"A. *This* is not Vishwa and B. We don't want them to be sitting too long, now do we?" the franchise lady, the one from the head office, the one in the suit, the suit that barks orders, has already whizzed past me.

“But you said that customers always come first...”

“Don’t ask me too many questions...there is a lot of ground to cover.”

Ours wasn’t a very big store before. We were the only one in JP Nagar - sandwiched between MG Road and Pritam Gully and so small that we didn't even have our own bathroom and had to go next door to use Milap Saree Center’s. The store was just a small room but still we used to hold 3000 titles even then. The bookracks were placed so close, only one person could walk through the aisles. And the books, they never got dust on them, so often were they browsed through. Back then, we never advertised as much as we do now: sponsoring college festivals and distributing pamphlets, and having reading clubs and what not, with all this franchisee money that we get, but we had our regulars who knew us, who would come even on a bad monsoon day, to read, to browse, to talk about the Indo-Pak cricket match and their bosses and sometimes leave without buying anything at all.

Here too we have regulars, not to say we don’t, but they are more — should I say — more classy like, the coloured hair and leather shoes type. Vishwa regulars don’t come here, even though we told them we would still give the same discount to them you know — 20% off any new title but very few of

them come here, to Crosswords. They say its too far and what with all the rickshaw fares hiking up and all, it is expensive to come all the way to Lokhandwala. But Shetty sir who sometimes comes to our new store says that they don't come because this A/C and soft lights, Kenny G music and all that, it's all too hi-fi, it unsettles them and makes them feel uncomfortable and very conscious like. And I understand Shetty sir because a few months back, even I wouldn't have stepped into this kind of store, much less listened to Kenny G.

Whatever our old customers say, one thing they have to agree — our new store looks real classy, ekdum jhakkas! We have vacuumed cleaned floors and real plants at the end of book cases and small stools for the customers and computers that even tell you which books we have in stock and which we don't so now I take the customers to the book racks only if I see the book on my computer screen, otherwise I just tell them with as much certainty like those women on customer service lines of credit card companies, Mr. Sharma I'm sorry we do not have the book you are looking for in stock but I can order it. I can even surf the Net now from my computer. Honestly, it's not that I really need the computer, because without it at Vishwa, I have helped some most interesting people: a Reiki healer, the master chef of Oberoi and even a Buddhist monk looking for the 'Book of Happiness' by Dalai Lama, find their books. I like the

Internet too, sometimes when there only a few customers, I log on yahoo messenger to chat with Alpana. Alpana is my elder sister; she is married.

Ammi is the one proudest about the store, I brought her to see it on a Monday (the day I'm off) and she was so impressed that she told everyone in our building, even the milkman, about it. The next day she was at the Krishna temple, breaking a coconut in my name. Ammi's also happy since I finally agreed to carry a dabba, because the khao gully is too far from here — I can't step out and eat the nukkad dosa or have the sandwich wallah deliver the grilled cheese inside anymore. Instead, I eat home-cooked food in the lunch area that has a microwave and a table with oily stains and crusty circles left behind by soda bottles. We even have a small fridge now where I keep my lassi bottle.

Here we get a lot of customers, much more than Vishwa, but I am not sure if they only come to read or really buy — the franchisee lady (the one from Crosswords head office, in charge of franchising) says customers just don't come to buy books if they wanted to do that wouldn't they just go and buy one from the Princess street hawkers, from the millions of cheap, pirated paperback books, she asks, they come to unwind, to relax, to enjoy some peace of mind, so its not just buying it's an EXPERIENCE she says, to Deven Sir (why does he have to nod his head so fast?). And then she does this grand wave of hand sweeping across

the coffee shop and restaurant, reclining chairs and cushions amassing all of it together and tying them up the things that make up the EXPERIENCE. Ever since we took the Crossword franchise we have been getting fancier and less real.

Now we also have a lot of people helping us, college kids you know, who work in shifts. Like the boundaries of countries, now everyone has their jobs marked out clearly: Rohan and Namrata handle customer enquiries, Ravi and Fabian at the customer service and Altaf at the bookstore cafe fulltime. Try to ask someone to do little extra work or cover up for someone else and it could start a mini-war.

When will I meet that guy, my guy, the guy I'll eventually spend my life with, I don't know. I wonder if I'll just know like Aparna tells me I will or I'll just mess up things while trying to determine if he is "the One" or not. Will it be through an arranged match or will I just meet him, like they show in the movies, when I'm doing the most insignificant boring thing, like ringing up an order? It makes me mad to think that I know SO many men: college friends and colleagues and the guy at the DVD library and the colony engineers, but I still don't know the man I'll eventually spend my life with.

Rohan joined us the day after Holi, last year. The streets were still colored red and gulal still lay sprinkled on pavements, neatly broomed to one side, on trains, on platform steps, clogging gutter holes so that the whole Lokhandwala looked like one was seeing it through a red lens. And I arrived to the store, faint color on my cheeks, in my ears, lodged under my nails. Actually speaking, Rohan looks like one of those millions of college boys, all of them uniformly dressed in fake Nikes and Heera Panna Levis, gelling their tiny crew cut hair. But when I saw him that day, the day he started, he looked a little lost and I've always had this weakness for a slightly lost, confused look. It's the look that makes me want to run down the aisles looking for books for my customers, the look that made me want to know Rohan better. Even though he rode a bike without a silencer and gelled all his hair.

Deven Sir brought him over to me for training the next day in the morning introducing me as the oldest employee of the store (made me feel really very old) and then added (as a sort of a benchmark) the one who hadn't bunked a single day at work and I hate this part because then Rohan too, like other trainees start looking at me as if I were some kind of a crazy.

The only reason why I come to the store everyday is that otherwise Ammi would then arrange meetings with the boys who responded to my matrimonial

ad that she puts in the Sunday Review, every week. And also because all my friends went on to finish their graduation and I was the only one dropping out of twelfth standard and after that, me with the bookstore and they with their college life didn't mix very well. We ended up being in touch only on birthdays and of course, their weddings — all of them I attended and suffered the characteristic enthusiasm of the matchmaking volunteers — the aunts, bhabhis and sisters. But now if you see, they all are at home raising children and here I am with my full time job that is something I am proud about but Ammi isn't. I'm just eighteen! She will be happy when I have a fulltime job **and** a fulltime family. Why do all mothers want their daughters to be Superwomen — good in everything, like she says?

I began by showing Rohan to operate the cash register, the discount codes and cancellation keys because those were the things I could do blindfolded; I was too nervous to start with anything else. When our hands brushed I was glad the traces of gulal camouflaged the warmth rising to my ears. I took him around trying to sound as professional as I could so that he couldn't see my fingers tying and retying the tasseled ends of my blouse. "There, that's the gifts and stationery corner, yes, of course, we stock handmade wrapping paper too. And here, these

are all the Anime DVDs and game CDs. This is the children's section, that's the one you have to check often — you'll find all sorts of things forgotten — toys and rubberbands, and hairclips and gum..." Rohan trailed behind me and I wished I had tied my hair with a prettier clip and worn a better fitting skirt. Later, I went to the restroom and turned around looking at myself. And I wanted to change the reflection in the mirror.

We slowed down by the time we reached the fiction and literature section since Rohan seemed to get more interested and he had stopped playing with his baseball cap. Rohan ran his hands over the spines of the books slowly, thoughtfully and for the first time perhaps, after working for two years in a bookstore, I felt I wanted to read those books, to see what about them made customers sit for hours their eyes going back and forth on the page, what about them made Rohan interested enough to stop playing with his baseball cap. It's not that I don't like books or something like that. Ammi has taught me to mentally place books and authors high, high up there, but I remember this man — a very ordinary looking one — in a pinstripe shirt stained with sweat and a briefcase come by looking for the store manager, open his briefcase and taking out some ten-fifteen copies, These are my poems, do you want to buy them? Like

salesmen selling Nirma, do you want to buy them? And this sort of changes your perception of books and authors, it's like seeing a hardbound book without its jacket, and I suggested to the lady in the suit, we need to have such authors for book readings too and she wouldn't hear about it. So I tried another way: but Madam, he was also ready to give us a 70% margin; she still wouldn't listen.

Rohan talked about so many authors -Naipaul and Salman Rushdie (the one who wrote the banned book) and Desai. He discussed things like writing and style and post modernism and postcolonial writing and Indian English (like the franchise lady, he also uses a lot of words) and I didn't have anything to say about that except how long it had been on our bestseller list. When we finally reached the last bookshelf S-Z, Rohan just stopped and looking at Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy' said that he had read it twice! Now when I think of it, if someone were to read it and if at all finish it they would have been able to remember exactly — once or twice — its not the kind of book one finishes in a day or two or even a week or two; I remember Deven Sir saying it was the longest novel in the English. But at that time I didn't remember this, I wish I had, and said it. Instead I found myself doing stupid things — like pretending, I found myself agreeing with him, "It was a great read." I didn't want Rohan to feel for me like what I had felt for that poet in the pin-stripe shirt.

“I would warn you against sprained wrists though,” he said. I felt like a commissioned painter, bit-by-bit, shade-by-shade, painting a picture to please the commissioner ignoring her own expression and vision of the painting. When we moved to Yann Martel I brushed another stroke — I said I loved it (because I knew it had won the Booker Prize) and he asked me if I wanted Pi Patel to be with Richard Parker or the hyena and I felt like a student who is suddenly called on in class, so I looked away and then guessed, Of course Richard Parker — humans are any day better conversationalists than a hyena. After I showed him the store I secretly pulled out the book. I found out Richard Parker was the name of Pi Patel’s Bengal tiger.

And I think I felt attracted to him right then, for not smirking, for pretending to move on politely with a nod. Rohan had a way about him that made anyone with him feel that he or she could change anything as long as one really wanted, even in an improbable situation like a Bengal Tiger or a hyena — I could still choose who Pi Patel wanted to be with, never mind that the author had already penned down the story — I could still choose.

Rohan and I took our breaks together (by then I had started timing my breaks with his) because we were the only two assistants in the store, though I didn’t realize it then. It was the first time any guy had really talked to me about

so many things, his family, his thoughts, his views. He talked about Arundhati Roy and dropping the Narmada Dam and wishing away the country's corrupt politicians and letting the Kashmiri people decide their own government. Kenny G, Beyonce and Israel-Palestine politics and I mostly listened and tried to look and hope to be the girl who listens to Britney Spears and Kenny G and knows everything about the Kashmir issue since 1947. I didn't read too many books, I had read some Sidney Sheldons and Danielle Steels when I was in eleventh but that was it and though I was surrounded by books I didn't have that much time, I was the only assistant Deven Sir had and there were books to be ordered, faxes to be sent, books to be mailed and order copies to be slipped inside envelopes. I didn't particularly miss reading either. In fact when Deven Sir had interviewed me and had asked why I wanted to join the bookstore, I had replied to earn a living and he had laughed. I am the kind of person who loves Ekta Kapoor serials —the one which all feminists and most women who come to the bookstore hate — it's not because I identify with those scheming women there, always cooking and sewing and thinking of devious plans, I like watching their jewellery, their style of wrapping a saree, the newer fabrics of party sarees, their bindis, their combination in matching bangles, their hair clips and make-up. I did once browse some Indian fiction but most of the women had abusive husbands

and mothers-in-law and called ghee, clarified butter (imagine, clarified butter!); I couldn't identify much with those kinds of books.

I think when you desperately want to be with someone you impose your imagination on that person and so everytime Rohan turned to look at the fiction and literature shelf, that was right behind me, I thought he was stealing glances at me, when he took down everyone's phone numbers and e-mail IDs to update the contact file, (we had six employees by then; three of them Rohan's batchmates) I thought that was because he wanted mine and was too shy to ask. I did not know that anything of beauty or of value always comes with an expiration date.

Ammi tells me that I should get married, so that she can have one less thing to worry about but then that isn't true because she worries more about Alpana; my elder sister is married to a family that needs to know where she is at any point of time and she never leaves without her cellphone anywhere — while going marketing to the bazaar or even when she is here, with us, at her own home. I think instead, it's better to spend my days in the AC, in a well-lit bookstore ringing up orders and helping interesting people like the Buddhist

monk and observing the kind of people walking in, and on top of all that take enough money home at the end of each month to pay the bills and still have some left over for a Shehnaz facial. I am not sure if Ammi will ever see it this way, but it's okay if we can't see each other's way as long as we do not force our point of view on the other. Ammi is cool that way. No forcing, no fighting.

Sometimes, as we go about doing ordinary things, the most extraordinary events of our lives unfold. Shobhana and me were in the back office labeling a cartload of books, covering the original prices with discount stickers and then stacking them on another cart. I asked her to call Rohan so that he would wheel out the cart and she shook her head sideways and smirked, "Rohan will not come. You don't want me to disturb the lovebirds, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you notice? Natasha and Rohan —they have been going out for such long breaks, I'm actually thinking of telling Deven Sir, I'm really tired of covering up for Natasha, and attending phone calls at the same time!" Now when I think of it, it is strange to see how much I wanted to delude myself, to see only what I wanted to see. Though I had seen them together I didn't think, didn't want to think, anything further. It really began like one of those infections, a cold

you ignore, refusing to pay it due attention till the next morning you can't get out of bed because you find yourself burning with fever.

“Oh, it must be for some store related work.”

“What store related work? I hear them lovey-dovey on the intercom everyday!” Shobhana was our receptionist, and finally, I had better sense than to challenge her.

Rohan and Nandita began to go off for lunch daily. And honestly I never realized it, maybe I was so convinced and so sure that it was me he thought of when he arranged the Valentine Day cards on the front rack, it was me he looked at when Unchained melody floated in the bookstore and it was just the whole Valentines Day business that kept me busy and kept us from taking our lunch breaks together.

That day, for the first time I pretended I was sick and Deven Sir personally drove me to the Andheri Station after making me swallow an aspirin. I don't even remember how I reached the Bandstand —that part of memory seems to be blocked and I was just sitting there on the promenade, amidst crashing waves and seagull cries, I watched a broken sun splinter and crash into the ocean, headlong, leaving red waters in its wake. I sat there for a long long

time, by then the mungfaliwallah and some beggars had given up on me, and left.

The wind roared, my eyelashes faltered, and I had to keep drawing my hair away from my face. The sea looked endless, and far away at the horizon where the blurry sea seemed to merge into the sky I could see the edge of the earth and wondered if I were there, would I just fall off, drop off from its curved surface?

Would anyone notice it?

Waves surged and sprinted to the promenade, sprays of water moistened my face, and then receded to join the ocean, returning once again, full and powerful drawing from the endless resource of the ocean. A seagull persevered to fly; its wings shaking in the strong wind dropped into the water then rose again. And I sat there, letting the wind blow against my face, whirling around my hair, fluttering my eyes, as I listened to the waves, the repetitive rise and fall, and willed that seagull to fly. I looked at the endless blue expanse of the water and the sky, till it all seemed the same, till I felt that vastness of the ocean and I knew, I just knew, I was a part of that largeness.

The next day I did something, I hadn't ever done before. I went over to Natasha's counter and "accidentally" dropped her purse while she was away shelving books and I kneeled down under the desk. I opened it. I studied the things in there: her hand sanitizer, a book of poems by Agha Shahid Ali, a deodorant stick, a half open pack of mints, a small leatherbound organizer and a walkman, some tissues and some money and membership to the Roxy circulating Library. Oh yes, she seemed to be the girl who listened to Beyonce and could write an essay on Kashmir conflict.

Then I began noticing Rohan and Natasha together. How often their hands met during the weekly office meetings, how long their lunch breaks lasted. When Deven Sir told them to stack the magazines that had just arrived, they took a long time ripping off the covers of the back issues and replacing the racks with the new ones. I thought that I should go in and ask them to wrap it up fast then I didn't. I didn't want to turn into the kind of woman they show in Ekta Kapoor serials. I watched Natasha. How long she wore her hair, how she always kept her hair open, she had that shining kind of hair, the ones they show in shampoo commercials. I wish she would just tie them up in a tight knot and secure it with those sharp-toothed butterfly clips.

When customers pick up the best-selling album or book, they aren't just picking it up for the music or for the writing, it goes much beyond that, the franchise lady says, they listen to Beyonce to feel the sass and sexiness of hip-hop in their life, to live vicariously the life of Pi Patel aboard on the Indian ocean, to discuss and distinguish themselves from the others, to lend shades of identity to themselves, that they too are a part of the defining world. Now I too wanted to squeeze in that world, belong to it. Once on the Andheri station bridge as I was climbing the stairs, I had seen an urchin, standing so still, right in the middle, looking at the roof above, while throngs of people sped by on both sides holding their briefcases and purses and haversacks and plastic bags, walking away quickly. No one really noticed her.

Then, the next morning I picked up Shiv Khera's book, the one on the bestseller rack, "You can Win," and I rung it up the first thing using my 35% employee discount. I read the book in between breaks, in the early mornings when there were just a few customers, mostly quiet ones, who didn't come asking for help, the self-helpers. The book was simple and all I had to do was just follow it and maybe things would change for me, like they did perhaps for those 175,000 people mentioned on the back cover. I had long been feeling like one of those books thrown on the bargain shelf just because of a small mark or some

dog-eared pages. All I had to do was just erase the mark, and it would be clean, smelling new, to be put back again with the others in the Fiction and Literature shelves. The book said: *"Success is not an accident. It is the result of our attitude and our attitude is a choice. Hence success is a matter of choice and not chance"*. Yes, I had a choice, just like Pi Patel had a choice. I had a choice and I exercised it to be noticed, to be heard, to be the girl to have long lunch breaks with.

So I started out with working on my "self-esteem", I convinced myself and Deven Sir that my HSC exams (I finally applied for it) were worth a one week paid leave; I no longer felt guilty to be the first one heating up her food in the microwave line during the lunch hour; I looked into customers eyes as I spoke to them, made small talk as I led them to the right aisle for that book, I "motivated" myself by joining a bunch of different classes: an Egyptian dancing class where a bunch of hippie people (an old Dutch dancer, a kind Parsee, a bored housewife, a pretty girl who wore rubber bands on her wrists, a depressed socialite, and our teacher a sensual, ageless Iranian lady) would meet every weekday evening in Prithvi and would shake the floor, gyrate our hips taking small steps forward and backward. I joined the e-group of Bombay Natural History Society and learnt to identify a peepul leaf from a banyan leaf, a hawk from a vulture, a koel from a mynah. Out of my window in the Virar local, I

began looking for the Flame of the Forest and the Gulmohurs. A single jarcanda flower now bloomed in a mug on my desk at the bookstore. In the crammed second class train compartments, I stood in the aisles reading, instead of catching up with Neeta and Smita to start another round of Antakshari. In that self-help book haze everything seemed doable, and I gained superhuman strength by reading it. I built my “interpersonal skills” and improved my “image”: got a manicure, colored my nails bright pink, had my eyebrows plucked till I looked perpetually surprised. I applied shimmering lip-gloss, watched makeover shows carefully and then advised Rita to cut my hair in steps. Went in for flicks. Got them highlighted deep purple-black.

Then I realized I looked the same — like those million other girls who star in commercials and infomercials, and I didn’t know what to do about that.

Mothers are smart, in their own way. Ammi thought that I was upto something when she saw me copying the styles of those serial women and my strappy sandals, but she was discreet and kind enough not to ask. I jogged around my building garden —actually a wannabe garden, a poor pretense of malnourished hibiscus, and a few, shriveled, dry marigolds — every morning till Mrs. Shah came out to the balcony with a toothbrush in her mouth; then I knew

it was time to get ready for office. By the time I reached to the last section about “values” I was no longer sure of what was the “right” thing, I mean, sure it had begun for Rohan, but then later, as I moved on in a dizzying speed, the world had opened up and split into alternate worlds frequented by large behemoths like music, dance, art, and among these musicsaurous, dancesaurous, flowersaurus, Rohan remained just that — a small rohan. A corner in the large worlds I now inhabited.

I received the signs and signals of belonging: customers would now stop longer to talk at my counter, at grocery malls I was always greeted in the check-out line, boys, men, would ask my help to find a book, women, girls would check me out head to toe, in trains, buses people accommodated me, created space for me to inhabit, people began to “see” me, eyes acknowledged me as I sat waiting in the doctor’s dispensary or shopped at the sabzi mandi. And I stopped feeling like the girl on the railway bridge.

Maybe Natasha had gone out of Bombay (her Nani stays in Old Delhi and her whole clan meets there once a year) I don't know but Rohan asked me to go with him for a play in Prithvi since he had three tickets. Fabian too was to join us. I called home to tell Ammi I would be back late because of a book signing. I

couldn't tell her I was going out with two guys from the office, else I'd have to meet up with the Sunday Review boys. I had heard a lot of positive reviews about 'Tumhari Amrita' from the women in my dance class. Fabian cancelled out his plan with us in the afternoon, since he remembered he had volunteered at the Church in the evening. I spent the rest of the day wondering if this evening could be classified as a date or not, and how Ammi would feel about this and what if someone saw us at Prithivi together.

Prithvi is this small experimental theatre, the stage so close and small that you feel you are almost watching some home production play put up by your friends, except of course here, the performers are too sophisticated and practiced. That day I was unusually piqued, high and chatty. It was like I was in an interview and I had to impress the other side of the table with my knowledge , my wit, my style. I was the one that laughed the loudest in the play (Rohan only smiled), the first one to clap at the briefest of pauses (Rohan didn't even move his arms from the handle bars), the first one to interpret, the double-entendres of the play, (Rohan didn't find them valid) I was almost on some kind of drug, drunk, high strung. The melancholy moments of the play didn't even come close to invading me.

After the play, we moved outside to the Prithvi restaurant and sat on the wooden benches. We mutually agreed that we liked the play, and then bit-by-bit it grew really silent. I could hear bits of conversations from people sitting on other tables discussing the play, the actors, children's vacations, colon cancer, ATM cards and reality shows. We looked around — Rohan's eyes were fixed at something behind me, and since I couldn't immediately think of something to say, I began plucking the petals of a rose bud kept on the table. I was relieved to see the waiter and I told him some Iris coffee while Rohan made up his mind, and Rohan looked up at the waiter and smirked, then corrected me,

“What she means is IriSH coffee, you have that don't you?”

And I looked at the rose on the table and how small it really looked now, with all its petals plucked. And I thought of that girl on the station. And I thought that maybe it's only today I learnt to say Irish coffee, my tongue touching the palette, as I said the SH, breath exhaling out and maybe I just learnt yesterday that the s in rendezvous is silent and that a Flame of the Forest is different than a Gulmohur, as a Sitar from a Veena, as Zeenat Aman from Parveen Babi. But if I knew this before, would Rohan have treated me differently? Would the lady in the suit have listened to my suggestions?

FOREST LIGHTS

"Name?"

"Megha Jain."

"Fullname."

"Megha Dhanvant Jain."

"Address?"

"85-B, Riddhi Towers, NM Joshi Road... "

"Slowly, madam, slowly."

"J-o-s-h-I R-o-a-d, Mummm-bai."

"Purpose of visit?"

“Social work.” A half mocking smile spread across his face which Megha felt like wiping off with Surf. Ultra Surf.

“Carrying gun, knife, any small weapon?”

“No!”

The Forest warden closed the red tome creating a little cloud of dust. Megha sneezed and then pinched her nose. He waited, tapping a moldy Parle G on the rim of the yellowing tea cup.

“Walk straight through, don’t get lost else I will have to come looking for you MEMsahib” stressing on the ‘mem’, ridiculing the suffix, rendering it disrespectful.

“Okay,” Megha stood up, her chair grating against the grainy dusty floor. Stuffed deer and bison — the collectibles of the Raj days — and an old tiger stared back at her from the high ceilings of the old Forest Reserve bungalow. A punkha droned on.

Ignoring him, Megha stepped out into the slanting rays of the late afternoon, shielding her eyes from the sudden onslaught of light. Taking quick steps, she resumed the journey that had started the night before in the Bombay-Ahmedabad Gujarat Mail and had continued in the noisy, crammed Matador ride from Ahmedabad to Rajpipla till she arrived at the outskirts of the Dang

forest and walked into the colonial, moss covered Forest Reserve bungalow for her permit.

As she walked away towards the jungle, she could feel the Warden's eyes on her. She waded into the green world. Like a pool, the forest turned deeper and darker with every step. Here, it was another interval of time.

Overnight, tiny water pools had formed everywhere — in crevices of lichen covered trees, on a bundle of thick leaves, in ditches where the water had the hue of orange soda, where parched birds quenched their thirst and huddled close to one another. A damp smell of rain permeated through everything; the air seemed to drip moisture, its presence so heavy that Megha felt covered by a heavy, moist invisible shawl. Drops of water stood suspended, undecided, on tips of young, neon green leaves reflecting a million colors when caught by the setting sun. Squawking sparrows returned home to their nests before dark. Green shrieking parrots flew from one tree to another contributing to the cacophony and twilight madness of the avian world. A deep 'koo-hoo' rang out at intervals.

Clutching her khadi bag close to her, Megha trudged on through the loamy, soft earth no longer mindful of her salwar, which had long turned sullied and soiled, slipping beneath her kolhapuris. The lunch dabba in which her Mother had packed in some laddoos clanged against her body and added a metallic note to the sounds of the jungle around her.

Her map of the Raj Pipla district that Mrs. Kadam had drawn, lay stashed away in her large khadi bag, a bag she had used since her days at TISS where they drank milky, diluted coffee, discussed Marxism and applied social theories to fictional villages born in their project submission notebooks. They sang 'Summer of 69' with a passion that had faded over the summers since their graduation. Now she thought it was fool-hardy, perhaps it was all Mrs. Sachdeva's fault that she motivated them with beautiful ideas of equality and justice and not real things like walking through a malarial forest and bad transportation systems. Perhaps they could have courses that taught them how to walk through one.

Here, through these green paths she had only come across banyan and ashoka trees, leaves wet and quivering from the dense rain, squirrels and parrots with damp hackled coats and then a spotted deer that contentedly munched on tiny leaves from a lowered branch of the peepul tree, its neck gracefully bent for

so long that in response Megha stretched her own shoulders and exercised her neck up and down and around.

The only people she had come across in her path were two tribal boys; one of them had approached her slowly, had suddenly touched her bag and then fled, tittering as she called out to them.

“Hospitality,” Mrs. Kadam had repeated in a voice loud enough for everyone in their cubicles to hear, “you will find it there, Megha, in the tribal villages of India, the real India,” as if Megha’s India of coffee bars, khadi bags, cricket television on Sunday afternoons was all adulterated, impure, false. “By the time you will walk through the forest it will be evening, so stay over at the settlement you will reach, the next day go to the school. Anyone from the nés will take you to Tarkala.”

Megha walked on confidently, leaving bushes, trees and rocks of the Narmada valley behind every stride. Megha’s footsteps were sure and judging her composure would deceptively convince someone that she had been here, on these unmapped parts of India, several times.

This is just the way she is. When she was young, her teacher had nominated her for the Inter-School Calculus competition. An invitation had come in from the Board and Megha’s teacher has asked if any one in class knew

advanced application of Calculus. When no one raised their hand, Megha did. Later, she sat into the night learning from her brother's textbooks. Two days later she submitted a detailed page full of equations and complex mathematical steps —it didn't reach half-way in solving the problem but it convinced Mrs. Chaturvedi that one student in her class knew Calculus very well.

If the map she had picked up from office was accurate (though she couldn't be sure; Mrs. Kadam had drawn it from memory) she would reach a settlement sometime soon. She had already passed the landmarks — a small waterfall and a small stone temple under a huge banyan tree, all highlighted neon green on the frayed map. The néś, Megha calculated, should now be just two kilometers away. Megha opened the back pocket of her bag and pulled out a flashlight. The trees were now turning a darker green and the birds were quieting down. A darker shade of blue was claiming its place in the sky; the cicadas were making their presence known: humming at a distance, then closer, louder, around in the bushes. Megha knew where to look for the flashlight and dug into the right side-pocket of her purse; a beam of light impaled the evanescent darkness. The rocks glistened. Megha's path in the Dang was illuminated, bright and shining.

The jungle abruptly gave way and Megha readjusted her vision as she came upon a settlement. A dusty fence made of twigs and branches surrounded the nés. It wasn't much more than a few huts and a small enclosure for cattle. Cooking fires lit up some of the huts, so they glowed amber and wispy ribbons of smoke escaped from the roof made of dry palm leaves. Sensing the arrival of a stranger, the cattle shifted edgily and lowed. She could make out some shapes of children sitting in a circle; some of them turned back to look at her. One of them ran inside a hut, a hut just like the others in the nés except with beautiful peacocks drawn on the walls near the low door. Bending down and stepping out a girl, or a woman — Megha wasn't sure in the fading twilight — dressed in a dark long skirt and a colorful blouse emerged. For a minute she seemed petrified, then she approached her. The little boy followed her, walking a few steps behind, staring at Megha openly. Megha watched a slow smile summoned to her eyes.

She patted some cows on the way, they quieted down, consoled. Megha stood at the edge of the nés, her hands shiftily playing with the belt of her purse. The girl walked across, her necklaces and ivory bangles jangling. She opened the make-shift gate. By the time she reached Megha her smile had broadened.

“Where do you want to go?” she asked with a direct, clear gaze.

“Tarkala. How far is it from here?”

“The school? Oh it is very far, Bén. You can’t walk through the forest in this darkness,” she replied. Then without any hesitation, “Stay over the night here, we will take you there tomorrow; my father works at the school —he will take you there in the morning.”

Megha nodded, she had been counting on staying overnight in the settlement. The girl held Megha’s hand, lead her in. “Coming from Eklavya? From Mumbai?” she asked, looking at Megha. Then, suddenly, she burst out laughing. It was a deep, happy laugh, boundless, illimitable.

“Lot of your people come here, we know them, “she said. Operation Dang, nicknamed Operation Run-for-your-life in office, was Ekalavya’s primary project and had taken them almost seven years, Megha had been informed in her month-long training period. The statistics were impressive — a 47% rise in school enrollment, a 20% decline in school dropout rate and a proportional rise in school retention rates. These results, Megha had noticed, were mounted on plaques and displayed everywhere — in the conference room, the reception area, Mrs. Kadam’s cubicle and even in the johns, which she told all her friends when they called to catch up and inquire about her training period. The significance of this project to the company wasn’t lost on her and she wanted to do well, to

convince them, herself that she could do it, even if it meant trudging through muck and mud and living in huts. And then of course, the work satisfaction of educating tribal people.

Megha looked around the nés as she followed the girl. The girl's movements were accentuated by the delicate *jhink-jhink* of her jewelry and Megha looked at her elongated earlobes weighed down by heavy, jangling, silver earrings and the sweep of her long black skirt embellished with tiny mirrors. Her arms were covered with bangles and bangles of ivory. Perhaps she wore payals too but Megha couldn't really see them, walking behind her. Megha could feel her hand perspire in the girl's clasp. The air was grey, smoke-filled from the cooking fires. They walked past the cattle enclosure, and cut through the neat and freshly broomed courtyard shared by all the huts , from where children and other equally colorfully dressed women, observed her through veils hastily pulled down. Megha could feel their eyes on her, through their veils as she walked by. The girl called out along their way, "Madam's come from Mumbai, " she said loudly to them. Megha now slipped her hand out.

"So what do they call you here?" Megha asked.

"My name?"

"Durga."

"I am Megha," she said wondering if she should shake hands or just fold them in a namaste. Unsure, she just smiled and let her hands fall back.

They entered the hut, the one which was decorated with beautiful geometric designs. Against the mud-colored, gobar spread wall, the designs stood out, white superimposed on beige. Megha stood outside admiring them and remarked that she found them beautiful; the girl's face lit up. When they entered Megha noticed the silhouette of a man sitting on his haunches, his attention held by a wick of a lantern. He worked at oiling it, twirling it so that it would straighten, be ready to receive light. As soon as he heard them, he glanced at them and then, surprised, he stood up, appraising Megha. The man was much older; Megha guessed him to be Durga's father and this was confirmed when Durga introduced the two. He wore a dhoti and a white kurta, and a bright colorful bandhani turban. His long moustache twirled outwards at the ends as if he spent many a morning, oiling them, grooming them.

"Come in Bén," he stood aside and immediately pulled down a string cot, motioning her to sit. Durga brought her a glass of water. The aluminum glass looked well used, cracking at the rim, but it was shining, clean. As Megha drank the metallic tasting water she could feel Durga's gaze appraising her and she felt

self conscious and a little frivolous with her salwar kameez with its gold tasseled dupatta and her bejeweled butterfly clip. The room seemed very small, closing in on her.

“Where are you from, Bén?”

“She’s from Mumbai, father,” Durga said. Megha watched his eyes open wider.

“You have come here all alone? Where is your husband?”

“I...you see...I’m not yet married,” Megha replied, taken aback by his directness.

“Not yet married? How old are you Bén?”

“ Twenty three.”

“ Twenty three and not yet married!”

“Yes not yet; is she married already?” Megha asked, looking at Durga, eager to diffuse this sort of interrogation.

“God willing, once the monsoon is over perhaps it will happen; she’s been working on her trousseau since she was five.” The girl looked away shyly.

She handed the glass back to her and looked around. A few steps away from the entrance was a fireside made of dry branches; grey ashes lay in between the branches and beneath, a few coals smoldered amber. A grinding stone lay at

the far corner of the room and twilight glowed from the wall adjoining the entrance. A rectangular depression made in the wall held a few pairs of neatly folded bright cotton clothes, two aluminum drinking cups, two plates, some jars which probably contained sugar, tea and salt, a wooden box of spices and a cracked round mirror with a tattered leather case and some books. A small earthen pot for water and much used, misshapen aluminium plates lay in a corner. Megha noted all this down in her notebook for the project report of her visit that she would have to prepare once she reached office. She wondered in such little possessions where Durga's trossieu was.

The lantern that Durga's father had lit cast a flickering, pale circle of light around, turning familiar objects foreign, so that the cup and pot loomed into oversized, shadowy shapes; the little objects of the room magnified into huge versions of themselves. The room seemed to be caught in a dance of shadows and light. In the dancing flame everything remained stationary for awhile then suddenly, with the slightest flicker, change into another pattern, another kaleidoscopic instant.

Feeling as if she were wearing a dusty brown mask on her face, Megha asked, "Can I get some water?"

The girl led her to a corner of the room which was sloped downwards. She dunked the cup in the pot; it made a deep plunk and rose up full. "Oh, actually," Megha laughed self-consciously "not to drink, I just want to wash my face," she said, gesturing at the dirt on her face. After a moment's hesitation the girl replied, "Bhale, I'll pour then."

"Just a minute," Megha said and quickly walked away to retrieve her face wash from the pocket in her handbag where she kept her few cosmetics. She could feel the girl look at her purse and her wonder when she squeezed out some soap cream from the tube, but she looked away when Megha caught her eye. She signaled and the girl poured a thin stream of water in which Megha wetted her face and then applied some soap. The expensive fragrance of the face wash intruded the room. Megha signaled her to pour more, slightly annoyed with the insufficient water to take off the bubbly face wash. The girl finally poured glassfuls of water that finally washed off the soap suds.

A small hole was made in the wall that led the white, soapy water running down the slope, out into the green grass. Then the girl asked shyly, "Bén, can you give me your clip. I really like it a lot," she said, pointing towards Megha's hairclip.

"Why...of course!" Megha said a bit surprised as she unclasped her clip. But then when her hair fell forward on her face she hesitated, "But this is the

only one I have right now. I will need something to hold my hair for the rest of the trip and it's so warm here too. Give your address and I shall mail three of these from Delhi to you," she said, "before your wedding," she added. Inwardly she decided to keep her purse close to her in the night, when she slept — there was no telling what poverty could lead to.

"Oh that's alright, Bén. Please don't worry. Durga is just a child. Please don't take what she says seriously," her father said. "So what brings you to the school?" he asked, very curious, perhaps, Megha thought, wondering what a girl from a city would be doing in this part of the forest.

"I work for an NGO," Megha answered, sipping her tea which had less of milk and more of water. "It is a company that brings about development of villages by education, " she said forgetting that they were familiar with her organization. "So I have been sent here to evaluate the condition of the school and assess the need for funds that will be required to fall in line with the directive issued by the Gujarat Board of Education." Megha was now feeling comfortable. The tea felt refreshing and she thanked the girl. Megha noticed that she had scrubbed the cup very well with ash and earth.

"Our Durga also attended school."

"Oh really?"

“She studied till the seventh standard. She can read and write. She reads all the letters we get from the Government,” her father said proudly.

“But now she doesn’t go to school anymore Bén. There is much work to do at home than walk everyday five miles to Tarkala for school. She cooks, fills water —it’s almost two miles away from here — and then feeds the cattle, milks them,” Megha took some more notes down.

“Our vision at Swabhiman for all of you is that you become educated, independent and have the ability to earn for yourself even in the city. We want you to be able to break free from the poverty that binds you down to this place.” The girl and her father looked at each other.

“But Megha Bén, even if we are educated none of us would want to leave this place. It is our home,” the girl said.

Megha was momentarily taken aback even though she had observed all along, that here, in this deep pocket of the forest she didn’t find any of the desperation in the eyes of the people, that she had seen in huts and shanties of the city where naked children would run behind her, begging for food, money, anything as their mothers watched on encouragingly behind bright polyester curtains made out of old sarees, blowing in the constricted breeze of Dharavi.

Megha waved her hand. "No, no you are saying this because you don't know what it is to stay away from here. I am here for the development of these villages, yes you may have to learn many things before that, that is why we are here."

Then, looking at her sullied salwar she asked the girl, "Can I change into something else?"

Her laughter faded; the lamp flickered so low that for a moment the room seemed to sink into darkness. Megha recognized that the ambience had changed, slightly. She immediately regretted her request, "It is really okay..."

"No, Bén, it's only because ... I ... I don't have anything like what you wear... I just have another dress, like the one I am wearing right now."

"It will do."

She rummaged in the tin box that seemed to hold all their possessions. Finally she brought for Megha what looked like a long skirt and a blouse set which was very similar to the one she wore. Except that this was far more beautiful. Running across its hem, the skirt had a colorful motif of blue peacocks and green parrots embroidered in wool. The eyes of the peacocks and parrots were embellished with tiny round mirrors. But Megha was taken in by the blouse, so thoroughly and finely embroidered it was that Megha could not see an inch of the fabric which served as the base for the embroidery. Colorful wool

threads of magenta, scarlet, green, blue and yellow were deftly shaped into the life that surrounded the girl, and elephants, parrots, and mango trees were all embroidered. Small mirrors were embellished on these threads. It seemed that the girl as a painter had expressed herself on this canvas. The mirrors glinted against the flame of the lantern and reflected a myriad design of bright dots on the mud walls. Megha stepped outside to change. The black ghaghra fitted her perfectly, she was of the same height as the girl, and the choli was beautiful even if it hung loose from the sides, it felt warm and soft against her skin.

Eager to see herself, Megha asked the girl for a mirror, and in the cracked mirror and Megha was surprised at how different she looked — her eyes seemed big, sunk into large, deep hollows and her cheekbones made her thin face, seem long — the same light that imparted to the girl a softness, even a glow, seemed to be drawing away from her, rendering her face brittle, so that it looked stitched up all wrong and haywire in the cracks of the mirror. Maybe it is the angle, Megha thought and turned away from the lantern, her back facing and then caught herself, only her eyes, in the biggest wedge of the cracked mirror.

Then shivering a little, inspite of the embroidered red and green parrots and heavy mirrorwork, she stepped into the front porch, shaking her damp hair, splaying drops of water around the porch, on herself and leaving a straight line

on the brown walls. "Bén, you will catch cold don't stay outside for so long," the girl called. Megha made her way in. "I hope you will invite me for her wedding," Megha said jokingly to the girl's father.

"Of course, Bén, we will, if you will come. Before you leave please write down your address."

Then feeling curious she asked, "Can I see her trosseau?"

The daughter and father looked at each other and burst out laughing, again that boundless, illimitable laugh.

"What?" Megha asked, a little angry, a little confused.

"Ben, it's what you are wearing!" Durga said, with laughter in her eyes.

The light from the lamp was shining on her, adding a glow to her face.

"How could you give it to me?" Megha cried.

"It's the only one she has," Ramnikbhai said, still laughing, wiping tears from his eyes.

A FAMILY CELEBRATION

Chapter 1

Dawn permeates slowly into the inky Bombay sky, suffusing it with mauve and orange hues, a sprinkle here of deep red, elsewhere, a mellow yellow. It bathes the old building, 'Kothari Sadan' in colors, as it stands alone, at the crossroad of Bhaudaji Road and Adenwala road, away from the hustle of Irani shops, Udupi restaurants and Kanifnath sugarcane juice stalls of King's Circle. Pink rays reflect and bounce off the old Gulmohar tree filled with new, bright, red buds, then sneak past the rusty window grill of the ground floor, and burst through the floral printed curtains (bought half-price at aakansha yearly sale) to enter into the depths of the mosquito-coil smoke-filled room and fall gently on Bhaveshbhai, who, lies between wakefulness and dreams, the last phase of sleep.

He wakes up slowly, carefully, so as not to rouse Roopaben and lightly lifts the Sholapuri bedsheet. He fumbles looking for his glasses on the side table, knocking down the alarm clock and pen stand, before finding them and then watches the world transform from hazy, amorphous outlines of buildings and hoardings to the clear and sharp outlines of the compound leaves of the Gulmohar tree, on the other side of his bifocals. His mind begins to clear up, and remembering the significance of the day — 15th August 2003, free India's 53rd birthday, he steps out of bed with uncharacteristic enthusiasm and walks up to the window.

The streets are empty.

All he sees are a few dogs lolling sleepily on the street, some wrapped up in old sarees by kind watchmen to keep them warm and dry, other unfortunate ones under cars, their tails barely visible. The nightlamps on the street are still bright, what a waste of resources, Bhaveshbhai thinks angrily. Shahrukh Khan smiles from a bright red Coke hoarding opposite on Sanjay Kirana Mart. Dejected, Bhaveshbhai returns to his bed, picks up the bedsheet, looking for its two ends. His arms stretch and then come together folding the sholapuri into a small and smaller rectangle till it is placed as a neat little square at the foot of

their bed. Suddenly, seized by unreasonable anger, he rushes to the window, tempted to throw a stone at the Coke hoarding on the other end of the street.

Bhaveshbhai thinks he can hardly be blamed, for today it is quieter than the usual mornings. Devoid of the news paper boys, the milkman's impatient doorbells, bicycle bells, and pressure cookers whistling away in the two or three story buildings of the shaded Adenwala lane, Matunga, like the rest of the Bombay, hibernates this holiday morning. Bhaveshbhai turns away from the window and a patch of sunlight on the floor, to walk back into the high ceilings and cool recesses of his home, across the long corridor that connects all the rooms, the hall and the kitchen.

When he was young, the roads filled up with prabhat pheris and spirited "Vande maataram" on Independence Day. The residents of Adenwala road had the events planned out and practiced months before: Ramayan skits (before the advent of the modern Ramayan fad), bhajans, recitation of patriotic poetry and after the flag hoisting, a breakfast of jalebi and ganthia that the women of the neighbourhood had stayed up the whole night preparing. He too could never recall sleeping on the night of the fourteenth. There was too much excitement and too many things to look at: pandals being set, torans being tied, and mikes and speakers checked with a soft tap and "Check 1...2...3".

He walks into the bathroom, stopping briefly to wear his worn out bathroom slippers and stands over the basin, squeezing a thin toothpaste strip on the Binaca tooth brush (the only fully indigenously made in India toothbrush. Bhaveshbhai has checked, there are no foreign collaborators, no imported materials used in its making) and then observes himself in the bathroom mirror. His gaze travels upwards, to his rapidly balding head and the day-old stubble before curiously settling at the foam formed at the edge of his tooth brush bloated mouth. He checks the damage done by the water leakage: the water mark on the ceiling had been expanding, its circumference ever increasing since the monsoons set in and decides he will call their plumber Savle since all of Bhaveshbhai's efforts to curb the spread, by applying M-seal have failed.

He hears a dull thud of the newspaper flung outside the door, and then there is urgency to his movement as he shuts the bathroom door, gargles, returns the toothbrush to its holder and steps out with a napkin thrown across his shoulder. He opens the main door and then the latticed door, to retrieve the Mumbai Samachar and returns to the bathroom, tucking it under his arm. Through the ventilator window, he hears some angry voices and peers outside to see a cycle overturned, its rider shouting at the newspaper boy, who, bent over, collects his strewn newspapers. Soon sleepy taxi drivers and other street bums

form a circle to stare as the two argue, eagerly anticipating a fist-fight but then disappointed and bored of the tamasha since they do not see it coming, intervene to placate the two. Bhaveshbhai shuts the window with a BANG!, muttering angrily to himself, “This country has gone to the dogs,” and sits down on the seat.

BANG! awakens Roopaben from her light sleep, which on other days, is only broken by the milkman’s insistent two ring door bell, but today, perhaps subconsciously, knowing the significance of the day to the family - her husband and mother in law and perhaps her deeyar and derani- she wakes up but lies in bed, drained already, thinking about the events that await her. She knows the routine well, having followed it for thirty years: flag hoisting, preparing cha and nashta for their incoming friends (mostly her husband’s), giving little stamp sized flags to children to be stuck as lapels and silliest of all, inspite of all these years, wishing “Jai Hind” as she bid them goodbye. Who in the world said Jai Hind these days? (It always made her feel like she was one of the freedom fighters in the movie Gandhi). But “Jai Hind” she would wish even today.

Some oddities of this family — her family — she didn’t understand even after twenty-seven years of living together. In fact, over the years in a social

engagement, Smita ben had become quiet, in deference of her mother in law. It was only with her husband she talked openly though she had accepted his quirks, as one does, those of a best friend.

The doorbell rings twice and knowing it's the milkman she steps down, smoothing her hair, pushing some loose ends into her thinning plait, adjusting the creased pallu of her cotton sari. She smiles as she thinks of her daughter chiding her for not changing into one of the three cotton night gowns which Aayushi had bought for her which now lay ironed and stacked up in the top shelf, only taken out during the family's summer trips to Lonavala. She opens the door to the milkman — a boy actually — and tears off two milk coupons (one pink and two whites) hands them over and then carries the milk bags, holding them from their edges, slightly away from her, (it's the smell she can't stand). She clips open the two one-liter bags of milk, to pour the milk in a vessel for boiling and washes the bags and sticks them on the wall to dry. The smell still stays. A few years ago she had made up her mind she wouldn't wish Ramnikbhai as he stepped out of 7, Kotharisadan. But her mother in law had stared at her, and didn't allow Ramnikbhai to leave till Smita ben mumbled a coerced, faint 'Jai Hind' lacking the vigour and energy that her husband employed in wishing others.

She switches on the old radio, balanced on the fridge roof, and the RJ's bubbly, shiny voice spills into the quiet of the morning and spreads in concentric sound waves across the home and beyond to Heeruben as she stands calling "Aa Aa Aa," throwing fountains of grains to the pigeons, who, obliged by old survival instincts look carefully around the small gray compound of Kothari Sadan before picking the grains on the broken slate tiles and through its crevices. Heeruben makes clucking sounds and moves slowly, shifting her weight from one foot to another. The pigeons flock around her, the ones familiar with their benefactor, venture further and are bold enough to peck at her feet. Heeruben's compassion for pigeons has her walk slowly out of her room — the last one in the long corridor — every morning and only serves to irritate Roopaben who feels that she, herself, is more deserving of her mother in law's concern than the stupid pigeons who shit all over the compound. And even more so, since later she has to make repeated entreaties to Sarla, Roopaben's maid of twenty years to clean it.

Daily, the soft cooing of the pigeons interjects Rasikbhai's pooja, breaking through his concentration, during that one interval of the day where his mind dulls and relaxes into the repeated intonation of "NAMO ARIHANTAANAM" so that he feels cleansed and new, like the glittering soap commercials, in which

the models step out reinvigorated, brand shining new. This time is sacred to him and he guards it possessively since later, the day charges in like an army, uninvited: battleships of Sensex figures and share indexes, battalions of commodity prices, and sudden uprisings of natural disasters and political coups which Rasikbhai fights through to make notional profits. Cursing the pigeons, Rasikbhai returns the tinkling brass bell to its place in the ornately carved wooden mandir that houses marble idols, and dips his index finger into the sandalwood paste, applies a fragrant dot on the forehead and knees of the idol. He bows obsequiously, thrice, on his knees, before walking away from the pooja corner to turn on the news, welcoming the world into his small room.

When Preetiben hears the stentorian drone of the newsreader, she picks out the safety pin she holds between her pressed lips and cries,

“The world won’t stop spinning if you don’t watch the news today!”

“The world won’t, but I will, have to be on the job twenty four hours.”

The Bombay stock exchange is closed today but for Rasikbhai it is necessary to stay in tune with the world. Preetiben has now conceded to his abrupt interruptions: sudden exits from dinner tables to check the news, embarrassing cellphone rings in movie theatres, and hurried departures from

beaches and hill-stations, cutting short vacations, shorter. In his Dalal Street office, his IBM laptop is permanently fixed on the Economic Times homepage, programmed to refresh every five minutes. There, on the trading board he responds to the dancing NASDAQ figures with a matched intuitive rhythm of his fingers, selling and buying shares to the pulse of the market.

Preetiben wriggles to let the pleats of her handloom saree fall uniformly across her girth. Her hands are employed in adjusting the length of her pallu and she holds it, letting it fall below her knees. Satisfied, she picks up the safety pin from the dressing table, one hand on the pallu and pokes it in, attaching the pallu to her blouse. Preetiben is a careful dresser: the uniform pleats of her saree always stay crisp and the beauty of the border of the saree, prominently displayed beneath the folds. Her petticoats (she wears satin ones) never peep out and her pallu falls gracefully in perfect proportion over her expansive form, which Preetiben is very conscious of. Preetiben prefers to wrap her sarees a little tight in an effort to create the illusion of appearing thin but has to take smaller steps for these small manipulations.

Preetiben stood facing her cupboard for a long time this morning. Though she has two cupboards (and a half of her husband's) full of sarees: dazzling silks, airy chiffons, muted kanjiwarams, staid and bulky handlooms, crisp chikan,

filigreed, breezy black party sarees with light sequence and jardosi embroidery, it had been hard to choose something for the morning satsang meeting today, where she was to lead the bhakti. She had been practicing the bhajans since a week, every evening, much to her mother in law, Hiruben's pleasure and her sister in law, Roopaben's displeasure. Since today's topic for discussion was non-attachment, it was necessary that her saree (she couldn't look at her salwar kameezes, they would be a bit too casual and frivolous for the occasion) too reflect the emotion. That automatically ruled out silks and chiffons and georgettes (wearing silk would be social suicide, how the women — strict vegetarians and Jains — would show their concern for the thousands of silk worms boiled alive in its making) so she turned to her handloom sarees, and pulled out two sarees from her stacks of roll pressed sarees. She debated between the two: both were a pearly white — simple yet elegant, understatedly rich, just the kind of image she wanted to portray at the gathering. The handloom weave, of the saree, incorporating green and orange colours prompted Preetiben to select it over the other, thinking how appropriate it would seem for Independence Day.

Preetiben gathers and tucks in the thick wad of saree and pushes it deeper, inside her petticoat and then turns around peering over her shoulder to check if her saree is of the appropriate length. It is long enough to cover her feet

even after leaving an inch for her heels, since Preetiben wears exceptionally high heels to make up for her height. Then for a moment, she imagines herself elevated, above the others, at the dais, flanked by their guru, Satishbhai, orchestrating and directing the bhakti, singing bhajans, her eyes closed in rapture, and the rest of the Satsang members repeating every line and every word that she sings. Above all, she likes to hear her own voice relayed from the speakers bouncing off in the room her voice sounding a little different, celebrity-like, even to herself. Then after one final look she leaves the huge dressing mirror the corners of which were filled by several once-used sticker bindis. The fragrance of her Charlie perfume wafts along, creating a scented trail from her room to a stopping briefly at Jigisha's room and then proceeding all the way to the drawing room where Sarla has kept a box of khakhra, sambharo and La Opala china cups filled with hot, ginger tea balanced on the wrought iron coffee table.

The layout of the dark rooms of the floor downstairs, is copied here too, upstairs, but the home of Rasikbhai is flooded in green smells of the Gulmohar and bright lights. Here wide French windows welcome the bright sunlight to fall on gleaming, spartec fitted floors, fake, sylvan settings of artificial plants, stain glass doors, expensive bathroom fittings and modular kitchen units (which Sarla

loves to open and close, close and open when Preetiben is away). A much needed renovation of the home took place after Rasikbhai had made his first twenty lacs, during the software boom, from the sudden spurt in Infosys share prices.

“Are you on duty, even when share market is not?” Preetiben asks to draw his attention away from the TV, to her, secretly hoping he would notice her efforts at dressing up. But Rasikbhai does not immediately reply, his eyes still on the TV,

“Not really, guess just watching out of habit.”

Preetiben gathers the tossed news papers on the sofa, folds them along the preset creases and pushes them away, below the coffee table top. “There isn’t much time,” she says serving tea. “We have to go down for the flag hoisting.” Preetiben sinks into the sofa, takes a slow, pleasurable sip of the ginger tea, and looks at her 52 inch flat LG TV and her husband and the china and the soft morning light casting a golden glitter in the room and feels ensconced in a shiny bubble of bliss.

* * *

Jigisha rises in her lavender and white room and a menagerie of soft toys stare back at her: bears in short shorts, elephants with big O eyes, smiling tigers and docile lions all looking unnatural, their natural instincts pared down in a

desperate attempt to please. She steps into her furry slippers, shaking her sleep off, gathers her well-behaved, straight black hair and twists it, securing it in a bun, with her purple plastic butterfly clip and then immediately peers into her mirror. Small black eyes look back at her and she turns sideways, the face in the mirror looks at one cheek and then another for pimples. Satisfied, the image disappears as Jigisha steps out and returns the mirror back to what it always held: translucent lavender curtains and the hazy Gulmohur petals, their colour muted by the curtains. Jigisha's room, with its lacy, diaphanous curtains and pink, frilly bedsheets is exaggeratedly feminine and aggressive in its pursuit to recreate the ambience of Madhuri Dixit's bedroom in *Dil To Pagal Hai*, a movie which Jigisha had watched eleven times to date. Jigisha thinks about the events lined up today and feels excited and apprehensive, apprehensive and excited, a vague sort of confusion: excitement for the Independence Day and the satsang meeting and apprehension for the matrimonial meeting with the Desai family in the dim-lit Woodstock hotel. The hotel is dull and boring, nothing of the kind that its name suggests.

The Times of India matrimonial ad that she and Aayushi had sat up the whole night drafting, was ultimately greatly revised by Preetiben. There it was, all expressed neatly, succinctly (each letter cost Rs. 20!) *Jain, Sthanakvasi, pretty,*

fair, slim, homely, convent educated 22/5' 3" from a well established family with strong family values looking for a Gujarati boy from similar background Respond with biodata and photo to PO box 55371. The classified had elicited a far greater response than they had anticipated, which greatly pleased Preetiben; (that HER daughter was so universally acknowledged as eligible) but somehow it created an image that wasn't much like her at all, Jigisha thought and then she and Aayushi had picked up every word, reread it, verified it, validated it – the physical details easiest to check, yes, she was 22 and with Aayushi marking her height as she stood against the bathroom wall, she was 5' 3". Now, she steps back, her back facing the mirror and peers over, looking at her large hips — was she slim, the slim of Bipasha basu or slim of Madhuri Dixit?

Was she homely? "See you are not like me, so, you are homely," Aayushi had assured her, privately wondering if it were as simple as that. Jigisha doesn't fuss over herself for too long. She pulls out an orange silk salwar kameez and hunts for the perfect matching chiffon dupatta, and then pulling out an old pair of underclothes, rushes into the bathroom. Being fairer of the two sisters, Jigisha had just to open her arms and the adoration of grandparents, teachers, friends and relatives had fallen in easily. The self assurance that stemmed out from such

universal acceptance makes Jigisha choose clothes unmindfully, almost thoughtlessly.

“Dry your hair at least!” Preetiben exclaims looking at the damp, black coils. Water drops fall intermittently leaving orange dots on Jigisha’s silk dress. Rubbing her hair with a napkin, Jigisha sits on the sofa facing the TV and then noticing the unfilled plates opens the khakhra box, spreads some ghee and sprinkles the sambharo powder and then passes on the plates to her family. The thick, rich fragrance of ghee floats and then settles in the gold-glitter room. Outside, the birds chirp from trees.

“This dress looks nice on you beta,” Preetiben says and then, “why don’t you wear the peacock jadtar set?”

“I think this one is fine,” Jigisha says, fingering her paisley design jewellery set.

“But see the orange and green of the dress — the jadtar has the same colors,” Preetiben continues, knowing that her daughter will acquiesce, and she does.

The rest of the conversation is a bit hurried as Jigisha feels the need to go down and help her Uncle, Bhaveshbhai prepare for the occasion. Rasikbhai

continues watching the TV and then makes a few calls to his employees discussing the impact of the flooding in Bihar on the BSE and formulates their strategy for the markets when they open the next morning. Usually Rasikbhai doesn't bother much about social engagements or the eligible boy hunt — of which his wife and her sisters are the most willing and enthusiastic participants. He merely drags on with them to all the scheduled meetings though once there, he makes a perceptive and unhurried evaluation of the boy and his family and the power currents — social and financial that run underneath the outward appearance of harmony.

“Wear a salwar kameez today at least!” Roopaben scolds her daughter Aayushi as she slips into her flip-flops, ready to leave.

“Mummi look it has an orange and green — it's really appropriate for today,” Aayushi retorts. But all that Roopaben sees is a skin tight teeshirt with such short sleeves that she thinks they might as well have not been there.

Aayushi's mind is already outside in rounding up the rest of the neighbours on Adenwala Road, for today's celebration too, like every other year's, is scheduled at nine o'clock sharp.

“It doesn't look good, and you are going to Pratima Aunty's place too,”

“It’s not that tight, and Pratima Auntie is not my mother in law!”

“If you ever have plans of having one, I pity her already.”

Roopaben takes an inward sigh thinking of all the biodatas of prospective grooms that she had saved and at the repeated refusal of her daughter, unwillingly forwarded to Preetiben who had accepted them with a speed that surprised Roopaben. And Jigisha had already met with twelve bachelors! Roopaben recounted all of her daughter’s disadvantages: she was twenty-four, going on twenty-five and hadn’t studied beyond her graduation, (higher education would have at least explained her age) nor adept in any of the qualities usually mentioned in matrimonial ads. Thanks to Mahavir Bhagwan, Roopaben thought gratefully and made a mental note to fast on Monday, that her daughter hadn’t gained any weight and still looked twenty-two.

“Thanks for your solicitous concern for my mother in law, whoever she is, I can see she clearly wins over me!” Aayushi kicks the monsoon jammed latticed door and runs out.

“Don’t break the door!”

“Hurry up, mammi, pappa is waiting.”

“He isn’t waiting, he has gone to get jalebis!”

Bhaveshbhai steps out of the building compound and its blooming bougainvilleas, a flimsy plastic bag in hand, his wallet bulging from his jhabba pocket, to walk to Kings circle. The road wears a dusty, grey coat and he walks past the shaded buildings and bylanes of Adenwala road, finally feeling the sun, warm on his face, when he reaches the circle. Almost like the sun, Bhaveshbhai thinks, one of its rays, Adenwala road. The aroma of coffee from the South Indian restaurants assails him. The traffic being thin today Bhaveshbhai doesn't wait too long before embarking to cross the street, taking big strides, the plastic bag sailing behind. All the shops are closed today, only the restaurants are open and Bhaveshbhai briefly nods to Mr. Shetty seated at the entrance of Mysore café, before he walks on. King's circle still looked the same, with its restaurants and the newspaper boys, used books and magazine sellers thronging its circumference, all jostling for space, pushing against one another. His eyes, by habit, go over the headlines as he passes by the newspaper wallah. He passes the paan house and catches the rich, thick smells of oil set for frying. Already people have reached the Jalaram Farsan Home and the thick impenetrable crowd in various forms of nightwear: shorts, night suits, jhabbhas-lehengas stand, some eating samosas dipped in brown and green pools of chutney, others paying for jalebis and kachoris their warm bundles neatly wrapped in thick paper torn off

old financial reports and tied with a thick cotton string. A man in an old banian and checked lungi is frying little swabs of besan that swell and rise up to the surface, forming thick long strips of *fafda gaanthiya*. Colourful heaps: yellow, red, white and green of *mithais* surround him and he conforms to the image of the *mithaiwallah* sketched in school art books. Here the air is electrified, chaotic, disturbed — much different from the coffee smells of Kings circle. Orders fly, “Pav kilo jalebi, gulabjamun aadha karlo,” short bursts of information are answered with *mithais* wrapped in paper bundles, thrown into the hands of the customers; money is passed from one hand to another till it reached the *mithaiwallah*. The air is thick with sweet smells. Bhaveshbhai stands at the periphery of this din, looking, wondering how he should move in. His eyes surveys the crowd, shaped like a crescent moon, thick and noisy in the middle, tapering off at the edges. Searching for space, Bhaveshbhai stands there for a while, hesitating. Then he makes for the quietest corner where the crowd is the thinnest and stands next to a man with henna-dyed hair. He too joins the clamouring, but his position offers him the least advantage of being heard and replied to. After repeated cries, the *mithaiwallah* turns their way, and for a moment Bhaveshbhai thinks he has been heard but the *mithaiwallah* only communicates the henna-head’s order to the little boy frying the jalebi in the

large oil cauldron. Bhaveshbhai steps back, letting the man leave with his packet. He looks at the flies on the jalebis — too small and insignificant for the mithaiwallah to bother with. Then he straightens up, noticing the other men appearing taller than him. He stands till his plastic bag is completely crushed and crumpled by the crowd, the boy's eyes fall on him and he raises his brows. "Two kilo jalebi, one kilo fafda gaathiya."

"Garam," he adds, and then wilts under the boy's gaze. He wonders if he could ask him to add a little more of papaya chutney which Aayushi swears by.

"Add some more chutney," he says in a built-up gruff voice. The boy mutters something under his breath so that Bhaveshbhai feels guilty, greedy asking for extra chutney. The boy throws the packet. Armed, Bhaveshbhai steps out of the claustrophobic crowd, the stale, much breathed in air into the free, light air and coffee smells of Kings Circle.

Just this morning, Roopaben had complained to her sister in law, Heenabhabhi, hoping that she would put some sense into Aayushi's head, something, at which Heenabhabhi had often succeeded and she, failed. Through crackling long distance lines, she explained how early Aayushi awoke every Sunday morning to look at the matrimonial columns of the Times, an activity

that Roopaben secretly approved and rejoiced in till she found out: it was all for Jigisha. “This girl is so straight and naïve Heenaben, that she doesn’t understand any implications of Jigisha getting married before her. What will everyone say? The younger one is married off while the older one stays at home. People will think something is wrong her, ne? Won’t they?”

Aayushi runs down the creaking wooden stairs, and steps out into a bright and cool morning. She blinks at the sudden onslaught of light on her eyes. The sky is now forged a light blue with pearly clouds. ‘Just like how Independence day skies are always are’ she thinks and for a brief moment, Aayushi wonders if that day in August 15th 1947, was as blue. By now there is some traffic on the road, as trucks, cabs and cars saunter down Adenwala road. Everyone seems to be in a holiday spirit. Families and children walk down the stony footpaths leisurely, and the pigeons too on the building compound are picking the grains slowly, leisurely today. She too walks over slowly to her father, standing next to the burst of pink bougainvilleas on the wrought iron gate, he and Jigisha trying to set up the flagpole.

Hiruben, seated on the otlo built under the Gulmohar tree, turns to look behind and calls out to her grand daughter. As Aayushi goes over to join her,

some pigeons flutter away and land again a short distance away from them. Aayushi sits next to her grandmother and both women for some time watch the pigeons dawdle this way and that, straight, sideways and diagonal burying their heads in their thick and furry iridescent necks so that they look all puffed up and proud as if preparing for their own celebration of the Independence Day.

“Ba how was the sky when Jawaharlal Nehru hoisted the flag?”

“Oh, it was midnight,”

“Was it as bright the next day?”

“Yes, a clear blue sky without any clouds in the sky... difficult to see a sky like that in the monsoons...or maybe we were just so happy that it seemed like that,” Heeruben continued.

Aayushi looked at the pearly white clouds in the sky.

“Are you happy today?”

“Of course I am!” she said looking at the flag.

“I mean, are you as happy as Pappa or little less than him?”

“Why are you asking an old lady so many questions, go run along now, call everyone before your father gets a fit.”

Aayushi runs up the creaking wooden stairs of Ram Nivas to call the Desais, up the elevator of the only three story building on Adenwala Road to the Purohit's and finally up the next building to Pratima Aunty's home. Though they are new to Adenwala road, the strategic position of their window (directly opposite to the Roopaben's kitchen window) had lead to numerous short window-to-window conversations between the two, Roopaben opening up to their warming friendship. While rolling out warm rotis, Roopaben often catches up with 'Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi' on Pratima Aunty's large flatscreen TV that conveniently faces her and later the two women discuss the lives of the characters offering their own solutions to their problems.

With Aayushi, the adults send their ambassadors, freshly powdered and neatly dressed children and then hurry up to dress themselves. The small platoon marches through, and on Aayushi's bidding, bursts into a raucous, shrilly rendition of "Nanha Munha Rahi Hoon" one of the few film songs that survived, lived and bloomed from one generation to the other.

"Vanar Sena aagayi?" Heeruben calls out and the children run to her for Ramayana repeats. By now, Roopaben and Preetiben are both opening the packets of jalebi and gaathiya, emptying them into large steel plates. The papaya chutney is emptied in a large plastic bowl that is only brought out for special

occasions. Preetiben splits the tall towers of thin, crackling plastic cups and arranges them in a straight, disciplined line for carefully measured portions of orange Rasna. ,

“Pappa, anything to be done?”

“Thanks beta, but Jigisha’s been a good kid,” he says thumping Jigisha’s shoulder and Aayushi for a moment wishes she were Jigisha.

“So has everyone arrived?” he asks, looking at the children gathered in a skewed circle around his mother, their short legs dangling from the ootlo.

“The parents are coming,” Aayushi replies, looking at the children.

“No need to wait, the national flag doesn’t wait...” then later, “You told them it is at 9.00, right?” he demands, indignant, tired of waiting for his own family, then Rasikbhai’s and then finally the neighbourhood’s.

Aayushi nods looking at her watch, which reads half past nine, and then with amused eyes at Jigisha, who doesn’t return the smile and carries on instead, checking, if everything is in order. Aayushi teases her, “The suitable boy adventures continues today, and who knows what ...”

“Shut up,okay!” Jigisha cries

“And we’re back with episode number 13 today.” Aayushi continues, thinking about the boy that they were to meet today.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

“Learn something from your sister, nobody wants a smart talking daughter-in-law,” Heeruben overhearing the conversation, calls out. This has Roopaben looking meaningfully at Preetiben across the golden glaze of the jalebis, a rebuke to her daughter felt as deeply as a rebuke to herself. “This shameless girl, I don’t know what is to become of her!”

Suddenly Rasikbhai’s cellphone rings and Bhaveshbhai glares at him. He walks outside of the compound to carry on his phone conversation.

“The day the matrimonial ads read: Wanted a smart, intelligent, independent companion to share life with, I’ll think of responding,” Aayushi continues.

‘Don’t act so oversmart,” Jigisha whispers, shushing Aayushi.

“No, really Jigisha, it is ridiculous what these people demand: modern yet simple, independent yet innocent, I mean are these guys schizophrenic?” she speaks urgently, breathlessly.

“Don’t be absurd, you know all ads do not read like that!”

“Of course they do!”

‘WILL YOU ALL JUST STOP IT!” Bhaveshbhai interjects, angry that a mundane babble like this takes place on a day so important. A day for which

thousands in the earlier generation had sacrificed everything — socially, financially and emotionally — did they do it so that the younger generation could forget about the nation and the society and just ponder over their individual, little problems? Worst of all, he thinks, the idea appearing suddenly making his mind jump up in fright, if this is the state of affairs in his own family, the family of Heeruben who had been imprisoned for burning imported Manchester cloth in 1914, then what about the rest of the families in Adenwala road...in MatUNGA...in BOMBAY...in the REST OF INDIA! With that his hand involuntarily jerks the rope and the national flag goes up, fluttered green and orange stripes against the azure sky and the family a little surprised, runs, rushes, dawdles and walks over to form a skewed, irregular square facing the flag and the small gray compound fills up with “Jana Gana Mana” as spectators from nearby apartments look out of the window at the small gathering.

(To be continued...)

A WALK IN THE TWILIGHT

On her fifty-fifth birthday Mrs. Mehta decided she would take care of herself. So she had Suvarna cut roses from the terrace garden and had them planted in a vase that was dusted off especially for this occasion. Then she floated some jasmines in a bowl of water and had the bowl kept on the dining table. It was a new feeling – to celebrate one's own birthday and it took some time getting used to. Then she sat at the computer drawing doodles, some homes and hills with Microsoft Paintbrush. She liked the freedom the electronics sheet bestowed on her; on this she could paint and repaint, erase and create, for unlike her life, here, nothing would be permanent.

Today, she had awakened earlier than usual and had at once stepped out of her bed and made way to the balcony. Since she didn't trust her own legs, she walked a little slowly collecting her strength from the walls, the chair knobs and the windowsills, leaning in briefly. On her way Mrs. Mehta corrected the lopsided frame that held within itself her doctorate degree. In the terrace she wiped the rain drenched swing with her saree pallu and then sat tentatively so that any rainwater gathered on the swing poles wouldn't shower down on her. Then she pushed herself in quick, short bursts of energy, for her toes didn't easily touch the ground. The swing hadn't been oiled so it *keech-kieched* in to the sounds of the early morning traffic, the milkman's cycle bells and the chirping of the birds. Since Mrs. Mehta had made the pact with herself this morning, she continued swinging; today she didn't stop to worry about the sound awakening her husband asleep in his bedroom upstairs. It wasn't clear exactly when they started sleeping in separate bedrooms, probably after a long day at work Mr. Mehta wanted to sleep undisturbed, free of Mrs. Mehta's tossing and turning and then had continued to climb the stairs to the guest bedroom every night, an activity that had weaved itself into the Mehta household and become a habit – the sort that grows inarguable because of its regularity. But that one-week

changed Mrs. Mehta's perceptions of their twenty-six year old relationship forever.

Now, to the slow rhythm of the swing she sat there looking at the sky, quietly thinking of nothing in particular, for she felt at ease only now, in this state of zero thoughts. When the swing moved forward she could see the tall buildings cram into her view of the blue hills but when she swung back it was only the blue sky, and if she could, she would just hang there, suspended, for it was her favourite view; she could spend hours just looking at the ease with which the eagles flew. Then, she took a sip of tea that Suvarna brought for her, wrapping her hands around the warm teacup and looked at the sky till every thing else but the sky seemed dark and blurry.

When Mr. Mehta descended the staircase he hurried a little for he knew he was late for breakfast and didn't want it to be the cause of another argument. Their major battles were fought during breakfasts and dinners (their only time together) and so each activity on the dinner table had tremendous significance and was closely watched by the other for any small betrayals

(Mrs. Mehta: why didn't you taste the home-made pickle?)

(Mr. Mehta: did you begin breakfast without me). It was also because he remembered her birthday this year and he wanted it to be known before other things would occupy his mind.

“Happy Birthday,” so he said, wiping his hands on a napkin and pulling up a chair.

“Thank you.”

“So what are you going to do today? Any plans?”

“Well...No. (Shouldn’t you be the one making the plans?) If you were free I could have thought of something.”

(She’s blaming you again! Don’t retaliate today) and so he said, “I’m not as lucky as you in these matters. Unlucky people still have to go to office and slog from nine to five.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll do something,” (there he goes again, his usual self-important, indispensable-at-office self) Mrs. Mehta said dismissively. So after a hurried breakfast over monosyllabic answers, Mr. Mehta wished his wife again, took his lunch tiffin and left for office.

Mrs. Mehta slowly got up and made her way — shifting and balancing her weight one side to another — to the brown sofa opposite the Onida TV and settled there, for the rest of the day. She grouped all her necessities as close to

herself because she tired easily, too easily. So she kept all this close: a comb, a box of unbreakable rubber band, a Reynolds pen, bindi packets, a small cane trashcan, a mirror, a spiral bound notebook with 2004 calendar printed on the back, three remotes for the cable, TV and DVD, a glass of water and a few magazines; Camel oil paints and Japanese TK paper sheets lay tucked below the sofa. She couldn't go to grocery markets, she couldn't stand that long, she couldn't sit on the floor, she couldn't keep her legs crossed that long, she couldn't climb stairs, she couldn't breathe evenly that long. In her large duplex apartment this corner, this small space, was Mrs. Mehta's: the only one she inhabited.

This, in spite of, the fact that she was a doctor. M.B.B.S., M.D. Bombay University, 1971. The degree had again turned a little lopsided on the wall, below the clock, its edges rusted. She thought of waiting for Mrs. Kapur's arrival so that among other things she could ask her to set it right. These were times when Mrs. Mehta felt like an apple cored. Allright from the outside but with some kind of inner stuff missing. She tried not to think too much about the past, not especially today, but she couldn't help blaming everything else, her late-night hospital routine and the consequent negligence of her own body, and her husband for her ill health. Today, she thought, is a good day to change everything else: she would

eat on time, she would sleep on time she promised herself, but could she change her husband's attitude to her, could she go back and change her hospital routine? She sank a little deeper into the sofa.

The morning was cold and wet and the sky had been forged gray. A delicate and slim needle like rain prattled on the tile roof of the terrace since dawn. It was a dull, monotonous sort of rain – it didn't change in intensity or direction just kept pattering straight and pointed. On and on. The sky was a glum gray, as bored of the rain as Mrs. Mehta. With her husband gone, the house had fallen into the quiet monotonous hum of late morning. The dhobi had come and gone (one saree had been missing) and it would be sometime before Suman rang her patented three ring bell. This was hardly what one would expect on one's birthday Mrs. Mehta thought to herself, mulling over the unfairness of everything, sitting on the Rexene sofa looking over at the yellow roses in her terrace garden. At least the roses looked happy, she thought, looking at the drops glistening on the petals of a yellow bud.

Of course Varun and Usha had called. In fact she was pleased that Varun called at midnight, of course her children remembered her birthdays – they called every year. Of course, she could understand that they couldn't fly down

home from Bangalore and Nagpur just to wish her on 17th August each year. But today, like every other year, she wished they had. Then she immediately corrected herself for being so selfish. Mrs Kapur said it was nice enough that her children remembered her birthday and she tried to tell herself that. Yet, she had checked – it only took 1.5 hrs to reach Bombay from Bangalore. It cost four thousand rupees, that wasn't exactly cheap but wasn't Varun entitled once-a-year paid airfare anywhere in India? Even as she contemplated, she knew she would never ask Varun about it, or anyone else. Neither Mahesh nor Usha. Especially not Usha with her one and a half yr old daughter (her own granddaughter!) to take care of, and once again she thanked God that her time raising a family had passed. Now, she rarely got up once she sat down, except when she was in the presence of visitors or guests for she hated to look unwell before them, and she wasn't that weak really was she, she only had to eat well and sleep well and things would just sort of fall into place she convinced herself, she *had* to convince herself.

She looked out. The rainwater was slowly seeping in through the terrace, into the hall. By now she guessed the trains would have stopped running, the Kurla-Sion tracks would have been flooded and the railway services disrupted. She looked outside for a while then picked up the phone diary but it fell out from

the loose binding; she picked up the coverless diary and opened it to trace the number of her brother. Like every birthday afternoon she called up those in the family whose calls she missed. When the phone rang at the other end, of her brother's home Mrs. Mehta chided herself for feeling a little nervous; she hoped her mother would be asleep else she would have to talk to her, her mother, who has made her feel guilty as long as she can remember. When she was young, it was about her dark skin and the consequent problems to find her a groom. Even today, she thought in spite of her new saree, pink lipstick and neatly combed hair, in spite of the promise she made to herself this morning, she wouldn't ever get herself photographed. When she was married it was about the lack of time for her home and family (though her husband didn't mind that). Nowadays it was about drinking Coke over Thumbs up. Thumbs up over coke! Mrs. Mehta thought about the absurdity. She had tried to understand her mother –an ardent Gandhian who had taken part in Satyagraha, she had been jailed several times in colonial India; she still held her beliefs on self-reliance close to heart in a liberalized India. Her mother who looked at all the FDI and MNCs flowing into the country with the eyes of a hawk; ready to shoot down on any traitor who ate pizza over roti – subji, wore nike over chappals, listened to Indipop over classical songs, read Cosmo over Navnit Samarpan. As a result, Mrs. Mehta her

daughters-in-law had very little choices available in the clothes they wore, the movies they saw and the songs they heard. So to some extent consciously or unconsciously the two daughters-in-law harbored ill will towards Mrs. Shah's children too.

She was intelligent and sensitive enough to recognize this. But that wasn't the only reason why she gave excuses to her brothers for not attending the family get-togethers. When she looked beyond that, it was a lot of fun. The boisterous talk, monopoly games and esto, with grandchildren running about home, the constant teasing and bantering, made her feel again like a carefree happy girl, but only for a brief moment of time, beyond that she was always aware of her frailty here, surrounded by her fit and healthy siblings, more than anywhere else. It was hard to understand why she had been singled out. When the talk shifted to her brother's swimming routine, or her sister's dance classes, she would invariably be turning her toes inwards and smiling just a bit too wide, praising her brother a little too loudly. She comforted herself that she was the doctor, the highest qualified out of them all, that she shouldn't compare, that life had unfolded in a different way for each one of them. Even then, like a map that is folded incorrectly, on the wrong creases, she tries to find the right folds, the most

comfortable way to live, but always found the wrong ones which jutted out, stiff and inflexible.

The phone kept ringing at the other end, so she dialed the number again and listened to the rings, and the subsequent click of the answering machine. Though she liked the voice mail service (she could get away without having to talk to her mother) talking to a recorder still made her slightly uncomfortable. She wondered how should her tone be? Should she imagine that she is talking to her brother or should she acknowledge that she is talking to a machine and respond with an equally dead-pan voice? She liked to imagine her brother and that prompted her to leave a long cheery sounding message, though she felt relieved when she hung up. A clap of thunder above the opposite building tore across the sky and the glass panes shuddered. It made her jump. Soon a thick, opaque rain descended, pelting down the windowpane, splotching it in ugly big water drops. Rainwater dribbled down the wooden door that separated the balcony from the drawing room and a small puddle of water near the doorstep of the terrace grew larger. A younger Mrs. Mehta would have surely rushed to shut the door and stop the water from coming in but now she would have to wait for Suvarna to clean. Maybe she thought, she could even ask Mrs. Kapur.

Today she felt the memories of filling up syringes, diagnosing diseases and writing out prescriptions on pale pink forms at Lilavati Hospital, fading. She hiked up her saree and looked at her swollen feet. Were these the same feet she walked on for hours during her hospital rounds? Examining wounds, cleaning rectum boils, soothing burns and nerves. The constant wail of babies in the pediatric wards, the occasional female infanticide case and the paperwork, the police and the nights she stayed in the hospital ward ready to be called anytime, barely sleeping a wink and she felt exhausted, just thinking of it. In fact, just a week ago when she and Mrs. Kapur had been to a restaurant, a baby's cry at another table had made her jump alert. The harsh glare of the operating room bulbs, the plain stretchers, the severe smell of antiseptic maybe, she comforted herself, it would all fade away. She winced as she tugged the comb against a belligerent knot.

She thought she was too young to be suffering from joint and body aches. In fact Mrs. Mehta hadn't even comprehended this condition in her mind, to her own self. She of all people, a doctor herself, knew that such things happen only to old people. Fifteen years ago she thought, she would have readily called patients above 50 — old. Today, on her birthday, she realized with an unpleasant shock, these classifications had become hazy and blurry. Though Mrs Mehta

wouldn't ever admit it, not even to her own self, it was this joint ache that made her accept the hospital's voluntary retirement scheme so readily, made her not search for another job after that.

Bored, she wondered if she should call her neighbour Mrs. Kapur and ask her to come over a little early today. Then she turned on the TV, changed channel after channel, soap to another, a game show to the next, it was all the same. When she was young, she thought, there were at least some interesting programs on radio, like the Cibaca geetamala. Now in spite of so many channels, there wasn't a single good TV program to watch, to wait for, to think about all week. Between the swift zipping scenes she caught the glimpse of a weather beaten face, and let the channel beam for a fraction of a second longer.

The scene wasn't new; she thought she had seen it probably in some travel journals and magazines. A man in a large blue parka and spiked boots was climbing what the narrator claimed to be the second highest peak in the Himalayas – Annapoorna. This made her think about her younger days, when she, a teenager, along with her siblings, had climbed 10,382 feet of Himalayan terrain to complete their CharDham pilgrimage. It wasn't the drama inherent in this scene: the mounds of snow, the constant howl of the wind or the unmerciful

glare of the sun gleaming on the steel thermos, which made Mrs. Mehta linger for a while. It was something about the man: a strange kind of energy exuded from him. His body was hunched over protecting itself from the biting cold and his steps were slow but there seemed to be an energy, a force that was driving him on, making him place the walking stick one step at a time ahead of him. It was evident that he didn't know where he was headed and stumbled down several times out of sheer exhaustion. Yet again, he would get up and walk, on and on. Ice had formed on either side of his mouth and right below his nose, ice frosted over his ears and his lips had a bluish tinge, his face weather beaten, creased, his breath audible, long drawn and deep. It was a slow, treacherous climb till the summit; the sky was gray. After some time the snowstorm abated. He was visibly enthused; he climbed, rappelled and walked concentrating only on the next step ahead of him. He had stopped looking at the summit, and yet slowly he was getting there.

The rain pounded on the windows, she sat immobilized; suddenly the door bell rang, she moved a little forward to the edge of the sofa, placed her palms downwards to hoist herself up on her feet but this time a little easily, a bit quickly. She walked to shut the door of the balcony, stepping over the puddle of water and then walked over to open the door. Mrs. Kapur peered inside through

the wooden lattice door (that Mr. Mehta had insisted on having after reading about the rise of house robberies) and she was surprised to see Mrs. Mehta open the door herself. Usually she would click open her way in with the housekey Mrs. Mehta left with her. Mrs. Mehta, still not used to empty silences and lonely rooms, was only too glad to see her neighbor.

Mrs. Kapur entered in holding a round steel box and since this was Mrs. Mehta's birthday had dressed with care: she had combed back her hair, after flattening it with a little oil and water, and kohl lined her eyes behind thick glasses. She wore a pink silk sari that she knew Mrs. Mehta liked. Mrs. Kapur was too timid to come to meet her neighbour when Mr. Mehta was around so she came to meet her neighbour only in the afternoons – the time she is sure he is absent. Mrs. Kapur was unlike her neighbour in every way possible. She was pale and thin, with a long neck, almost lizard like in appearance. At her age she walked five rounds of the near by municipal lake every morning.

"Happy Birthday," she said, feeling a little funny for saying it in English. Then she didn't know what else to say so she looked at her fingers and tugged at her rings. Mrs. Mehta, picking up the cue, said, "It is always like this on my birthday, I can't remember a single birthday when it hasn't rained. I remember I could never even wear new clothes on my birthday at school."

“But you are today,” Mrs. Kapur said, eager to please her. Then they walked over together to the sofa and talked about their children, Mrs. Kapur reminded Mrs. Mehta of how glad she should be that her children remembered her birthday and Mrs. Mehta reminded Mrs. Kapur of how lucky she was to have a daughter in law she got along with. (Mrs. Mehta pushed back the thought of her husband calling them as a mutual appreciation club.) They talked about the increasing nudity in Bollywood and the ineffective censor board, about the best deals in sarees (Mrs. Kapur, knew all about this) and inspiring books (Mrs. Mehta knew all about this).

“I know everyday isn’t a birthday but if you could stay this happy everyday,” Mrs. Kapur stopped, wondering at the absurdity of *her* giving advice to Mrs. Mehta. That too a doctor! She was slightly in awe of her neighbour and had mentally granted her the certificate of an ‘Ideal Woman’ - the parameters for which she had decided after reading Grihashobhas and watching the personality development shows serialized in the afternoon TV programming for women. Since Mrs. Mehta was the only woman Mrs. Kapur knew who had worked outside, leaving her home from 9 to 5 everyday, who earned as much as her husband and yet raised well behaved children –therefore she, according to Mrs.

Kapur, ought to be respected. After all, Mrs. Kapur watched 'Sanjivaneer' regularly on Tuesday prime time nights. She knew all about the medical world.

Mrs. Mehta was aware of this and wanted it to be so. Away from her patients, away from the approval of her children, at this stage of her life, Mrs. Mehta needed validation, now even if it came from Mrs. Kapur. If she marvelled her strength and energy, she didn't admit it, not even to herself because then the equations would change, the balance of power would tilt. Mrs. Mehta and Mrs. Kapur went together to all the places where their husbands refused to accompany: a new shopping complex in town, the handloom exhibitions at Bandra Kurla complex, crockery sales, an upcoming theater festival and book readings since Mrs. Kapur was the only one who had the patience to stop every now and then to rest along with Mrs. Mehta, on chairs in stores, against cars in the streets and arrive early enough to book readings to get the chairs.

The rain had stopped and the afternoon sunrays slanted in through the terrace windows to bounce off the steel box that Mrs. Kapur placed on the glass tabletop. She opened it with trepidation. She hoped her neighbour liked it. She had cut the koparapak in thirty-one pieces, and decorated it with plastic alphabets, that she had saved since her son Vinay's 10th Birthday. She hadn't

followed the Happy Birthday with Mrs. Mehta's name. And now as she looked at the koperapak she felt it was a mistake. But Vandana, her neighbour's first name had sounded too casual, and Mrs. Mehta didn't sound right somehow. So it was just 'Happy Birthday' like she could have taken the koperapak to any one's birthday. Mrs. Mehta told her neighbour she really shouldn't have taken the trouble but was touched anyway, then she got up to bring some candles and walked into the kitchen opening drawers and closets till she found them. Now that she was there she also fried some samosas for Mrs. Kapur, something she hadn't done since her retirement.

Mrs. Mehta arranged the only candle at the center of the koperapak and Mrs. Kapur lighted it – and they laughed over their little self-indulgence. Then they dragged chairs from the drawing room into the balcony where they sat eating samosas and koperapak. Today Mrs. Mehta did not talk about how lonely she gets. Instead she told Mrs. Kapur all about her trip to the Himalayas and her Chardham pilgrimage and the difficult climb and the exhilaration at reaching the temple on the summit.

Later when Mrs. Mehta excused herself to go to the bathroom, her neighbour went over to quickly wipe off the puddle of water that she had seen as soon as she had walked in. Discreetly she wringed the wet cloth swab before spreading it

on the windowsill before her neighbour returned. Mrs. Kapur glanced at her watch and looked outside. When Mrs. Mehta returned she took her leave to go for her routine walk around the lake and besides this was the only time in the park when she wouldn't meet too many people, so would it be okay if she would leave now? She walked over and slipped into her trainers, which looked a little funny under her saree. Mrs. Mehta looked at the trainers. She thought maybe she should really do something different for her birthday. She opened her shoes closet and dusted off her old chappals and told a surprised Mrs. Kapur that she would join her today. Tomorrow, she thought, I'll buy the trainers, like the man's in the blue parka.

WHEN VARUN ARRIVES

“Who left this unwashed spoon here?” Shetty demands, looking at the steel spoon abandoned near the sink. It still had some dried dal sticking on it.

“Two dollars fined straight away.”

One more fine slapped in the Raj-Aman-Shetty-Nishant home.

“It’s not me,” I say before he looks at me, not that I’m under pressure but just to let him know before I continue with my cell biology homework.

“It was Nishant’s cooking turn today. Ask him, he might know,” Raj says looking up briefly from his anime movie. Shetty is already moving towards the white door with a ‘Only dogs allowed in’ sign hanging outside. He bursts inside the room, holding the spoon like a weapon, “Nishant whose spoon is this? Is it

yours?” Nishant is the one who has made all the rules for our home. And therefore Raj doesn’t let go of a chance to reprimand him whenever he can. By now Raj is already stationed outside Nishant’s room, enjoying the show. Though Raj isn’t any different from Nishant, after all he is the self-appointed discipline enforcer of the V-B-S-K home. When he is not around we refer to him as the ‘watchman.’ Nishant makes the rules, he makes sure we follow them.

“Fuck it’s mine.” Nishant says with a sheepish grin, feeling a little silly. A million-dollar moment, I bet Raj must think.

“Okay, two dollars then,” Shetty walks away leaving the spoon on Nishant’s worktable. Nishant is the one who drafted the exhaustive VBSK manifesto. The manifesto, as Raj jokes, had been “born out of a need for the smooth functioning of the activities carried out by its members (such as the timely payment of rent) and also to safeguard the right to privacy of the household members.” We were four guys living in a three and a half bedroom apartment, tired of sharing the phone, bathroom, dinners. Tired of seeing each other’s stuff lying in the living room, of shoes left abandoned in the hallway, of finding the water pitcher unfilled in the fridge.

So the weekend of Thanksgiving, precisely November 27, Friday we created a manifesto. And then spent two days – almost the entire weekend – in

passing the resolution to have rules in this house: \$2 for any unwashed utensils in the sink after the dishwasher cycle had been started; \$1 for cooking after 7.00p.m, \$0.50 for missing grocery shopping on Wednesday, \$3 for not running the washing machine cycle before noon on Sunday. Skipping one's cooking turn or grocery shopping were unpardonable offences and could only be absolved by cooking or grocery shopping, whichever as the case maybe, the manifesto read, for four consecutive turns, IMO a very high price to pay. This had us eat Shetty-made food often. Nishant was the one who convinced us about the whole idea of creating rules in our home; he is always the one who pays the maximum fine at the end of each month. We all maintain our accounts under an Excel sheet program that Raj created. It tells us the amounts due for each of us when the months ends. The collected amount is then divided equally between everyone. So far this arrangement has worked; the home stays clean.

"Aman you are the most obedient baccha we have. You never break any rule," Raj chides me when we walk back from Nishant's room. I'm a bit lost for words at times; I can't retaliate with a clever answer. I wanted to tell Raj that I obey all the rules and stay careful so that I can send more money home, after all 2 dollars are almost equal to a 100 rupees. That's equivalent to a dinner Aai, baba, Meenu and me would have at Madras café!

Wooden tables. Waiters in uniformed grey-blue shorts and shirt with madras café embroidered in red lapels. Steaming coffee served in stainless steel tumblers and saucers and the careful swipe of crumbs by the boy who cleans the tables and then a quick swish of the same napkin on the green formica table top. Meenu would always wait for the dampness to disappear before resting her elbows on the table again. I never bothered about such things.

But there is no point telling Raj this. He is much too lost in his world of Japanese animation and dance to think of these issues. And he doesn't have to go to Western Union every month transferring dollars over transcontinental wires. I try to return to my homework for the cell biology class.

After spending more than twenty minutes on it, I leave the sixth answer halfway. Tomorrow, I decide, I shall ask Angela about it. Right now, it's too late to call her. I drop the books I will need for my classes in my Jansport bag, which we bought at the Thanksgiving Day sale. The day after Thanksgiving, at six in the morning, bleary eyed, we were standing in the huge line outside Bestbuy. Kapil – for the first time – had agreed to take us all in his car without charging for petrol, or should I now say gas? That day when I remembered to get in the right side of the driver's seat and put on the seat belt, I felt I was getting used to my life here,. Almost after six months. I pull out clothes from the pile lying near

my door looking for a teeshirt, any teeshirt since one of the good things about winter is that I can wear it without ironing – as long as it is covered by my sweatshirt. I mentally pick my trousers. Looks like I am all set for my class tomorrow.

I wonder if Aai and Baba are online, and turn on the computer, the long shrill connectivity buzz tells me I am online.

Just then Kapil walks in our room, glancing at the screen. “Hi Chave, going to chat for a little while?”

“Parents online?”

“Yep, uh...are you going to sleep? You can switch off the lights and I’ll decrease the brightness of the screen.”

“Don’t worry yaar, you know this doesn’t disturb me,” Kapil goes to the bathroom carrying his shorts and a night shirt.

“Of course, this is less disturbing than your morning gargling sessions.”

He laughs. Kapil is a nice roomie to have. Non-intrusive, chilled out, easy going and yet sensitive enough to know when I am in a bad mood or homesick. Those are the times when he says the most vague, disconnected things in an effort to make me talk – his way of making me feel better. The only thing I grudge against him is his morning gargling ritual. He gets up at 5:30 a.m. daily, I mean 5.30 a.m!

Then he drinks a glass of water, walks around the room – to build up pressure he says – runs to the bathroom and then throws up all the water he just drank. He has learnt this technique at some pseudo yoga or Ayurveda camp (I don't remember which) in Haryana and is convinced that it keeps the three 'forces' in his body in harmony. For that camp he attended, I have had to invest three dollars in earplugs. But Kapil is the best cook I have come across. We tell him we don't mind his cooking, though we all come home early every Tuesday. No matter what he makes, Dum Aloo or Dal-rice we hardly have any leftovers. I turn off the lights anyway and sign in yahoo messenger. I see Aai and Baba have already logged in.

The_kales: hi

AmanK: Hi! Sorry was just finishing with the H/W.

The_kales: In today's newspaper we saw pictures of that museum in Washington.

AmanK: Which one, Smithsonian?

The_kales: Yes, it was covered in snow.

The_kales: Is there so much of snow there?

The_kales: Aai sees the weather news everyday she says Washington DC was -8C yesterday.

AmanK: We got 24 inches of snow.

Our online chat sessions, are like those rapid-fire question-answer rounds of gameshows. So used to talking on expensive international phone lines, my parents try to cover as much ground as they can, forgetting that chat sessions are free.

The_kales: Aai says she hopes you are wearing a thick sweater, coat and scarf when you step out everyday.

The_kales: Don't forget to take ginger powder in milk before you go to sleep.

They also forget that now I am twenty-three years old.

The_kales: Yesterday, Varun had called. He said his company is sending him to US for some time.

AmanK: That's real good news. When did he say he was going to come?

The_kales: Not sure, I think he was talking about reaching there on the 20th of this month.

AmanK: That's great. Do you know where?

The_kales: Don't know, we didn't ask him the details.

The_kales: He said he would send you an e-mail.

AmanK: Okay, I will wait for it then, in case he calls again just take down his new e-mail id and send it to me.

The_kales: Okay.

AmanK: Did you get the 600 \$ I sent by Western Union.

The_kales; Yes we did, beta.

The_kales: Your roommate must want to sleep.

The_kales: We'll come online tomorrow.

Aman_K: Okay, Bye.

I log off the chat, look at the glowing Titan watch, as always set to the time in India. It is 9:30 in the morning.

Aai is entering the kitchen to cut the vegetables, hurrying up before the maid claims the kitchen for herself at 1:00 p.m. Baba is reading his newspaper and sipping tea – the gurgling sound of water in the bathroom as Meenu fills a bucket for his bath. The shaving brush would be bobbing up and down in the plastic tumbler placed under the jet of water in the sink. Meenu would be calling out for a towel again from the bathroom, angering Aai and making her panicky, handling so many chores, all at the same time.

Varun coming over fills me with a vague feeling of uneasiness. It's like having my presentation accepted for a reputed scientific conference like MABEC. I am thrilled about being accepted till I realize the practicality of it.

We were kids brought up by parents who put us side by side, competing against each other for nearly everything: grades, clothes, volunteering for school activities, even at making runs in a game of cricket within the neighbourhood. Predictably, we grew up comparing ourselves, having only the other as a reference point so we could never climb out of the loop, completely free from each other. We both cracked the entrance exam of the Indian Institute of Technology, chose to stay in the Bombay campus and though he moved on to software engineering and I to bioengineering, we managed to keep track of each other's grades, friends and participation efforts at tech fairs. Perhaps we were also bound to each other because of this competitive spirit, along that continuum another, smaller line also ran parallel – that of friendship, for we could understand one other completely, as bitter competitors often do.

I log off the computer to check for mails in my outlook express box.
Nothing.

I wonder if I am slowly being forgotten by my friends, lost in a flurry of other things, the here and there, the now and present that occupy the minds of my school friends, college friends and I wonder if Varun has now occupied that space. Kapil is already asleep, soft snores rise and fall in rhythm. I close the door,

set the alarm, and spread the comforter with a giant sweep so that it covers my toes. Then I snuggle in for my dreams to take me back home.

The overcrowded red coloured BEST bus. A rude conductor with an acerbic tongue, ready to lash out at anyone who doesn't have the requisite change. The bus full to the brim with people talking and balancing themselves on their toes, with one hand catching the hanging black rexine straps, moving to and fro to the traffic rhythm. Stop. Move slowly, pick up speed, fast, sudden stop. Lurch forward. College students, labourers, sales executives, families returning from weddings all aboard on bus no. 81 from Hutatma Chowk till Dadar.

Here it's different the first time when I walked into the bus, I looked at the ticket and then turned it over to diligently read the fine print. That happened with everything that came in my way when I arrived to USA. Bus tickets, vending machines, railway platforms, microwaveable food packets, I read instructions on all of them. I watched 'Friends' and 'Smallville' and listened in to conversations at the school library and food courts. I observed people walking inside the bus, the way they would politely smile at each other or look absently into space, a practiced avoidance of looking at people. At the grocery store I watched the way people swipe their cards and look at the people conversing

with each other at restaurants. As if everything – even buying a ticket from the machine at the train station had to be learned. As if I’m starting all over again.

I look at the sun shining brightly on the trees along the bus route and I think about the brilliant deep red sunsets that I have seen here. Does the sun make up its mind to set differently in diverse places of the world? In Calcutta, it’s a gradual sunset in gradients of colors; the sky takes a deeper hue of orange, then red and finally pinkish gold. Here the sunsets are characterized by deep red streaks across the sky and free of a skyline, like the one in Calcutta, here the sky is just so astonishingly, beautifully blue!

In the warm rays of the late morning slant into the dark teak wood office as Varun and me sit across from Dr. Sharma. “Do write to us and stay in touch,” he says in (what I feel is) the end. “Don’t forget to write to your family. Your family and friends are the anchor in foreign lands” I nod, though it makes me feel as if I’m sailing for strange lands in an 18th century ship instead of going to DC by an airplane. I have barely spoken to him about my post-graduation plan and he begins to talk about the moral implications of emigrating. When Varun looks at me sideways I know this isn’t going to be a send-off speech but more of a sound-off speech.

He goes on to explain to me the philosophy of the Vedas and I know the best thing I can do is to look down at my hands and just listen; to argue against the Vedas would surely be social suicide. He tells me about the four stages of a human life that are mentioned in the Vedas.

“Bhramacharya ashram,” he says trying to gather all the papers on his desk, “the stage that you are in is soon coming to an end, a stage where as a child you claim resources from the society, “ he continues without looking at me, “your parents give you love and teachers impart knowledge, so the society nourishes you and in that sense you are,” he stops dramatically to make his point, “a receiver”. Varun is enjoying this and he smiles so I know there is more coming.

“You are now approaching the second stage – Grihastashram – where you have to perform, be productive and give back whatever the society has invested in you for so long. It is wrong to give back to a different society than the one you are indebted to. You know the jamun tree in the garden – we received it as a sapling, for years we cared for it, when it began bearing fruit would you like someone else to claim it? Like Varun, you too should stay here, do research in technology that bring benefits to this society, not another, “ I do not even try to answer this because I know that this question, like many others have no direct and simple answers or solutions. The silence in the room grows larger, only the pigeons coo outside.

I shake his hand as I leave, and I hope that he understands me. He hugs me and presents me a Parker pen set, wishing me luck.. On my way out, I pick up Borsali flowers that have fallen down in the campus building. I crush them in my hand so that the smell stays long after I have left the campus. I get into a cab and see Dr. Sharma is still looking out of the window at me. I wave.

In the evening when I reach home and check my mailbox I see Dad's email informing me that Varun has left Bombay but I am more interested in the mail below Dad's — it's from Varun!

Hey Aman,

What's up? Company has scheduled my visit from 15/2 to 16/7 in Raleigh. Seems like we will get some special gyan attending some seminars and conferences by Boston Consulting Group. Beats me why they should spend so much money over us? Anyway, the good thing is I'll get to see you and possibly travel around. So see ya soon. I'm leaving by Lufthansa 717 flight from Bombay — Washington via Frankfurt. Calculating the time difference, I will reach there by 4.00 in the afternoon on Saturday —if there are no terrorists on the plane. ☺

See you,

Varun

Since tomorrow is a Sunday, Kapil agrees to take me to Dulles to pick Varun up, as long as I run the washing cycle for him this week. After dinner I dust the computer and book shelf, spread a clean bedsheet over the mattress and wipe off the fine film of dust the photo frame, and the room looks ready to receive Varun. Kapil offers to sleep in the hall on the sofa till Varun stays and I readily accept to be spared from his morning retches. Then I see that my cassettes and CD drawer is in a mess. I kneel down, pull out the drawer and begin by pulling the Ricky Martin cassette out from the Air Supply cover.

I finish the grocery shopping early on Sunday morning and stock my section of the fridge with milk, microwaveable pizza, grape juice, cake, cokes, diet pepsis, smoothies, salsa —as if all my anxiety found its way into the fridge. Additionally I also cook pulao rice and dal fry. Shetty and Raj too have somehow sensed my anxiousness – today they have cleared up all the mess in the living room, folded their week-old laundry pile and drained the water that had long been sitting at the bottom of the dishwasher. Kapil and me leave from home at two in the afternoon; the flight is scheduled to arrive at 3.45. I tick things off my checklist mentally. My room is clean; the living room is clean too. Kapil has already placed his comforter and pillow near the sofa. We are all set!

When I spot Varun walking out of the immigration line, pulling his two black suitcases, craning his neck to look beyond the Latin American and Chinese visitors walking ahead, I wave and a slow grin breaks across his face. In his excitement he forgets to load his luggage on the airport trolley as he walks out of the gates, instead he drags the two suitcases, slowed down till I have reached him. He hugs me and several people around look at us and smile. We look each other over. He looks as if he's just begun weight training at the gym, I can see his arms a little bulged out, his veins visible and his jawline set. I suck my stomach in.

"You look the same!" he tells me, as if he didn't expect me to be so.

"But you've lost weight, man. Room mate cooking?" Varun jokes.

"By the way, meet my roomie Kapil."

Varun is embarrassed, "Sorry man."

Kapil shrugs. They shake hands.

We step out into the chilly February air. Varun pulls out a sweater and wears it.

"How was the flight?"

"Wasn't too bad, I caught up on sleep, the last few days in Cal were crazy – I got my visa just two days ago and just stuffed in everything in these two bags. I don't even remember what I threw in, what I didn't."

“Was the airline food edible?”

“I was sitting next to an Italian, he almost saved me from having a fish sandwich.”

“Ya, you have to be careful, actually you should ask for vegan stuff.”

“What’s vegan?”

“Oh you don’t know, tell you later, tell me about the flight,”

“I stopped via Frankfurt, lovely airport except for the security people. The way they look at you, as though you are Osama Bin’s cousin. Anyway, I flew over Germany and kept looking down through the clouds it looked beautiful, the tiny houses, the farms...”

Just at this moment I realize that Kapil has been dragging Varun’s suitcases and I rush over to relieve him. Varun as usual doesn’t notice these kinds of things. As we try loading Varun’s suitcase in the trunk, he is positively excited. “My bag is full of stuff your parents have sent for you,” he says.

“If you have any mithai, it’s shared property,” Kapil finally speaks.

“So have you been sponsored here by your company?”

“Ya, they have a software project in Raleigh for four months so a couple of us were sent here.”

“Raleigh as in SC?” I ask, wondering how long Varun would stay with me.

“Huh?”

“Oh sorry SC, south Carolina.” Veganism, SC – I’ve already started using language as my new defense mechanism. Suddenly I realize the full import of having Varun staying with me.

“Did you get any sleep in the plane?” I asked.

“No I was too excited, I guess. I didn’t get sleep at all.”

For having stayed awake since the last thirty-six hours, Varun looked remarkably fresh. I guess the excitement of the journey hadn’t worn off his face. We shove the suitcases into the car and sit with the hand baggage on our laps. As we drive away I can feel Varun’s enthusiasm.

“Are we going to drive past the white house?” he asks.

Very soon we are out of Virginia and all along the way, Varun is guessing the state names from the abbreviations on the number plates of the cars ahead of us. By the time we are out of Virginia state limits, he knows the abbreviations of all fifty states.

“Amazing speed the cars are whizzing past!” he exclaims when we reach the highway.

“60 miles,” I say, eager to show him how well I know this place.

When we reach home Nishant and Raj have already heated up the dinner for us and I mentally make a note to thank them. I introduce them to Varun. We sit down for dinner together. I can’t tell if Varun likes the food I cooked. He is either too exhausted or too excited to notice the food. The rules of the house have been relaxed for Varun, though I am supposed to be responsible for him.

Later, before we go off to sleep, Varun suddenly gets up. His voice is low, almost conspirational.

“You are happy here, na ?”

“Yes, of course.” I say quickly, “Why? What makes you think I am not?”

“Nothing, just asking, ” he says. Within a few minutes I hear him snoring deeply. When he wakes up in the morning at about ten, he looks refreshed as if there is no such thing as Jet lag. “Let’s leave soon,” I tell him. “We will first go to see the Smithsonian and then the White house and the spy museum.

“After I unpack.”

He opens his black suitcase. I am surprised at the number of things my mom has sent. Extra frames for glasses, luddoos, a Lee sweat shirt, photographs of our Agra trip, a new album of Jagjit Singh, a wristwatch and a maroon wool scarf. Kapil who had been hovering around immediately picks up the laddoos.

“And here is what I got,” Varun says, giving me a notebook.

“Go on open it...”

On each page, Varun has stuck a photo of us together since we were young. Since our school days to our college years. I realize he must have spent a long time collecting these photographs. I am a little surprised, were we really that close? Ever?

“Thanks!”

When we reach the metro station, Varun spends a long time looking at the fare card machines. And though I offer to buy our tickets he insists on doing it all by himself.

He swipes his global credit card and hits the buttons, a bit unsure about operating it. As he reads all the instructions carefully, I am reminded of the first time that I stood before this machine. In the train, I explain all the currency denominations to him.

When the doors open and close, Varun examines every person in and out of the train; on our way to the Smithsonian he stops to look around at the lawns, the building across on the other side and the people walking around there. At the National Air and Space Museum we take about four hours, since Varun goes

slowly over every specimen on display and insists on discussing it with me. By the time we step out, we are tired and hungry. When we get lost in the lanes of DC, he is the one to find the way, reading the maps I have been carrying, to the Eastern market where we have enchiladas and spinach quesadillas. Varun relishes the food. On the way back he is charmed by the Reeboks and Nikes on sale and is drawn in by cheap AIWA stereos. We stop by a souvenir shop that sells three teeshirts for ten dollars.

“One fifty rupees per tee shirt, not bad, huh?” he asks rhetorically, calculating dollars into rupees. He picks up six tee shirts and bargains for another one free. Despite being new here, I am surprised at his ease in this country. He has picked up the way things operate here, as if for him it is a software code waiting to be broken and deciphered. The vending machines, McDonalds, train and bus schedules. “Everything is so standardized here, so organized,” he says often, surprised, the engineer in him pleased. We stand one arm over each other’s shoulder waiting for a German tourist to take our photographs.

As I watch him frame the Smithsonian building in his camera I wonder if I am the only one still trying to adjust to a new place, a new country. Or I wonder if we are both programmed differently. Like the bacteria in our body, some of

them can never survive in a new environment and others, when they enter, fit right in, and then even go on to change the environment around themselves.

We reach home tired with our film rolls full of photographs taken at Capitol Hill, Smithsonian museum and the Eastern market. The next day I have another surprise in store for Varun. It is supposed to snow!

It snows and snows. Awakening earlier than Varun, I sit alone in our room, and watch the snow flakes gently swirl and settle down on the windowsill. They look so beautiful, swiveling little tufts of snow, glinting like crystals before melting away under the warm sunlight. I sit here with my homework but cannot concentrate. I spend the whole morning just looking out, looking at the snow softly forming a feather-white carpet. I watch for a long time, as if I'm enjoying this not just for myself, but also for Aai, Baba and Meenu. I wish they could see how beautiful this looks. Varun emerges from his sleep sometime late afternoon – he is still jetlagged, getting used to sleeping halfway round the globe. "I have never seen so much snow before," I say, drawing his attention to the window. He looks out mesmerized, "I have never seen snow before!" he says.

"Let's go out!" he says.

"Take your camera," I say picking up my own.

Outside, the whole scene looks different and new, as if a giant brush has applied white strokes to everything around me.

“I had only seen pictures of this you know in foreign calendars and postcards,” Varun says. The snow crumbles softly under my feet and I love the soft crunching sound. Varun and me leave a trail of Reebok prints on the snow. We make for the lake. The whole street looks so different now and it is a white, bright almost surreal with the sunlight reflecting and bouncing off trees and homes. Far off, we see a snow mobile clearing up the street. Children in their furry winter clothes and thick soft caps throw snowballs at the snow mobile man. He drives on by, unaffected. The kids retaliate with a heavier arsenal of snow balls. Varun and me laugh. The lake’s level has risen and the ducks still swim on it though near the banks water is frozen and the pattern of ripples is firmly captured in thin ice. The bare branches of the trees are highlighted with the white settled on it.

“So what do you think?” I ask him proudly, pleased to see him happy.

“Looks great, wonderful!”

“Aren’t you going to settle down here, like everyone else?” He asks then catches a few snowflakes on his tongue.

“I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“Can’t imagine growing old here,” He starts laughing.

“What?”

“Nothing, you haven’t even yet graduated and here you are thinking of getting old,” I laugh too.

“It’s a simple choice,” he says.

I wonder how things can seem simple to Varun. Now that I have come here I know the choice is not simple.

“Stand here,” he gestures, pointing his camera to a rock, with a smooth flat surface. The bare branches throw in strange shapes in the still lake. It looks eerie. Too still. I obey Varun and give him a broad sunny smile. “Ready?”

“Thanks man”.

“No problem; send it home.”

We walk ahead, I take a few snaps of Varun facing the lake, looking at the setting sun framed by trees with snow flakes on their branches. When I bend down to pull a twig and snap it free, I watch the snow tremble and cascade down. Suddenly, Varun is behind me and I feel something cold, slide down my back. As he pushes snow into my shirt through the collar, I wriggle and the lump of ice falls down. I rush, pick up a handful of snow, mold it in my hands, and

shoot straight at Varun. Barely able to see each other, we reach down and throw the snow up in fountains creating small snowstorms for each other. After some time my hands feel numb and have turned red after the snow fight. "Enough, enough" I say, tears in my eyes, still laughing hysterically. Varun throws one more snowball at me and again we have another bout of our fight. We stumble in the snow and climb up snow slopes, and slide down. The trees, lake, everything, disappearing in a blur. Again and again, till we are giddy. Today I don't feel lonely. In this perfect moment of happiness, America and India seem one and the same thing.

F-1 SNAPSHOTS

If this were a video test for one of those U.S. - India crossover immigration films I'd surely win a role. I came here, like the others before me, trying to merge in a Made-in-Dharavi leather jacket (all buttoned up in the heat of August) clutching my handbag close and balancing my two oversize, cramped up VIP suitcases (with oversize name labels that Mom had stuck with Fevicol) that were barely sitting on a minimally designed luggage cart. Annoyed by the handbag that kept sliding down my arm, I pulled it up and I pushed the cart on, moving with the rest of passengers through the signs and boards and antiseptic airport smells, to the immigration lines.

It's a video test I'm not happy with. A test that I'd like to have retaken, recreated or even destroyed. I'd never like to be an immigrant in a crossover movie.

My first step in America the difference is obvious, the lines are clearly drawn: I stand in the line of immigrants and tourists. The line is dense, closely packed; it smells. Maybe I do too; I have been flying for 24 hours. Mumbai-Heathrow- Washington DC. 24 hours of watching the sun, like an intractable infant, wake up, stretch out its first rays when it should really be asleep. My body still struggles to register the shock of jet travel. The Americans — the permanent residents and the citizens stand in a line that is loosely strung: people at large, American distances from one another. The line is perfumed, it moves quickly. The INS officers there smile and make small talk. At our line people get fingerprinted and shot at by webcams. People in my line enter with shoulders slouched, leave shoulders straightened. In the other line, people's shoulders never slouch. I look straight ahead beyond the line to the precautionary fire extinguisher and beyond the huge glass window see the anxious groups of people waiting, communicating by signs and signals to their people in my line. Their people signal back and try to look relaxed, but their fingers cross and uncross, and the Mexican man ahead in my line is now standing before the INS

officers, trying to answer the questions he is asked, but too nervous to understand. His shoulders slouch but later he walks out proud, a happy man with his papers stamped and documented, entry granted. He joins a woman and a little girl who hug him so tight like they haven't seen him in years.

When my turn comes I feel a strange dryness in my mouth, if this officer here has a fit, if my name somehow appears on some malfunctioning software generated security list, if he doesn't sign my papers, I will be sent back, it is too late to be sent back now, after preparing for a year with the GRE and TOEFL and the paperwork. I, shortly to be christened resident *alien* momentarily forget what an index finger is and keep my forefinger on the fingerprinting machine. The INS officer rolls his eyes, signs on my papers, and wishes me luck for my graduate studies. It is over! I take my first, legalized step on American soil to find a payphone and call back home to my bleary-eyed, tired parents at the other end of the globe.

ROOMATES

Three Indian girls decorate their home. One Indian girl decorates her room with the essentials: a desk, a chair, a borrowed mattress, a Shahrukh Khan poster. The other Indian girl decorates her room with a used bed frame and handloom bedspreads, a worn out teddy and blocks of perfumed candles which are never lit. I decorate mine with a bookshelf and an Ikea futon an Ikea desk and chair, a dhurrie, and sandalwood flowers bought from a family trip to Bangalore. When the January winds huff and puff and rattle the windows the three girls are warm and cozy eating dinner in front of the TV.

Madhu is from Madduland — the land of Idli and sambar rice. Madhu doesn't ever eat out, shops only during 50% off sales, doesn't buy a down jacket — makes do with three layers of clothing, cuts coupons, remembers to post mail-in-rebates, calls her parents only from calling cards, hurried how are yous and take cares, the rest of the conversation carried online on yahoo chat with hands-free voice conversation feature on. Madhu and her family have mastered the art of voice conferencing: pausing, listening, speaking but in turn Madhu has to raise her voice, so I'm sure even our neighbors upstairs can hear us but are nice enough not to come knocking at our doors, are resigned to give us only tiny smiles and quick nods when we meet them, occasionally, near the mailboxes.

Madhu saves her fellowship stipend for the really big things — she's the first one to buy a digital camera, and later, a car. Madhu saves her heart for the really big things — she's the first one who visits India in Christmas to meet the boys her parents have spent the whole year selecting from matrimonial websites, Sunday Reviews and marriage bureaus, eager matchmaking relatives.

Shagun is the only girl in her family to have studied so far, to have emigrated outside Ludhiana, outside India for an education. Her parents still do not understand why is it important for Shagun, for a girl, to want to leave her home to just study abroad. Is it a boyfriend tucked away somewhere in America perhaps? Shagun doesn't tell us about the stress last year: the secret preparation for the GRE in her college library, the borrowed Visa fees, her fellowship and the sadness joy that mustn't be shared brings. Shagun doesn't tell us about these things but Shagun has a huge bald spot at the center of her scalp and ties bandanas when she steps out, even if it is in the humidity of August.

Sunday mornings are for old film songs. We cut, chop, cook to Rafi and Lata Mangeshkar melodies and then clingwrap steel utensils filled with dal, sabjis and dosa batter and tuck them away deep in the fridge to use them later in the week. That day, the smell of food reaches beyond our apartment door to the mailboxes and Shagun fans the smoke alarm as I fry puries. That day, all we eat

is curd rice as if the smell of the food has filled us already, made us slightly nauseous like guests having eaten at a wedding party. With the songs, the smells, the heat, the chatter we have created a mini India on 101, Lakecrest Drive.

On the first Saturdays of the month I clean the bathroom, the next Shagun deos it and after that Madhu. Madhu brings in the mail everyday. I sort it out. Shagun gets mail she's not interested in: credit card offers and sweepstakes tickets. Madhu gets Popular Science magazines and receipts for the money she sends her parents every month. We send three different checks every month to the rental office. Like three girls who are playing house-house we have neatly divided our work and as if we are living out our childhood games. Madhu is the one who maximises everything — figuring out that three people can share phone bills and Netflix bills and three connections of high speed internet. We sometimes watch Netflix movies one after another, from morning till evening like the video cassette craze, back home, when people sat up the entire night watching three Bollywood movies one after another with relatives and neighbors. We sigh over cute professors, talk about our families, gossip about other students.

We are sarcastic when Shagun forgets her turn to clean the bathroom. Each waits for the other to open the door when the doorbell rings. We leave

angry notices for each other on the fridge, near the sink when the dishwasher hasn't been turned on like it was supposed to. When the fridge handle is found dismantled we spend more time on determining who did the deed than on calling up the apartment maintenance guys.

Evenings we have dinner together sometimes in front of the multicolored TV rays, sometimes on our dinner table which badly needs a new table cloth. We give joint parties, all Shagun's and Madhu's friends are my acquaintances, on Dandiya nights I wear Shagun's dupatta, on Diwali, Shagun wears my saree and I wear Madhu's. Madhu wears Shagun's bangles and poses pretty in front of the camera, and then e-mails the photo to a guy she has been chatting with on shaadi.com.

We are as much family as tangerines posing as oranges, like a rainy day starting off sunny, like stuffing inside an empty purse, like faux fur, like zirconia making off as diamonds, like concealing creams, like store bought cookies wrapped in a old cookie box, like dosas made from a Gits pack, like a borrowed saree on Diwali.

FLAME OF THE FOREST

Shobha thought she should write to Shilpa today. Maybe just on an inland postcard so that she wouldn't be required to write too much, she thought, as she balanced herself on the edge of the seat in the ladies compartment of the crowded CST bound train. The train was full to the brim, stuffed with tired, overstressed women. Nightly massages of cracked cold cream had not overcome the creases formed by the vain battles of managing home and office. The stench was over powering, suffocating her lungs and she looked in the direction of the window, anticipating a breath of cool air to soothe her. Shobha glanced outside; Aishwarya, floated on the green fields full of flowers in a movie poster,

temporarily frozen into a shocking green of film studios. Again, for the thirty second time Shobha began writing to Shilpa in her mind since she arrived to Bombay.

Hi Shilpa, I got your letter; it reached me in five days. Can you believe that, just five days! We can now write to one another much often. Post-election times are good for the public, since they seemed to have revamped the postal system totally. I looked at a poster of Aishwarya and thought of you and our first-day first- show madness of seeing Aishwarya 's movies in Bahar cinema. Did you see her latest movie? Has it yet come to Bahaar? I haven't been able to catch the latest — KSKT though I see the posters everywhere — on railway stations, bus stops, on building walls.

A tall woman, perspiring, her neck glistening with beads of sweat, was trying to get the overhead fan in motion by hitting one of its wings with her tail comb and Shobha turned her legs sideways to accommodate her. Other women looked on in anticipation. With a slight push, the fan started whirring; a collective sigh of relief rose up in the humid air.

She continued: *But things are very different now, Shilpa. I can't seem to just step out whenever I want — the way we used to. I seem to have become like a clock, a keeper of time. I don't do anything: the maid cleans, the dhobiwallah takes the dirty laundry and returns with clean ironed clothes, the cook brings the vegetables and cleans*

it. But that means I can never step out of the home for I have to be there when they work. You might think I'm just really idle and spoilt having the luxury to complain about maids and cooks. Except I know you will never think like that about me. It really binds me down all this — I can't go out like we used to walking through the fields, going for movies, going to the market looking for hair clips and bindis, studying when we felt like (except we never felt like). Mother says that's the difference between married and unmarried life as though marriage is that one single life-changing event. As though the life of a woman can be compartmentalized only that neatly — married / unmarried like on govt. forms. Then Shobha stopped. She knew she wouldn't write to Shilpa now, not just yet. Perhaps some time later, much later when she would sound better, like before.

A small girl with radiant black eyes and a bright red frock, torn at the edges, was advertising her wares: small stone earrings, plastic combs, clips and other such brightly coloured baubles, in a high-pitched voice. She pushed her way across to the next berth, upsetting a woman rubbing tobacco in the hollow of her palm. The next berth was full of young college girls singing a popular Hindi pop song in loud, excited voices. Shobha picked it up and started humming, her thoughts drifting to the sunny languid afternoons of Pithampur and the gentle breeze beneath the mango groves. She drifted off to sleep and

was woken up by kohl eyes telling her to get off the train; it had reached the last stop. Shobha stumbled out of the train and joined the crowds climbing up the stairs, on their way out. Some lecherous stares and ‘accidental’ bumps later, she reached the rickshaw stand irritated. The song still stayed in her mind.

As the rickshaw sped off she tied her hair back together to stop it from blowing. She thought of Anand’s grandma who she had met for the first time after their wedding. After a few preliminary questions she had hastily deduced that Shobha didn’t know enough about managing the home and its responsibilities. She said that Shobha’s generation was full of women who had turned lazy because of the appliances that had replaced the woman’s duties at home. Shobha had to fight the urge to talk back rudely to her and hastily retreated from the home of old rustic furniture and creaking beds. She had almost fought to keep her tongue in check, otherwise the old woman would have informed the entire clan that the new bride had no culture—didn’t respect the old and conclude that Anand had done a big mistake marrying her. She sometimes wondered that too.

The Flame of the Forest had started shedding its red flowers and Shobha knew she had reached her destination when she saw the tree. She could never talk to Anand about such things — as trees. He always found it strange when she

gave the directions to him with trees as landmarks. Yesterday, when she had been giving directions about the new movie theater, “Turn right next to the Gulmohur tree and keep walking straight and stop just a few meters before the old banyan tree...” she had halted, noticing that amused look in Anand’s eyes. She knew he found it silly (though he didn’t say it). He had later asked her if she knew any shops or roads passing near the movie theater.

Dear Shilpa, she continued, things are really very different here. The city is so crowded that I wonder how people manage to walk without bumping into each other. I was standing at VT station the other day and happened to look at the people I felt suffocated just looking at them. So many of them! We had a different picture of Bombay, the kind they showed in the movies, you know the tall buildings and the skyline but there is so much dirt and garbage here, everywhere around. And no, I haven’t seen a single filmstar since I arrived here. Not even one!

Her rickshaw stopped at a traffic signal and Shobha covered her nose with her dupatta. Still not used to the smoke and the fumes, she coughed, felt breathless. A young boy selling gajras of jasmine flowers approached her; the flowers had yellowed in the vehicle fumes. She looked away but he requested her to buy them till the rickshawallah scolded him away. Just then the traffic moved.

She continued, *In fact, I had been to the Siddhivinyak temple here – it's a huge, huge temple Shilpa, and it is said that a wish made there always comes true. I was standing in the line and I saw this beggar, a child really and he looked so miserable. They never show this in movies, do they? He didn't have any hands, Shilpa and I just saw him and I couldn't control my tears. It was embarrassing because I know people were looking at me, but I couldn't control Shilpa, I really couldn't.*

At her stop, she alighted from the rickshaw, the song still playing in her mind. She fumbled looking for the home keys. The elevator stopped and she swung out, knocked on her neighbor's door. Her neighbor opened the door and the wailing sound of her infant pierced Shobha's ears. After some hasty pleasantries she asked for her home keys, opened the apartment door and gave the key back to her, eager to shut her door. When she looked at the rasamalai she had cooked for Anand uneaten on the table she stopped humming. She remembered the day she found all the cards she had given Anand yellowing away at the edges in his cupboard, the shirts which were never used were invariably the ones she had gifted, his amused look when she tried to tell him to listen to the birds, his frequent interruptions when she sang, his obsession with work, his unconscious but impatiently moving feet when she spoke about her daily affairs, his shifting eyes, focusing on her, refocusing on the window, back

at her, on his watch, again on her as she spoke about her family. The twilight air lay heavy in the room and suffocated, Shobha opened the windows to gaze at the sky. The sky was a layer of a smooth mauve silk pallu thrown carelessly over the shoulder rippling down in folds, each fold taking a different hue — from a darker mauve to a quivering, rosebud pink. The lonely crescent moon was embroidered in the folds of the pallu, its brilliance curtailed.

Sometimes in the morning upon awakening, she had a strange lonely feeling like that of a traveler awakening in a hotel room of a faraway town, a little confused, trying to place the room in some perspective. It had been two months since mother had invited everyone to the wedding, proud of the match she had arranged for her daughter. On the day of their wedding, she was in her white panetar and Anand, tall, slightly nervous, had wrapped her in the chundari of bright red with gold threads spun into it to form a beautiful floral design. A red on the white. Color and brightness on the monotonous white. A bright promise on life. And yet Anand never fought with her, even when she provoked him, never curbed her freedom (but why didn't she feel it?), never derided her in the presence of people or embarrassed her. But where had it all gone? Was it slowly fading away when he abruptly went off to sleep on the day of their wedding, in the car? Or was it when he kept disappearing frequently

during their honeymoon? The problem was she could never accurately pinpoint the exact cause. Sometimes it seemed unrealistic as if she were posing in a photo taken by her mother; it wasn't really her in that white saree. It was someone else or maybe, she was someone else two months ago. The silence and equanimity of Anand frustrated her. The knowledge, that, though she could make him smile she could never make him laugh the way it shook every bone, every vein in his body. That she could hurt him but not the kind that would leave a permanent scar. There was this invisible wall around him, and try as she might, she could never break it. It was impassable.

Two months after her wedding she had gone to meet her mother in Pithampur. After much deliberation and thinking, she finally broached the subject.

"Mumma, I didn't think married life would be quite like this."

"It always is like that, dear," she said, picking curry leaves.

"But Mumma...." And suddenly she was sobbing in her mother's arms.

"Beta, what is the matter?", her mother put the curry leaves aside.

"Does he abuse you?"

"No, Mumma!" Shobha snapped.

"Then Beta, what is it? You should be happy with what God has given you. Shilpa's husband doesn't even allow her to get out of the house without him

knowing where she's going." Her mother continued, "You are representing our family, our values when you got married to Anand. You should be strong. A woman joins the cracks if there are any, in a family, she doesn't break ...she joins people together...she creates a home. And that takes a lot of commitment and ability to endure pain. The home is where the woman is...when the woman leaves...the home breaks."

"But Mumma, I am not talking about leaving the home. I am just saying that I am feeling disillusioned." Shobha protested.

"All I can say is Shobha, you are not the only one, look at me, Shilpa everyone adjusts," her mother abruptly cut off.

"And Beta, anytime you feel bored you can always come here." Her mother hugged her.

"Now just start picking the curry leaves, I need to make the chutney soon before your father comes in."

After that brief encounter, Shobha never broached that subject again. In her mind, she composed to Shilpa many times in her loneliness. But never actually did she write the letter. She thought about calling Shilpa but was afraid her voice might give away what she had long feared her words would. Gradually, Shobha stopped singing or humming. She tried to get a job in the

engineering sector; many of her friends who were now in the middle management tier had given her hope that they might be able to help her get a job. Anand's reaction to her ideas was as expected – just a nod and a “If that's what you want to do, go ahead.” He helped her in fixing the maid's schedules to match her interview dates and time and even cooked dinner for her when she came back tired from her interviews. But with the economic downturn, Shobha only got offers that were being also made to high school dropouts. So she decided to reapply when times were better.

It was a rainy afternoon when Shobha woke up from her noon day sleep. She staggered from her bed and looked at herself in the dressing room mirror. Tired eyes and sallow skin looked back at her. She looked around her home-the bedsheets were never ironed, and when stretched on the bed, had a crumpled look about them. There was dust collecting on top of the TV set. Knick-knacks lay about her home everywhere. A broken kitchen unit door mocked at her; sharp glass edges jut out of a broken window pane; the wild roses had died and the fan had layers and layers of dirt. Is this my home? This place of neglect? Shobha looked around.

The shrill ring of the phone almost made her jump. She hesitated, then picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Shobha, Shilpa here!"

"Shobha?"

"Shobha....are you crying? Shobha, what's wrong? I know it's been a year now, but the phone lines...Shobha is something wrong?"

"Shobha.....Shobha!" Shilpa's voice grew louder.

"Shobha, tell me what is wrong."

"Shobha, I'll write today to you. You wait for my letter, okay?"

Shobha awaited Shilpa's letter, opening the door every afternoon at 3.00 to check the mail, even though she knew it took five days at least to reach her. When the letter arrived, it was as if Shilpa could sense exactly what Shobha was going through. Shobha read it quickly the first time and then slowly again. Some parts of the letter she read several times and carried it with her, even in her purse when she stepped out. It was like in Pithampur, when they could read each other, tell how the other was feeling, like a pair of eyes always synchronised, always with the other, even if one couldn't see the other. Shobha gradually started seeing the colour in the Flame of the Forest again. It felt like a slow awakening. Among the many things that Shilpa persuaded Shobha to do, was to

join a music class that taught Hindustani Classical music. After much thinking, and hesitating, Shobha agreed to try out the classes for a week.

The room was bereft of any furniture; a maroon dhurrie with geometrical designs was thrown on the floor. A tanpura leaned against the corner of the room, and her teacher, Mrs. Pandit — a grave looking woman, sat on the edge of the dhurrie, her black eyes peering out of her thick glasses, looking at Shobha, listening, evaluating the voice of her new student.

Shobha began with the most basic of notes, the Alankar, but it felt as if someone else were singing this instead of her. Someone old, someone frail. A few young students were practicing the Bhairavi raag and looked at her askance. She stopped and began again. But it sounded the same.

“Don’t worry, go ahead, just sing.” Mrs. Pandit said with a hint of a smile. Shobha rushed through the Alankar, feeling a little foolish, the notes ascending randomly. Her fingers kept adjusting her saree unconsciously.

“You sing alright, if you practice everyday, you will be able to sing like you used to before.” Mrs. Pandit remarked. “When you practice at home, imagine your notes being plotted on a graph chart — as if they are in a geometrical succession, one after another and the lines should be straight, not

wavy. Imagine this and then sing.” “Come every Thursday at 6:30.” Mrs. Pandit added and started tuning the tanpura. “We shall first practice with the Harmonium for accompaniment and then move on to the Tanpura.”

Shobha nodded and rose.

At home she switched on the TV and headed straight for the kitchen. She was still humming the Bhairavi song that the kids were singing. Then she imagined the straight line and sang Sa...Re...Ga.. but it still sounded wavy. Shobha kneaded the dough, divided it, started shaping them into small balls and roasted them till they were light and fluffy chapattis. The TV blared out some garbled dialogues of a movie. When Shobha began frying pakoras the vapour from the kitchen permeated in the entire dining area. She thought about Shilpa and decided to call her and tell her about her first day at the music class. The doorbell rang. Shobha mopped up the droplets of vapour and sweat on her face and rushed to open the door. Anand peered inside from the front door, a little tired, a little damp. Shobha offered to take his briefcase inside. “It’s okay, I’ll keep it, just take this umbrella though.” Shobha took the wet, black umbrella and perched it in the little bucket near the washbasin.

“Let’s sit for dinner as soon as I change.”

After a few moments, Anand returned from the room vigorously wiping his head with a hand towel. A warm aroma swept through the dining room and Anand settled in his favourite carved wooden chair. Shobha hurried to set the table, as Anand waited impatiently. He heaped his plate with some salad and she passed on a few chapattis and sabzi after taking some in her plate.

“So how was your day?” Shobha asked. Shobha watched him eat and waited for him to say something, anything. If he liked the Alu Gobi, if he didn’t. About his job. About the weather.

“So how was your day?” she repeated.

“Oh, it was alright. It was pouring quite a bit today so I was at my desk all the time. What about you?”

“Nothing much. I just attended my first music class today.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It was great actually. Shilpa had called up and we were talking about things and then we just, I mean, she just suggested I could start learning music again, here, you know...” Shobha continued, refilling Anand’s plate with salad.

“So why don’t you call Shilpa sometime here?” Anand said, “Maybe you can even show her around Bombay,” Anand suggested, wiping his mouth with a blue embroidered napkin.

“Yes, but after the monsoons are over, this rain and mud, it’s all too much for someone coming here for the first time.” Shobha said picking up the plates and bowls.

Thursday crept in cold and rainy. Shobha set out armed with a peach umbrella jumping over puddles and avoiding the splash of rickshaws and cars. The class was too close by to drive to.

“So did you try singing at home?” her Mrs. Pandit asked when she reached.

“I did but my voice still shakes and it hasn’t evened out yet.” Shobha replied, embarrassed. Mrs. Pandit laughed a little. “Shobha, that evenness of voice can be developed after a rigorous practice of at least one year. That is what you should strive to achieve though it takes a long time. If you practice everyday, it will come by. But if you stop, even great singers — if they stop — they lose it. Constantly practice.” Shobha wondered if she had the patience to formally learn music — it required more commitment than she had ever anticipated.

“Today I will teach you Raga Bhup,” Mrs. Pandit shuffled through the pages of her old notebook and stopped at the right page. She handed the book

over to Shobha. Shobha noticed that most of the pages were coming off and were tattered at the edges.

“Now copy these songs in your notebook,” Shobha’s insistence on neat handwriting and the condition of the notebook greatly slowed down her speed. Halfway through Mrs. Pandit remarked, “You know, my teachers never wrote down music. They were only taught the notes used and the rules in which they had to be used in a particular Raga, and then they set about composing their own melody or song. So each time they sang a Raga it was a different piece of creation. In fact, music started to be written down only from our generation. Some say this stifled creativity.”

“Can I do that? Learn music like your teachers did?” Shobha asked, tired of copying the notes. “You can try, it’s difficult for most people, but then music is a gift given by God — some people can compose a raga in minutes what takes others months. Try it, that’s the only way to know.” Mrs. Pandit held the flap of her harmonium and her fingers moved deftly on the keyboard. When Mrs. Pandit sang, Shobha could almost trace each note, as clear and consistent as if it were being sung through a hollow pipe. Listening to the twilight raga, Shobha found herself rocking to the Ektaal rhythm.

Dear Shilpa,

Your phonecall changed so many things! I started the classes and just listening to music makes me happy. I don't know if I will be able to ever sing perfectly but even if I don't it doesn't matter because I'm perfectly happy just listening to it and practicing it. Thanks so much! Now I can feel there is rhythm to almost everything, rhythm in Anand's footsteps, rhythm in the chop-chopping of the vegetables, the ticking of the clock, even the rain! You may think I'm crazy but I must tell you in detail about my class and even sing to you a few new songs I have learnt. That is when you come here. Shobha arranged the plates and bowls on the dining table, set the pitcher of water, humming a tune. Yes, Anand and I are just waiting for the monsoons to recede, so that we can call you to visit us. Will you come; can you come? I have already made so many plans, of the places we will go to, but first we will start with my music class.

"It was wonderful, I mean it felt just so good you know," Shobha gushed at breakfast. Anand raised his eyebrows quizzically. And though she continued telling Anand about her class she already knew he wasn't listening. The rest of the dinner conversation floated around the office politics, family news and the new layout adopted by his newspaper.

Shobha tried out combinations of different notes of a raga — she replaced higher notes with lower, changed their order till she could finally hear a kind of melody in the structure of the song then she set about composing the rest of the lines with a new kind of enthusiasm. Shobha progressed steadily in her music class. She practiced singing, while watering the plants, baking potatoes, applying for jobs even in rickshaws. She stopped taking her afternoon nap and started composing melodies in the raga she was being taught in class. She began thinking of the things she wanted to express and then would set the raga according to it.

Twice a month she would attend the fortnightly music party where the other students — women older than her, or even school children — would be asked to sing. Sometimes they would shift from singing pure classical music to the latest film songs. At other times, Shobha would start randomly and all the rest rushed to join in. There was a great deal of clapping and cheering after each song. Sometimes the classes ran longer and Shobha would end up discussing the latest movie at the nearby theatre, a new restaurant that had opened, municipal elections and the musical concerts doing rounds in their city with the other women — women as old as Anand's grandmother or as young as her tanpura companion who had just started college. Once in a while they would decide the

themes on which they would compose or sing songs. Today, being a full moon day, they sang songs about the moon. As Shobha began she didn't even think about the uneaten Aloo Gobi on the dining table.

The next day, she wrote a letter to Shilpa.