ABSTRACT

Title of Document: SMALL TALK AND OTHER STORIES

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This is a collection of stories involving the everyday lives of Indians (from India) trying to cope with the disorientation of being where they are physically: the United States of America. By exploring different characters in difficult and/or unavoidable situations, this collection portrays not only the range of conflicts one might experience being the "other" in society, but also the range of story-telling by experimenting with structure, form, voice and language.

SMALL TALK AND OTHER STORIES

A Collection

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

YOUR BLIND MOTHER

Have I told you about this village? And the old lady I met there?

There is a tiny village where the tea is like tea no where else. The bus halts there on route to and back from Jamnaghar and Himatnaghar mainly because of this very fact. The tea shop itself is a little box built of weak wood panels tacked together with large slits between them to let steam out. Two benches, made of scrap wood, stand crookedly among piles of dried cow dung. No one really bothers to shovel them away. The bus driver parks on the side of the narrow dirt road, declares a half hour and forgets his job. The first time this happened, I was about to yell a profanity out the half-stuck window to his back. I had things to do. I had people waiting for their visa documents, their eyes anxiously trained on the grime covered station clock. People who were tired of this country and wanted to live somewhere where tea shops weren't the main attraction on a bus route that promised to get you somewhere you needed to be. But as I saw him slump down on the bench, my anger dissipated into a sort of pity. After all, this might be the one highlight in the day of the young, dark skinned, exhausted bus driver: A cup of tea at the corner of a road barely the width of the bus itself.

To my surprise, many of the passengers followed him, including a man whose suit I had not neglected to notice. It was handsome and reeked of imported textile. His hair was oiled, combed so that not one strand stuck out. From my window, I watched him approach the shop as if it was as normal as entering a five star hotel, avoiding the trash on the ground so that his polished leather shoes remained unmarred. He handed the chai boy a rupee extra and the boy scrambled to properly wash and dry his best tea cup. The man sipped his tea slowly, clearly enjoying it, and handed the boy another rupee when he was

finished. When he passed my seat upon returning to the bus, he said to my wondering face, "Best tea I've had in my life. Every time."

“This place?” I asked, looking up past his broad shoulders.

“Trust me, it's the tea that counts.”

So I had a cup. And then another. The tea slid like silk against the tongue and sweetly landed in the hollowest curves of a stomach, making eddies of warmth overcome any sensation otherwise circling inside a body. From then onward, I make it a point to take the same bus with the same driver just to relish that cup of tea. I take my tea standing a little ways away from the benches and shop. The vapid chatter near it distracts me.

But lately, something has been catching my wandering gaze. On the opposite side of the road, there is, as there are often in such villages, a small, white-washed temple with a tiny orange flag stuck at the top. Toy temples, people call them, because they are half the size of a standing seven-year-old, and seem to be made for the purpose of play rather than prayer. But in fact, every village hires someone to take care of the many toy temples, lighting a devo every morning and evening for the even smaller idol of Krishna or Hanuman or Mataji inside out of respect. They are built usually under a tree or on a raised platform, as is this one. Next to this temple always sits, like at most temple platforms, a begging elderly lady.

On that particular day, she sat with one leg under her and let the other one dangle off the platform. She covered herself from head to ankle with a tattered red sari, pulling the slipping edges back into place every now and then out of habit. Her eyes were half closed, as if too tired to try and open them any more. From where I stood, it seemed as if she was waiting for someone to approach. Every time someone did, I would see her

wrinkled little mouth whisper something, pleading. Then, a man stopped and handed her a couple of coins. She shook her head vehemently, giving the coins back and asking for something else. The man, offended at her refusal, pulled his hand from hers and walked away. The old woman folded her hands in his direction, lips still moving, begging, and then returned to waiting silently for the next person to walk by.

Old begging women are not unusual. Every village, town and city has them. But this one was odd to me. Poor as she was, she had not taken the money. I finished my tea and returned the cup to the chai boy. As I paid him, I wondered aloud,

“That old lady, what does she want?”

The boy chuckled, “Oh, that Maa-ji has been there for years now. Everyone feeds her once in a while. We look after each other in this village. But no-one bothers to listen to her anymore.”

“But what does she want?”

Shrugging a little the boy replied, “Oh, mostly a letter. But, really, who knows?”

I slipped the extra coin I was going to hand to the boy back into my pocket and turned towards the old woman again. I decided to cross the road and find out for myself what this stooped Maa-ji was sitting there for. What possible harm could I cause by knowing? My footsteps made her raise her head to my direction.

"Hello, Maa-ji." I said.

"Please, please, sir." her lips moved, "Please, can you help me write a letter?"

I stood about two feet away from her. There were sore marks all over her skin, her face almost invisible beneath the folds and folds of wrinkles. She stunk like wet manure, and her hair was nearly gone. All her toes were curled in, and it made me wonder how

she managed to walk, if she ever did.

"A letter, Maa-ji? A letter to whom?"

"Please, sir, please. I don't want money. I just want you to write a letter. Please. Will you write a letter for me?"

I looked back at the shop where the driver was still on cup one of three. A letter was all this woman wanted.

"Alright, Maa-ji, I'll write a letter for you." I took a seat next to her on the tiny platform, brushing away leaves, rummaged for a scrap piece of paper from my sack and reached to my pocket for my pen.

"Tell me, Maa-ji, what is it you want to say."

The woman reached for the space near my hand, and tears were escaping her, rolling down the many skin bumps. "Oh sir, sir, bless you. Thank you, thank you!"

I gave her my hand and she clutched it as if it was a precious jewel. Her skin felt as it looked: rough and dry, as if scraping against an old wooden fence. I withdrew my hand gently, "Tell me, who do you want to write this to and what do you want to say?"

She used the base of her wrists to wipe her dull eyes. She began with her whispering, sandpaper voice, and I wrote:

Beta Raghu,

It's me, me, your mother. Beta, it has been five years and I have not heard from you. Not even a scribbled note has come to me, bhai. Sitting here waiting for some news of you since you never came back has eaten up so many of my days, beta, so many. I keep seeing your empty bed from that day, the blanket neatly folded like you knew you'd never sleep in it again. Oh, it haunts me, my child. It haunts me everyday. Once, that

horrible cousin of yours told me about you living in Mumbai, a place bigger than here. That you do so many things and spend money like water. I said, then that is not my son you saw. Because you know better, bhai! What good is money wasted on drinks and bad things? Keep your actions clean, dear, and remember the poor...

I have sold the farm, and the hut, beta. When I cannot find a piece of rotlo to eat from the people, I drink water mixed with a little yogurt for some taste. You might have a house now, son, with a soft bed. I have a little spot here, under a tree to sleep. And every night, I fall asleep thinking of you. Before, when I was able, I would grind wheat kernels with the wheel grinder and make some rupees for food. But now, I have gone blind, my boy. And no one gives work to a blind old woman. Beta, your days may be filled with lights. Mine are filled with dark shadows...

Please, I hope you read your blind mother's words. I have nearly given up begging for people to write my letters for me... This may be the last one you'll ever read, dear. Now, I am going to sit here till the end of my days and sing to the Lord. If you read this letter, I have just one thing to ask of you, my son. When I die, please come back to my side. Otherwise, people will hate me for dying, too, for who wants to cremate a simple, old, sick woman like me? My dear son. This is all I ask...

Your Blind Mother

She sat there weeping loudly as I folded the letter. Catching her tears with the base of her wrists again, she said,

"Thank you, sir. Can you mail this for me? Please?"

“Mail it where?”

“Mumbai! They must know a Raghubhai of Mumbai.”

I watched as the old woman helplessly wrung her thin sari with her knobbly fingers. I felt the warmth of the tea inside me slowly ebbing away.

"Yes Maa-ji, I will." I reassured her, "I will make sure the postmaster has it."

"Just send it to Raghubhai of Mumbai, yes?"

"Yes, Maa-ji, I will. I must go now, Maa-ji." I said, getting up.

"Of course. Please. And thank you again, sir. God bless you. God bless you."

Back on the bus, I held the piece of paper and wondered how many people had such a letter to an unknown Raghubhai of Mumbai folded up somewhere in their desks. I wondered if they too continued to take the same bus here for the tea and watched the old woman at her temple platform, begging. Slipping the letter into my breast pocket, I braced myself for the backward jerk of the bus as it pulled onto the road. I was glad to be moving again. After all, there were people waiting for their visas. People waiting for me.

Tell me, will I meet you again here next week? No? Oh, but then we must try those samosas. That stand there is the pride of this town!

SMALL TALK

As he lay dying, she was making small talk.

She was his son's first child. A girl surely to be followed by a second child, who would surely be a boy, so it was all right that his favorite son's first was her. He saw her wiggling in her mother's thin arms from ten feet away ten days after birth. Colicky and blue-lipped. He wanted to hold her, trace the little nose with his already wrinkling fingers, but no grandfather did that. He watched from afar, then stood up, fixed his dhoti which had caught ungracefully at his knees and asked for his walking stick. He passed his son on the way out and said,

“Beautiful.”

The next time, she was scooting around on her tender buttocks, using her little feet to pull herself forward, or, faster yet, push her thin body away. He watched, a little amused. She was a backward one, he chuckled to himself. She was a troublemaker, and no one would ever know. And when she never came to him he thought, there, I have already lost another. But then her father, his son, tucked her lovingly into the elbow hook of his arm and said,

“Look! It's Dada! Say, Daaadaaa. Daaadaaa”

She watched her father's mouth curiously and her wide eyes went from the sounds to the aging man she was meeting.

“Daaadaa?” she asked.

And his heart was collecting at his feet, then surging back to the middle of him to make him smile. He stretched out his arms and stared into her young, young, young eyes. Baby tooth showing, she came, patting his cheeks, then his head, then his forehead.

“Dada! Dada! Dada!” Her jaw dropping and lifting. He basked in her tininess, her curious fingers in his ear, then twisting his ear hair, her jingling anklets hurting his hip as she swung her leg lazily back and forth.

“Tell me,” he asked his son, “Why doesn't she crawl on all fours?”

“She's afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Hurting herself, I guess.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Watch her.”

So he watched her, scooting and sliding across the old floor of the mud-sand hut, squinting as she stood up when her mother put down a straw mat. One step and another and another on the mat. Then the dirt hit again and she squatted to sit.

He laughed and shaking his head to his son, said, “Watch out for that one. She'll be ahead of all of you!”

Then he left, because grandfathers don't linger. Not in houses anyway. He and his men could spend hours at the village square, sitting on rope cots their wives or daughter-in-laws padded well with cotton-filled mattresses, one leg crossed under them, the other in a triangle rising besides them with the knee grazing their chins. They talked of water buffalo births and sipped rakabis of tea for ten paisa served by the chai boy who came around every three quarters of the hour. So he walked there, watching women draw their saris still lower across their faces as he passed, burka style. He lighted a bidi and blew the stream of spiced smoke up into the foggy sun, thinking again, she would be ahead of them all.

When she said good bye again, she was getting on the plane, a skinny three year old holding on to her mother's dress, on her way to her father, his son, who left a year ago to study more. He had never understood the glorification of America the younger generation talked about. The money, the freedom, the prospect of becoming something greater than what they were in their own country. For him, the farm with lush green wheat fields sweeping in sea-like motion after the monsoon was everything. The farm made things great enough.

“What is over there that isn't here?” he had demanded.

“Opportunities, Bhabha.”

“No need. You always have this farm to come back to if all else fails.”

“But I have scholarships. And I want my children to grow up in a place where they can study what they want to.”

“They are girls. They don't need to study!”

“Things are different now, Bhabha.”

No, he could not have stopped them all from going, least of all the little girl who shyly smiled up, neck stretching back.

“Touch your Dada's feet.” Her mother commanded.

And so the child did so, shyly, with both palms resting briefly on his earth-roughed skin, fingers brushing against raised veins. She went to touch her eyes to complete the motion, but he couldn't let her do it. His fingers caught the little wrist and shook it lightly, then brought her palm to his wrinkled lips. Everyone said nothing. No grandfather kisses a granddaughter. She brought her little arms around his leg and still, everyone said nothing. Then a sob came from the family's crowd and he remembered

who he was again. From the jeep, he watched the plane rise, away, away. He thought, there, now I have lost her. And rode back to the village with a bidi stuck in his mouth, unlighted.

“Dada! You smoke!?” Her shrillness making his head turn.

He stared at the arms on her hips, the scowl in her now eight-year-old face. How quickly that happened, he thought. How fast grow bones in five years.

“Dada! You shouldn't smoke! It KILLS you.”

Someone passing on the dirt path tsked. She had found him on the wooden swing that hung down from the patio ceiling. He drew in deep and blew away from her face, into the breeze. She moved forward, and he thought, alarmed, what was she going to do? Didn't she know?

“Dada, NO.” And out came the bidi from between his lips. He jerked back at the movement and watched, astonishment settling into all curves of his jaw as she threw it down and stomped on it with both feet.

The world saw, and stopped. Women stood, whispering into their thin, flower patterned saris, still balancing earthen pots of water on their small heads. Men leaned on their walking sticks, curious, storing images for gossip later. Children tittered and peeked in and out of the scene, afraid, excited, afraid, kicking up dust behind their rapid shuffling. Only the yellow lab, homeless and damaged, slept on, swatting at flies with his tail.

He stood up and looked down at the child. How insolent! He thought, how dare she show me anything? He was glad for the strip of fear that passed through the little girl's dark irises as she stood, the sound of her grinding her molars suddenly the loudest

thing to listen to.

He saw that everyone was saying nothing. He lifted his eyes and the statues became mobile again, frantically avoiding him. The emptiness calmed him and he reached slowly into his shirt pocket to draw out the cone-like package of bidi. The moment he tipped the cone to the right to slide a roll out, it was lost. Snatched, like fish to eagle, he thought afterward. The girl ran, and without thinking he ran after her, yelling,

"You! You! Come back! YOU!"

So unpracticed was her name on his tongue.

The yellow lab awoke, barking loudly as their bare feet thumped in mud. He had to stop ten paces in and remember who he was. When he did, the lab slumped in its corner, defeated. That evening, he pulled a grandson close to him and found that she had run deep into the village, insular to cow dung, to thorns, to garbage at her toes. At the deepest well, she had thrown the cone, watched it float a while, and hadn't waited for it to sink.

"She said her teacher taught her that smoking was bad."

He frowned, "So this is what they teach them in America!" and took our a bidi. Lighting it, he joined the other freckles of orange against the otherwise dark front porch. The smoke was thickening. He thought he saw her standing in the shadows of the flames, staring at him. But it was only the yellow lab again.

"She fell in! She fell in!" his children's children were yelling and laughing.

Two years later, they were all at the farm again. Uncles, cousins, she, him. He took a seat under the mango tree, the vines so still it could have been an etching on marble temples, he thought. He would nap, watching parrots dance in the branches

waiting for the fruit to ripen. But they would never get a chance, he smiled. They would harvest mangoes green, still too tough at skin to break by beak. And the parrots would whine. He was lulled by the occasional cow call, and lowered his lids to see gray inside them.

When he heard the splash, his back forgot the aching and he ran to see what happened.

His stomach flew back to place when he saw her sinuous, branch-like limbs lift herself up and out of the buffalo drinking tank.

“You should've seen her plunk in, Dada!” a boy grinned, “She went in head first!”

The child was wringing out her clothes with them still on, grasping corner after corner until the only wet patch left was on her back. Everyone didn't help.

“Come here,” he demanded.

She went, head down, saturated hair letting water slide freely down her temples and nose. And then she was on his shoulders. Higher than she had been in a while. She smiled, happily. This is what grandfathers do, she thought, and everyone was saying nothing.

He remembered his back in five minutes, but left her up there. She was holding on to his head, a perfectly still load. He knew they were staring at him from behind. Up front, they ignored him. He felt her glee as she noticed leaves and berries on high bushes. She leaned a little in, and worried a little more, nose tickling his scalp nerves.

“Dada? Can I talk?”

“You can.”

“I'm sorry, Dada. I didn't mean to steal your bidi the last time I came here.”

“Don't lie, girl.”

“Well, okay, I did mean it. I'm sorry.”

“It was a waste.” He stopped to shake a pebble out of his slipper, “Wasting is not good.”

“I don't want you to die, Dada.”

His heart finally gave in and strummed his most tender string.

“I won't die. Now, stop talking.”

And she did.

His eyes were foggy ten years later. The girl who touched his feet was almost not one anymore. Everything seemed to be said with nothing, only he knew better. No granddaughter asked for stories at her age anymore. He felt her young-ness doubting his: he had taken to wheezing more than ever before, his teeth almost gone and tarred, his wrinkles getting lost in thick flaps of skin which were once firm, glistening cheeks. He listened to her voice when she passed, talking to someone, and smiled secretly at her l's and k's. Still the same, he thought, as she who made me run. He sat in his corner on the patio and counted the days of her two week visit dwindling. His hat fell from his fingers once and she saw it as she walked by. He let her pick it up, giving a sweet sunshine spread with her lips and wondered if she would cover his still silver hair adorned scalp with it or hand it to his shaking fingers. He did not let her decide, and took it gingerly then looked away. When the wind blew that summer, the rainless earth helped with dust storms. He watched her guard the younger ones tenderly, pressing their young faces deep into her stomach while shutting her own eyes in agony. He wished he was in front of her, pressing her lovely face into his shoulder and brushing the dust stuck afterward in the

creases of her neck and palms away. But when she finally left, his hand did not stop hers. She was never here. She was always gone.

“What does he do all day?” she had asked a cousin.

“Nothing really. Sits, eats, sleeps, maybe reads.”

“Almost gone.”

“Sister!”

“It's the truth, cousin, isn't it?”

“He's our Dada... you don't talk like this!” the cousin had cast a worried glance across the grand foyer of the family bungalow recently built by a pooling of 5 brother's funding. The paint still reeked and the grout used on the marble would seal the patch between skin and nail without second thoughts.

“I don't care if he hears.”

And he had heard it all.

At eighty-nine, he laid with all his sons there. They all knew it was it. His skin was peeling like a newborn's, and his toenails were falling off. They all watched. All the men in white, solemnly circled around the cot, the women biting at their saris, standing in the farthest corner of the room, trying not to cry too loudly. Everyone saying nothing. The heat, he thought, was getting almost unbearable. Maybe he should have listened to his favorite son and gone to America. To see snow. To see tall buildings. To see her. She had not come. And why would she? It had only been a year since he saw her last, explaining to her uncles what she was doing at university.

“I study books.”

“Oh, you study from books!” one of his sons clarified.

“No, no. I study books. Novels. Literature.”

“Novels?”

He had twisted his head to her then and smiled. She hadn't seen. She had been too busy explaining. Explaining that stories are more than just stories. Explaining her worthiness. Explaining what they do in America. He had thought, she'd never know much about him. His heart. Nor much about her. Her beauty.

He called his favorite son closer and hissed.

“What is it, Bhabha?”

He hissed again and his son tried to listen.

“Beautiful...” his death breath said.

12,500 kilometers away, her phone rang. She paused to pick it up, listened, and said,

“Alright, will do,” then shut it.

There were people around her, all holding beer bottles or wine glasses, all smiling their public smile, all gathering for the sake of being gathered. Laughing at sentences, pouring out new fears and nourishing old ones, or delivering stories with penchants for dramatic pauses. She stared through the commentary on patterned dresses, her thoughts lost in the footprints she had left in the mud long ago. Someone was looking for the bottle opener and she pointed to the porch stairs where it lay, remembering how they all pointed with the middle digit instead of the first until they came to America. Her grandfather had never tried to understand when she had explained this to him the last time. He had shook his head and had mumbled, as he usually did, something about things becoming lost. She remembered too, the feeling of dread tingling the back of her neck when she sat at the

lunch table years ago in high school, listening to her friends surely exaggerated versions of stories their grandfathers told. When it had been her turn, she had nothing to offer. There was no memory to lose when it came to her grandfather's history. All she did know was that he was the only child of a widow and had prospered quite well under the then strange circumstance of a woman handling a farm and son on her own. Everything else had never been told. Sipping at her cola she thought, well, I've lost him for real. There was no more grandfather, peering at her curiously from his corner, his withered form gently raising itself to lean closer as if he would see her better if he did.

GIRL AJAR

MRA has signed in.

MRA: hi you.
Me: Can you hold on a sec?
Me: Got to do something real quick.
MRA: sure.

Sent at 6:36 pm.

Mother saw the message and swung. It was a talented slap. The kind which left white welts and then dissolved to venom in your veins. The inside of your cheek puckered and bloated.

In 3rd grade, Mother would look at you in the mirror as she finished a topsy-tail and say, You stay away from Benny and Jeremy. Play with Molly. But Molly was a tight curled bitch, and everyone knew that. You didn't play. You strutted behind her. Benny told funny knock knock's while you stood at the ladder to go up the slide and Jeremy tied your laces to it so that a minute later you're hanging with both of them howling at your hair brushing the mulch. And then your mother heard about it. The principal was your backyard neighbor after all. Don't play with any of them, Mother said.

MRA: I'll be around. Just holler.

Sent at 6:37 pm.

As you stare at her face for a few seconds, you realize how Mother's face is the same one that looked at you all those years ago in the mirror. You flash a sick smile, refusing to lift your palm to the now rising pink bubble which might have been a sort of abomination on a smooth chocolate mousse. Mother only swipes again and catches the other side. Harder. The tears are squeezing out of you because you're laughing. Laughing at the absurdity of being twenty-three and having Mother tame you like this. Only then,

she grabs the edge of your laptop and you yelp and grope before Mother has the chance to take that two-slate gem—before you get to hear it cry some unearthly sound as it cleaves. But no, it's saved, thank god, and you clutch it to your chest, grinning. There are blotches on Mother's face which might have mirrored yours, only her nose catches the best of it.

You know Mother loathes them all: The boy who helped you up after you slipped off the swing set, and the one who hugged you in the sandbox. He was only six and so were you. Then the one with a crooked smile who sat by you to let you copy the homework from his planner because you were too self-conscious to wear glasses, and the one who stuck out a leg and sent you sprawling in the middle of the hall only to apologize ten years later through a message and smiley faces on Facebook. Also the one who offered you a ride to the lab so that you wouldn't have to waste gas, and the one who took you on nightly strolls while he patrolled so that insomnia wasn't a word in your book.

Of course, Mother didn't know all of them. They were Rachel and Amy and Linda fabricated from your initial's only chat contact list. You are smart, you know. So smart that secrets pour out of you as lies. Only, Mother is smarter sometimes-- she learns to distill the crude into clear truth oils and greases you with them.

Like now.

Mother's hands send the breakfast tray that was under the laptop to gravity. Your toes curl in. She stares, teeth gnashing incomprehensibly. Molded, the artist would be famous. She is remembering to breathe again and so are you. The pause is enough to inch your knees up towards your face and cover the electric-hot machine completely, but she's at your face again, fingers grabbing the swollen flaps of skin over your cheekbones like

tying twist ties. Shaking your head you make her fingertips slip, hair swatting around you uselessly, but Mother lands those hands which are almost-copies of your own on your thighs: a quick double beat plays and pain escapes in waves through the hollow of your mouth. She screams, It's him again! It's him again, isn't it? I'll teach you to stop! I'll teach you!

MRA: you there? Or just invisible?

Offline message sent at 6:40 pm.

And so, Mother knew about this one. The one with his angled three letters etched along the top of the chat box. The one who sent you a taped shoebox every Christmas and birthday, and then again for some lost bet. The one for who you woke up early and stayed up late to maybe catch a glimpse of online in secret. Just to tell some silly story you didn't want forgotten, or discuss a sleeper line in a play, or feel wounded with about Amish shootings. Or tell rare dreams and rave about ranting. The one who came to visit (no, Mother didn't know this part, or so you hoped) and left you your first kiss, telling you to practice on fruit, and then had you running after the rental car that carried him away into the rising sun. His is the name which laced in your mother's pure, brown soul a whip of hatred.

The whip that lashed out only on you.

When you look up again, her presence has evaporated. Over. Mother was gone. The silence makes buzzes in your ears. You unclench, unwind, swish your hair to the right side, gingerly run the back of your fingers under your nose and over your twitching lips, pick up the tray and open the laptop. It starts at a buttons notice. You wince at the welcome sound and expect the door to fly open again. You wait, a game of statue, fingers

white and poised to slam the screen shut. One minute more. Then you look and the light fights with your lids.

He's still there.

MRA: everything ok?
Me: Yeah. The internet just cut off
MRA: oh ok
Me: Should be good now
MRA: may I share something?

HENNA FEET

“And at night, after the wedding, he'll kiss these toes and send a string of giggles up your leg which will lace around your heart before escaping throat and mouth. Do you know how lucky you are, to have such beautiful feet?”

“They are so cold, Mother.”

“Henna cools, dear.”

“They also smell.”

“Oh, stop it... henna smells wonderful.”

“Maybe to your nose. To me, it smells like petroleum and lemon and...what else did she put in it?”

“Chaan.”

“Do I need to know what that is?”

“Probably not.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“Buffalo, you know, poop.”

“God... and you call shit beautiful?”

“Mouth! Watch your mouth!”

“And what is the dung for?”

“Color. The blacker the mehndi, the stronger his love is for you!”

“Is that what they said when you got married, Mother?”

“When I got married, the trend was to write your husband's name somewhere in art. Then have him look for it, after the wedding.”

“He's not going to kiss my toes.”

“Come now... stop being such a spoil sport. It's the day before you get a husband.”

“Exactly.”

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“I'm getting a husband.”

“Your tone.”

“What?”

“I don't understand why you're so unenthusiastic.”

“Never mind that. I am more worried about how I will sleep tonight.”

“Oh, you won't... when I got married--”

“No, I mean, lie down. With this…stuff on me.”

“Oh. We'll just prop your feet up. And wrap them in plastic.”

“Great. Freezing feet. It's December you know.”

“You won't catch a cold.”

“Finally, something that doesn't make me sick.”

“Really child, what is wrong with you?”

“The idea of cold feet.”

“We'll put a heater next to them. They'll be warm, okay?”

“That's right, anything for me, the bride.”

“But cold feet will bring more color you know...”

“Oh, really?”

“Heat makes henna go red. And red...well, it's not attractive.”

“Oh, you mean the women will say my husband--?”

“Oh, who cares what they say?”

“You do. Everyone does.”

“If I did, I wouldn't have let you marry a Brahmin boy.”

“Seriously, Mother, no one cares about the caste anymore.”

“Oh, you have no idea how much your father sacrificed to let you marry that boy... his family greatly disapproved. But see? I didn't care what his family said, or what other people said. Otherwise, I really wouldn't have let you.”

“If you hadn't let me marry him, maybe I wouldn't be here getting my feet decorated by this artist lady who would probably make triple as much if she put up a stall back in the States.”

“I thought we had already gotten past this... why do you keep insisting?”

“I still have 24 hours. Less. But I still have time.”

“When will you understand, child?”

“What? That cold feet give bolder colors?”

“Stop this. I demand it.”

“So do I, Mother.”

“No...no not you lady... keep drawing. You're doing beautiful things to my silly daughter's feet!”

“Yes, lady, keep flowering me up. Make me have feet that smell!”

“That's it. I've had enough. I am going to have your sister sit here with you.”

“I'd rather be alone.”

“Alone!? On your last night of being a part of this family!?”

“Oh Mom...”

“No, no... don't mind me. I am just crying because--”

“It's okay. You can stay.”

“I should go check on the decorations outside. I will send your sister in.”

“Fine.”

“Want a heater?”

“What?”

“For your feet?”

“No, my cold feet are fine.”

“Alright...”

“You could bring some samosas though...”

“I'll send them with your sister.”

“Okay.”

*

“Mom said you had cold feet.”

TOUCHING SCREEN

It happened in Venice, climbing up the steps to a cathedral. Winding along with the wind trying to push us away. My sister and I were at the top already, watching gondolas lull to the paddles swift swings. People were inside them, but we didn't look. Just like we didn't look when we were watching a movie and someone was kissing. We bent our heads away and waited till someone started talking again. At the square, pigeons ignored the crowds until they were a centimeter away. Then, they neck-danced, speed-racing away.

There was a small yelp behind us and a body slipping to the cement. What we saw when we twisted our necks back instinctively was our father helping our mother up and their hands touching. Touching. Fingers gathered in fingers. The gondolas blurred and all we could see was our parents doing something they never did.

We had our mouths open, surely. And when she was up, his hand still held on to hers and they climbed on. Just like the people in the long boats. Just like the movies. We looked away. We pretended it never happened. And at the top, our mother smiled at us, blush-less. We stared at our shoes, hiding our redness gathering in little prickles right below the eyes.

“She wasn't ashamed!” I whispered to my little sister that night, her toes enveloped between my calves.

“They just held hands. It was cute,” she smiled.

Of course she didn't understand then, but no man and woman held hands. When hormones burned inside man, the eyes played, laying a touch swiftly under the collar bones. Then up again to tremble quickly at the lips. Then to the hand that rested against

the womb of woman. And the woman, whose eyes never left the chipped nail polish on her index finger, she would suddenly answer. The corner of her mouth lifted and her lower lip hid behind teeth. He was gone before the minute was over.

This was courtship. No one touched. Not in this world. Not in this culture.

Twenty-two years could pass and the patch between the thumb and finger could still be virgin. Twenty-two years of being born, of living among those who would stroll in hallways with arms draped around and worn like clothing, with lips gluing saliva over and over again on another pair, with fingers pressing the small of backs, and never once being seduced. This is how we live. This is how the world is. There is no room for touch. No grounds. We waft in and out of the touching society, ghostly. And when touching men approach us, we lift our noses and set the rules:

There was a boy I liked once. We were 16. Sitting next to me one day on the bus, he held out his hand.

“I'm Nick! Hi! What's your name?”

Cringing away, I squeaked, “I'm sorry, I can't touch you.”

For the next year, my poetry had spilled love music for Nick. We talked like soul mates, sneaking to the library during study hall so that quietness didn't hinder us. The tenderness was all in the pupils of his irises which matched the sky. I'd watch it drip between us, inches of space separating skin. The last time I saw him, he offered his hand again.

I shook my head, “I can't touch you.”

I can't do anything with men. Even Father has not held me since I was ten.

No, I have twenty-two years standing behind the steady, unfaltering bars of rules

laid by my father and my religion so that when my peers at the temple sensed my presence, they stopped being wavering women. Girls who lived through two minds: One helped them fold their hands and bow reverently at the God in marble statues, murmur prayers which moved the water from behind their eyes to their cheeks in drops, and touch the feet of their parents with their heads every morning while risking carpet burns on soft skinned elbows. Planting a red vermillion dot in between the eyebrows to mark membership in faith, they smiled in mirrors. The other mind helped them be women. Women who took 40 minute showers and 20 minutes choosing the right shirt. Women who never thought twice changing their loose jeans to tight mini-skirts in public bathrooms, smoothing legs with girl-sweet scented lotions, twirling that last curl before a man grazed his fingertips between the crease of her thighs and heavy ass. Women who had to stop their mice-like twitters when I walked past their clustered huddles. I was flawless. Untouched.

But what started in Venice never finished. They touched. I watched. And I kept watching. 3 o'clock in the morning, the neighbor's dog is whining, but the souls in bed were gone from the minds that body them. Where we live, the wind barely blows. Breaths of unconsciousness were the loudest of all. Moonlight might be a presence, or the pincher bug creeping six legs across the thick, cut berber carpet. Summer roses sighing maybe, relieved from the flame of day drying gossamer petals. My laptop screen opens then, clicking in headphones and sticking the buds deep into the canals of vibrations, sealing myself in the media of touches. Watching, listening to men with women.

There was a blond one tonight. Blond like sunrise on dandelions. The ropes pinched into her form, creasing deeper, natural lines. She hung upside down, her face

tinted like the skin of a pomegranate, shoulders pulled away and bared breasts thrown forward. Shivering, she gasped into a ball placed between her white, white teeth. The whip tangled in her hair and the man didn't stop. There was blood now, a string of dye slowly seeping down her long curls. It formed tears at the end and dropped. Dropped into a tank of clear, cool water and blossomed circles. One. Then two. Then five. Screams erupted from the hollow of her throat, the drool foaming at the corners of her stretched mouth. And then they disappeared. She disappeared, dunked deep into the well, contaminating the clean liquid with swirls of agitation. Her eyes were bulging, the mascara giving her a raccoon mask. 5 seconds, and she felt years. She felt eons. The dry air hit her in shock waves that traveled up her in trembles. Two seconds, and she was in again. Seven seconds this time. Out again, her garbled terror froze the man. He smiled and held the rope easily, waiting for enough water to stream off. Her eyes were blinking wildly, her lungs straining, catching millions of air particles.

Then, he fucked her. Tied in the air by wrists and ankles, positioned to the height of his hips, wet, whip scarred, he fucked her. Her neck hinged and thrust back and forth with his body, no screams left in her.

I didn't start with this. Love touching was first. Fingertips brush-painting roses between breasts, lips tattooing themselves tenderly in the hollows of collarbones and kneecaps. Nails marking passion in skin like initials in tree trunks, and tongues swirling bliss to every pore of sensation that arches the back and holds the lips in a sweet, perfected O. Sometimes, love eyes reminded of lionesses lazily basking in African dry heat, a contentment radiating beneath the fur, captured in hooded stares. Love touching was animal in nature. Simple, honest. As generous as carnations in suit pockets, or

jasmines to scent. But it becomes the same. The touches. They stay the same. Wearing my long sleeved shirts in sweltering summer heat, I wondered of women with shoulders hanging carefree, of nipples pressed lightly into thin tank tops, how men molded their love into them. How each lip caress might have brightened a dull patch, how earlobes must wear a million kisses. And then the thrill died. The beauty faded and dried till it dropped completely like fall leaves.

But the nights didn't end with it. Soon, there were fists to watch. Clenched balls of bones and paper thin muscles pushing past pulsing, puking tunnels. Birth tunnels, shit tunnels. Tunnels I never knew existed. Hands are so malleable. Holding a pencil, they are triangles. Picking a fruit, they are tiny baskets. Noticing a cardinal flying past, they are lines. And against hanging bedsheets around a campfire, eagles can soar, deers can run, swans can float. Fists were no less, though they too became no more. Touches were granted hand-less. Machines, screwdrivers, inflated condom balloons. They put firecrackers in one once. Lighted, she squirmed. Exploded, she was swimming in blackness, the camera zoomed-in on tiny hairs shriveling, aglow like the end of a smoking cigarette.

Nothing stopped them. Nothing stopped me. When the sun wove in pink swirls lacing up to push away the purple night fabric, I put away one world and entered another.

*

They called me Pathro when I was born. Nicknamed me Pathro. Stone, in English. My sister was the lucky gold, but I was the stone. She's symmetry and I am crooked at the nose. They say Mom saved my head from a boiling milk pan. My grandmother was trying to, you know, kill me. No one wants a second daughter. So I got everything

second. Clothes, toys, shoes. They even named me what they didn't name my sister the first time. Not that it matters. My name is better than hers here. Mine sounds exotic. Hers sounds like something you shouldn't have to say.

Yet she's the woman here. I am the girl. At the temple, no one has the guts to pass her without mustering a good-girl grin. She smiles back. But her eyes don't. She is, as we all knew, the ideal. The exemplar of faith. The person who could blow off "American" like it was fluff. But to me, she is human. She is the spider-remover, the dog-shooer, the body which would finish one cup of hot milk she hated at some old relatives hut in India, then switch her empty cup with my full one to drain it too.

I don't know what drives her to live the way she does, carrying her honor on the way she combs her hair and leaves her eyebrows un-plucked. She goes to work and comes back. She cooks and scrubs the many tiles of Mom's grand home. She has been here forever, and never changed. Nothing, at least nothing I know of, moves her. When we went to Venice, I hated the smell. Smells bother me. If there was a turkey sandwich on my neighbors plate, I'd have to leave. But Venice reeked of fish and I couldn't see anything but moldy green when I shut my eyes. Disgusting. There was nothing to like. But then Mom slipped and fell and Dad held her hand. I liked that. It was real. Something that seemed like all humans did, and my parents should do it too. My sister, she hated it. She turned her back to me in the hotel room later, telling me I was ridiculous. Maybe I was.

She may not have changed. But me. The second. I am nothing like I was.

I grew up like all the other girls, giggling about boys and wondering what holding a hand might be like. There was a cry-room at the temple for mothers to breast-feed their

babies. Once, my best friend dared me to put her nipple in my mouth. We were 13, by the way. Naïve and stupid too. But she dared me and I said I'd do it if she did it back to me. She said she'd do something even better and do it to me first. I sort of hesitated because, well, no one had seen how big my nipples were getting. I lifted my undershirt quickly. We weren't allowed to wear bras yet. She stared for a second, then closed her eyes and licked them both. I started laughing cause it had tickled like hell. She lifted hers and I was about to lick hers when the door started creaking. I never did get to do it, but that touch, that feeling stayed with me for a long, long time.

High school came and went. I didn't give a fuck about respecting my parents for a couple of years, but my grades kept them happy enough: Mom would cry and slam her fist on the table in agony every time she found a note in my bag from some weirdo white guy, and then turn around and make me my favorite curry cause I got the highest grade in my advanced math class. They were hellish years, those. But I left this house at 18, and what met me outside was nothing like the inside. Outside I had classes, labs, exams, roommate drama, volunteer work, sick old people waiting, you know, to die and watching them die, counting pills. Hundred of thousands of pills. Pharmacy school taught me things about them. And one pill taught me, you know, things. Things on the inside. When I take it each day, I know I can let go inside and let things happen to me. Real things that felt like something. I have this obsession, I guess. I want to feel things no one feels. Nothing makes me more alive. Nothing is supposed to make me more alive.

I don't mean drugs, by the way. Drugs are cliched. Everyone who's fucked up does them. I am not one of them. Swallowing chemicals terrifies me. The inside of my body terrifies me. I don't like thinking of the millions of particles of hydrogen and carbon

bonded impure shit pulsing through my veins. It's like envisioning a fire licking down a trail of gun powder before the bang, or something. Not my thing. Besides, I want to feel alive, not gone.

Truth be told, I was scared of this too. The first time I did it, it was noon. The shades were drawn and there was cheesy music playing in the background. I sat and waited. When the door opened, I couldn't look up. No one asked me to either. I heard the equipment turning on, and then a hand on me. That hand was everything to me in that moment. I could feel the heartbeat at the tips of those fingers. It was like nothing before. Of course, I eventually wanted more. And there was more. Soon, I could say to myself, no one has ever felt this before. No one but me.

And there is so much more out there to try. So much more to move inside me.

But it's spring break right now and I feel dead here, coming back to this dustless place of old memories and old conversations and old rules. Mom makes the same food and gestures. Dad strokes the same earth under the same plants, maybe bigger. My sister. My sister the woman is still a woman. Untouchable.

*

"How was work?" she asks. My younger sister is always too full of questions.

"Work was work." I shrug.

"What do you do?"

"Same thing as before. Read labels, edit them, approve them."

"Doesn't it bore you?"

"Doesn't medicine bore you?"

She laughs, her stomach rippling in the act. Her shirt is too tight. How does her

skin breathe? She was thinner too. Much thinner. College. Always made them worse.

"No, medicine does NOT bore me."

"Well, there you are."

"Hey, is everything fine here?"

"Yeah. Everything is fine... why?"

"Nothing... I come back here and I feel... well, never mind."

"Okay. Never mind."

She laughs again. "You are still you."

I shrug and leave her in the foyer. The same where she threw her high school graduation cap down and swept our mother in a hug. The same where her head obediently listened to our father chide her ungodly behavior. Lipstick. Red. Whorish, my father had yelled, whorish with no idea what she was doing to the family name. The same she closed the door to when she left me. Us. This world where your middle name was the name of the man who, in more ways than less, owned you.

When I look back, she is gone. She hardly leaves her room. In that way, she is like me.

The door was locked. The screen was on again tonight. Every night. Yesterday, one had dogs at her throat while he fucked her. The dogs pulled off, he sucked at the gnawed flesh, nails puncturing fresh slits at her hip. She was lost, eyes lolling behind half closed lids. The fucking was still happening, still rushing blood from tip to womb. She smiled when she came to. She smiled and his lips swallowed hers, dogs barking around. Tonight it was all metal. Thin, sharp, shining metal.

Brown. She was brown. The foot showed. Only the foot. A gloved, white finger

traced a toenail, a toe, a heel. Brown leg. Bottle shaped. The finger grew claws, and up the leg it carved. She had waxed, this one. Her pores played with blood easily, filling, overflowing, filling, overflowing. One finger became two, two, five. Lines grew, creeks becoming streams, then rivers. The floor, an ocean. Up, up. Metal shrouded muscles sculpted, the slicing halting at a birthmark, patterned like a bulb at her hip.

Birthmark. Bulb birthmark.

The screen slammed. Bulb birthmark!

Her door was shut. Pressing a hand to it and then an ear, I waited. Marks ran in this family. Scars of forgotten falls, of unknown moments snagged immortally in new skin. I pushed at the cool knob, and the hinges whimpered. She was sleeping like she always did, an arm under her head, hair cascading on the pillow next to her. A sheet covered her, gently billowing with the fan beats. I bent close, grazing the bed against my thigh. The sheet I lifted, and she slept on. Tight clothes. Her breathless body, bony curves. Her leg twitched, I froze. The crescent in the sky blinked behind clouds and light seeped in through the window. My fingers found themselves treading the hem of her shirt, sliding the material up. Up, up. The birthmark. Bulb shaped. And beyond it, streams. Healed streams. The fabric slipped and slapped against her skin. She didn't stir. The sheet came up, my fingers tucking it under her chin, not touching a molecule of her living body.

I had to know. I had to know more. I had to had to had to.

The scene was on again, and the metal circled her dark nipples, down her arm, up her thigh, down her sternum, up her belly button. Down her pelvis fat. Up between her, disappearing. Blood bathed, she lay, face cut off the screen. He wore a blade, strapping it,

waving it, testing it with his fleshy thumb, gushing forth a wet ruby.

He fucked her. Bulb birthmark squeezing shapes under a maroon sheen.

And she was soundless.

*

“Do you ever think about sex?”

I thought about freezing but my spoon reached my mouth. “Sex?” My sister, the untouched, asking this question.

“Yes. Sex. Touching. Bodies.”

“No.”

“No?”

“Not really. It's a biological process. You know that.” I picked up the comics page. Sex. My sister was talking about sex.

“I don't know.”

“Don't know?”

The sun was filtering through the palm trees Dad had planted years ago. Mom was on the swing reading. The morning's 70 degrees melting into the grass.

“I don't know.”

“You don't know what?”

“Anything.”

“About sex?”

“About anything.”

“Oh, stop it.”

“Have you heard of people making videos of sex?” She lifted her fork, cut a triangle of the golden pancake, dipped it in raspberry syrup and slipped it into her mouth.

“Sure. It's called porn, you know. Pornography.”

“Yes, that. Do you know people who do that?”

“Do what? Watch porn? All the guys in my class, maybe?” I can't really swallow easily anymore so I push my bowl away a little.

“No, I mean, not watch. I mean act in them?”

“Sis, why are you asking me these things?”

She cuts another triangle of pancakes and swirls it a little in the syrup.

“Spit it out.” I can't stand her anymore.

“Why are you wearing such long sleeves? Aren't you hot?”

Something in me churns. Maybe it's my stomach. Maybe my guts. I could never tell the difference. She knows. She must know.

“You always used to complain about wearing them in the summer, remember? But Dad doesn't like tank top on girls. Not that you cared.”

“I care now.” I heard myself say. “I care now, and I don't want to upset anyone. So, yeah.”

“Oh,” she puts the fork in her mouth and pulls it out again, syrup less, “how considerate.”

“Really, sis, you need to grow up.” I pick up the comics again, Classic Peanuts blurry on the page. She must know she must know she must know.

“You might need plastic surgery at some point.”

I freeze. Good god, she knows.

“Your nose,” she pointed with her fork, “is uglier than you know.”

PRACTICE

There was a girl who wanted to fuck a guy because she loved him. Not that fucking him had anything to do with her loving him, but it wasn't exactly the opposite either. She wanted her virginity gone. She wanted to lose it. It was a burden, this damn virginity. She wanted it gone before she married because the man she wanted to fuck wasn't the man she was going to marry. The problem was, the man she loved admired her too much to fuck her back. He called her his right hand. He called her his dearest soul-mate. He called her the light of his life. He called her all the tear-inducing things men are prone to say to the face of the woman they know they love but cannot have. All the things they say and turn into nothing. So in the end, there was no one the girl could lose her virginity to but the one person she didn't want, the man she was to marry.

This is, for her people, the right way to live.

But she didn't care. If it wasn't the man who she loved, it had to be a man she didn't despise. She had to try.

I had to try.

Of course, men are so easy to find. Give some of them a clue that you're fuckable and they'll grab for ass. I only learned because I had to. So I picked an editor of a small press who had come to the university to give a speech. I offered to help him carry the extra books back to his car and soon, he had my number. That was all I needed to lay next to him.

He said, “Was this your first fling?”

“Yes.” I was buttoning up my shirt. My pants were still on the floor by the bed. How easy had it been to be only in panties in his presence. Strange, even. He had taken a

long shower before I had come. The humidity had made my hair wavier.

I liked him. I liked him because he was real to me. He was what he wanted to be. He said sometimes his only frustration was when he woke up with no clean pants to wear for the day. I never worry just about that.

I was smiling at him through the mirror. He was shaking his head, saying, “I am glad we didn’t fuck.”

“I wouldn’t have let you,” I teased. But really, it was all his fault. He had asked if I was a virgin.

“I know. I respect that. Tempting though.” He shirt slid over his chest.

For him, maybe. A little bit, as he liked to say. But truth was it wasn’t tempting for me. It was empty. Not a waste. Just empty. Almost like a flame of fire. There but not there when you poke something in through the middle of it. Virgin as I am, I am not a prudish goody-goody girl.

I heard his heart as we hugged, fully clothed. His scent was the same scent I had sensed lingering on the rock climbing wall last week when I went after him. Strong, like years of alcohol was cushioning his sweat. I liked that he was tall. I liked his body. It was just beautiful. And he had built himself well. He reminded me of Rome. Of those marble statues. Or was it sandstone? I don’t remember anymore. But he was holding me and I felt like telling him about my mission.

I have only touched two other men in my life; one of them is my fiancé. It had killed me, the numbness I had felt with the man whose mother had selected the ring that is now on my fine finger.

But I am going to marry him. I am making myself marry him so that my parents

wouldn't feel like they had failed in their lives. And to prove that I could do it because I knew I could.

I was going to tell all this to the editor. I was going to turn around, skip back up the steps of that hotel. The same hotel whose owners knew me and might be watching everything. I was going to throw my hands around his neck and scream into his chest, God, I am so sorry! Blurt it out and say it plain and clear. How afraid of going insane I was. How insane to me meant almost making love to a person I didn't love. How I was doing this for practice.

Using him.

Using him for those nights I'll have to lay in bed with my husband, feeling his hands leave trails of sweat on my thighs. Practice for that creeping emptiness. Keeping sane.

But I looked back at him, at the top of the stairs, his blue eyes and solid frame shod in chinos and cotton collared navy blue, and I knew I couldn't. I fell into the door instead and ran out into the parking lot. Ran because what else does a girl with velvet black hair and milk coffee skin and tender curves do in the dead of the night in the middle of downtown?

He had asked, "Don't you feel guilty?"

"I am tired of feeling guilt."

"That's good."

And when I slammed my car door shut, watching his box car drive away to have a drink with his St. Nick look-a-like father in my rearview mirror, I wished that tiredness was the solution. Tasting his lips still as I licked mine, I shook a little and wanted to sob a

little too. The wrong I had done him.

“I never cry. That is, hardly,” I had told him.

So I turned on the car, and drove to the big house with nary a tear strolling down my high-boned cheek. My parents had left a light on for me. The security machine chimed as I locked it down and a door creaked. I was standing in my mother’s granite countered kitchen and she asked, “Study hard?”

“Yes.” I wasn't exactly lying.

“Make sure you eat.”

“I don’t really want to. It’s eleven-something.”

“You must eat.”

I poured myself a glass of milk and rolled a chapatti to bite into. She was going on about my mother-in-law-to-be and the pendant she was going to buy me. The mangal-sutra. The pact of marriage worn on the neck, in diamonds. I could only hear the moans of the editor's pleasure and the fakery of mine. I needed to throw up. I swallowed a lump of food.

“What time will you be back tomorrow?”

“Same.”

“I’m going to pack you leftovers for lunch.”

“Go for it.”

She kissed my cheek and walked to the other side of the house. There she would open the door to her bedroom, lift the covers, lie beside my sleeping father, fold her arm so that it lay across her eyes and snore in ten minutes.

I dumped the milk down the sink and let the water run longer than it needed to.

Then I tossed the rest of the chapatti under an envelope in the trash. I got in bed, clothes all on. The scream would have come if I had let it.

“I don’t get too emotional,” I had confirmed to the editor's smiling face. If my mother came to check later if I was sleeping, I would be. I always am.

Practice, as they say, makes perfect.

So of course the story doesn't end here. She can't stop after one go, can she?

She met him again. At another hotel.

“Hotel’s are my hobby. Well, one of them anyway.” She was twisting handles and swinging covers. He was watching her, pretending to be skimming a page of her fiction, like the editor he was.

“Oh yeah?”

“Well, so many people I know own them. I guess I just like to compare.”

The clothing hid a bit too much, he thought.

“Honeycomb tiles,” her voice echoed in the bathroom, “classic.”

She heard his chair swirl and pretended not to be interested in the fact that he was blatantly staring at her.

“Exotic lamps, but too modern for the rest of it,” she confessed with a nod at the glass vase-bodied end table decoration.

A twist of her neck sent her eyes to the window as she plopped herself on the foot bench of the bed. When she looked at him, he was smiling.

“So tell me, how’s Mer?” She asked. Mer was his partner, he had said. The mother of his son, but not his wife. Not officially anyway. They were both so liberal, it didn't matter.

He sank back into the chair, lifting a casual arm over and around to the back of his head, “Oh, you know, she’s fine! She’ll be okay.”

“Yeah?”

“She is talking about moving to Kentucky.” He lulled back and forth with the backboard spring he was pushing against.

“What?”

“Well, we’ve been friends for about a year now, which is perfectly fine for me. She fell in love with her best friend, and wants to go live with her. And that’s in Kentucky.”

“Wait, but what about Andy?” She had seen pictures of his toddler son, chasing a golden lab in a grassy park, blond hair glowing in the sun's glare.

“Well, that’s what I said. I mean, she still wants to be able to see him. But, anyway. I think I am going to have to be the single dad.”

“No… you can’t do that! You can’t raise a child on your own.”

“Sure I can. I’ll manage.”

She got up and wrapped his head to her stomach. His palms held her hips. “No, that’s just wrong… you can’t do that to Andy…”

“It’ll be okay. I work better in stressed conditions anyway.”

She was cutting up puzzle pieces of his face with her gaze. The cheek, the eyebrow behind the Calvin Klein publisher glasses, the dip of the nose.

“You’re too close.” His fingers gripped the hollows under her hip. She smiled down. He rose and gave the warning before she could blink, “I’m going to have to kiss you now.”

She didn't know what it was about those lips. The perfect way they creased against hers? The neat clash where no molecule of saliva was ever misplaced? Arms automatically maneuvering, those walls of dignity which so often turned down the act piled under her feet as he lifted her easily with an arm and tossed her on the bed. She let the shirt and the bra slip off but squeezed his wrist as he headed for her zipper.

His voice was coarse, "I just want to see you naked."

"Not yet," she pulled the hand to her bellybutton, "Besides, you haven't even taken your sweater off."

"We should stop. This is not good for either one of us," he leaned away from her. She nodded and sat up, reaching for her top.

An hour later they lay, fully clothed, on either end of the bed, trying to feign interest in crappy commercials. An hour and fifteen minutes later, she had her head on his shirted chest and his fingers were playing circles on her stomach. An hour and thirty-two minutes later, she looked up at his form hanging over her and asked, "You wanted to see me naked?" He sat with his hands over his face. The shirt, the bra, the skinny jeans, the cotton panty, off. When he looked, her soul shuddered.

They were standing in front of the mirror, she in skin, he in boxers. The freshness of her form against his startled her. How beautiful was the girl and how tired was the man. How perfect and how lined. She never caught his eyes in that picture. She wanted to say something like, look at us. Two lost human beings. Something poetic that would make him look too.

"Nice mirror. Large," she pointed.

"I am so glad we didn't fuck. Again."

“I wouldn’t have let you.”

“Next time, we’re NOT going to be anywhere near a hotel… we’ll go eat, where there are lots of people around.” He clasped her bra on carefully, watching tenderly as she finished being clothed again. She straightened his collars and tippy-toed up to kiss him.

“Go. Now.”

“I am,” she said, matching the lips again.

“Now. Go now. You’re dangerous,” he pushed her lightly towards the door.

“I’ll see you when ever I see you,” she said to the hallway, her back to him.

When she stood out on the street, the walls were up.

My walls were up.

I felt betrayed. Self-betrayed. Like something of me had clung inside the oyster of my virtuous world. Of their world. My birth-world.

And I am still there:

The phone rings and my mother-in-law-to-be tells me she got the best thing for me from Bed, Bath and Beyond: a paper towel holder. I talk loudly back into the phone, laughing, thanking, "mom"-ing her, tickling her starvation of daughterly love. She tells me I need to come home. I tell her, no.

“But beta, why not?”

“Because, Mom, I have work to do. I'm sorry.”

“Well, at least let me tell you about Netuben. Did you hear?”

And so she tells me of a person who will be family soon, a someone who is sick and going through a hard pregnancy. She tells me how lovely it will be that Netu will have someone her age to relate to. Someone to share baby stories with. As if I were

already there with Netuben, my own belly promising to be a globe.

“Oh beta, I am so happy to have you in my family.”

“I am too, Mom.”

“Well, I'll let you go now. I'll make sure my son brings you that pot I promised you last week.”

When he calls, I have to pull the frying pan off the heat, leave my chappati half-cooked, and run downstairs to open the door. He holds me and smells my neck. I feel it, the engulfing. I pull away, blaming the food. I feed him a little less than too much, run a hand over his head, laugh at his half-wise remarks, let his fingers stroke my nipples, watch him sleep. We are not supposed to be doing this. But no one says anything. We are going to marry.

In the morning, I cry in the shower until I can story-tell again.

I give him a cup of chocolate soy milk and pour myself the real kind. We are sitting by the window near the aloe plant his mother has given me. He plays with my wet hair, smiling as a curl springs back into shape once he lets go of a stretched strand.

“Want to hear something?”

“Ah! A story?”

“Yes.”

“I'm ready.”

“It's about my first kiss.”

He chuckles. He's expecting to hear a story he already knows. He's thinking of the first time we secretly shared a bed.

“Do tell.”

“It was a late spring afternoon. The kind where the wind no longer shed leftover maple helicopters to the ground. Everything was bright and fresh. We were sitting on my twin bed. I was holding his cheeks in the middle of my palms. He asked me if I wanted my first kiss.”

He tilts his head a little, “Okay?”

“I didn't say anything. I just nodded.”

There is nothing left for him to say at this point. He is looking at me, curious.

“He leaned in, gray-blue eyes approaching slowly. And then, it happened.”

“Wait, this is a story?”

I smile at him. Sip from my mug. Stare outside. Gaze back at him. He looks slightly worried. Slightly sick.

“Of course this is a story. I was going to tell you he had gorgeous muscles and lips that were soft like apricot skin.”

He laughs then.

“He told me that there was no one he loved like he loved me.”

“You are such a crazy woman.”

“Wanna hear how I almost fucked another guy?”

“Another story? Yes. Sure.”

I lift my mug and set it in the sink. He waits, smiling at me. I am treasure. His wife-to-be.

“Some other time!”

He comes to stand behind me, his arms wrapping around like a perfected belt. I smile. Because that's what they say to do: Please him even if you're not pleased.

My phone rings and he grabs it before I can. I watch him laugh and know it's my mother. He hands the phone to me, dropping his lips lightly on my cheek as he does.

“Hi, Mumma.”

“What were you doing at the Zala's hotel a couple months back?”

I turn around to look at my fiancé, and smile.

“Oh, nothing. Seeing an editor.”

He smiles back, grabs my fingers and kisses them, one by one.

BIRD FALL

She was jump roping to a song in her head when the bird fell. The tree was studded with young crab apples, the pale green leaves of spring solidified finally into a darker, bitter tint. Crouching till her nose pointed back at the slightly ajar beak, she collected her lips in a gentle o and blew. She wanted to scare it away, cause a jolt and make it scamper. She blew again, the feathers lightly stirred. Her fingers found a twig and she poked at a wing, wondering why it was so hard. She had expected it to be delicate, like the flannel ones attached to her stuffed parrot. She poked again, aghast at the way it fell, clinging, back to the tiny body.

"What are you doing?"

"Daddy, this bird fell."

"A bird fell?"

"Yes! I wasn't doing anything! It just fell. It won't move."

His eyes followed her pointing finger to where the bird lay, the patch of grass slightly squashed, eyes half closed.

"Did you try to wake it up?" He pointed to the stick.

"I poked it! But it doesn't want to fly."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Is it too tired to get up Daddy?'

"No. I don't think so. Here, come with me."

She followed him happily, looking up as he reached for a plastic bag, then skipped ahead of him to the spot under the tree.

"Look, this is what you must do to dead animals."

She looked at him with eyebrows scrunched. “Dead? What is dead, Daddy? What does that mean?”

“Well, it’s like this. Birds have hearts like we do, right?”

“They do? You mean you can hear it too? Like I can hear yours?” She leaned her head towards his chest to confirm.

He smiled gently, swiftly running his hand over her black head, “Yes. Like that.”

“What happened to the birds heart Daddy?”

“Well, after a while, the heart gets tired.”

“The heart gets tired Daddy?”

“Mmhmm. Don’t you get tired when you jump-rope too long?’

“No! I like to do it! I am strong!” She smiled widely up at him. He laughed and fell to his knees, almost her height now.

“Well, that’s my girl. But see, a heart does get tired. So one day, it decides to stop.”

“You can’t hear it no more?”

“Nope. It just stops.”

“Oh.” She eyed the bird again, a bit hesitant, “So the bird doesn’t have a heart anymore?”

“Well, it does. It just doesn’t work anymore.”

“Can’t you change it?”

“Change it?”

“Like batteries? Can’t you put in another heart Daddy?”

“It’s not like that.”

"Oh. What is it like Daddy?"

"Well, only Bhagwan can change the batteries."

"Oh."

"So when somebody's heart stops, we pray that Bhagwan takes them to Akshardham."

"Even for birds?"

"Yes."

"So do we pray for this bird too?"

"Yes, we do."

"OK." She clasped her hands together and bowed her head, and he watched her lovingly, wanting to kiss her forehead. He bowed his head in prayer and when he looked up again, he found her smiling at him.

"Done?"

"Yes Daddy."

"What did you say to Bhagwan?"

"To please change the bird's heart so it can fly again."

"I don't think that's going to work."

"Nope," She shook her head, poking the bird lightly again.

"Well, I guess we'll have to pick it up and throw it away then."

"Is that what you do?"

"Yes. We do. To people too."

"To people too?"

"Yes."

"Your heart is going to stop one day Daddy?"

"Yes."

She stared at him, a little taken aback. Then her hands fell across her own chest. "Is my heart going to stop too Daddy?"

"Yes. Everyone's heart stops one day."

He watched her face go through waves of innocent emotions.

"But Daddy," she whispered, "I don't want your heart to stop."

"Oh no! It'll be a long time till my heart gets tired."

"But I don't want my heart to stop either!"

"Yours won't ever get tired! Remember? You told me just now how strong you were!"

"But that's sad Daddy. It's very sad."

"Is it sad to go to Bhagwan's home?"

"But I don't know how to get there."

"He'll come pick you up!"

"But what about you? And Mommy? And Eva?"

"We'll get together there, eventually."

"But this bird is by itself Daddy. I don't see any birds going to Bhagwan's house with it."

"True. But they'll get there one day."

"Are you sure Daddy?"

"Positive."

"OK Daddy."

"Let's pick this up, alright? Then we can go eat dinner. Your Mommy is waiting."

"OK."

He held her hand in his, covered it with the bag, reached down, picked the hard ball of feathers up and flipped the bag over it. Her let her tie the knot and held the garbage bin open for her to throw the bag in.

"Let's wash our hands and go eat!"

"OK." She held his hand and walked two steps to his one, head looking down. He stopped and kneeled to her height completely so that her deer eyes were looking into his.

"Hey, are you alright?"

"I'm scared, Daddy." Her hands started playing with his shirt collars, looking at them instead of him.

"Of what?"

"Of going to Bhagwan's house."

"Why is that?"

"Because I don't know Bhagwan, Daddy."

"Of course you do! He is our everything! He is the one that gave us everything too!"

"How come He never comes to visit us then?"

"Because He is everywhere! You'll understand later… but for now, just know that He's with you and will always be with you. He loves you very much, and you know Him very well. Alright?"

"Alright, Daddy."

"OK then. Shall we go now? I can hear that stomach growling…" He smiled,

reaching to tickle her. She giggled, but kept playing with his collar.

"Hey, Daddy?"

"Mmm?"

"If your heart stops, I'll change it with mine!"

He burst out laughing and she stared at him, wondering whether to laugh with him or not. He noticed her uncertainty and stopped, bringing his nose to hers, "And how are you going to do that, hmm? Are you going to be a heart doctor?"

"Yes! I'll be the bestest doctor!"

"Yes. You can be the best doctor and change my heart for me, alright?"

"Yes! And then, no one will have to go to Bhagwan's home alone!"

He laughed and picked her up, setting her on his shoulders. "You can do whatever you like doctor… but right now, we have to eat! Watch your head! Dinner, here we come!"

They went through the door, laughing. The street lamps flickered on, and curtains fell. He opened the door to her bedroom and stood, loving the sweet face sleeping, arms clinging to her sides, mouth slightly ajar. He went forward, tucked her in and kissed her smooth forehead.

"Daddy is overwhelmed with love for his daughter I see," his wife stood watching.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"She's our daughter after all."

"I worry about her."

"Already!? Oh dear… protective are we?"

“You have no idea.”

He fell asleep remembering how she had played with his collar, her little face looking up at his.

“I’m scared, Daddy... I don’t know Bhagwan.”

THE BOOK DICIPLE'S LESSON

I remember how I fell in love with books. The point in my childhood history is like a bump on an otherwise basic, happy time line. When the magnifying glass inside my brain gets closer, the scenes come alive as if time isn't a factor to recalling them like saved documents on an old thumb drive suddenly found:

She was picking her nose at the other corner of the garage, squatting near the closed door so that the line of sunshine from the other world traced the raised ridges of her toes. This was the second time my mother had thrown us in here this month to remind us that peace came with a cost. A perfectly beautiful summer afternoon was wasted. We would miss the episode of Arthur on channel 36. It was the only show on the garage sale bought 19" Panasonic we were allowed to watch.

"I have to pee." Whining, always. It would never quite leave her.

"Go pee in a flower pot." There were plenty of them, stacked in a neat pile against the bare, foamed walls. Old dirt still clumped at the bottoms. My father reused them every late winter, letting us watch as he pressed one sunflower seed after the next with the middle of his thumb into the black dirt. It always thrilled me, sinking my nose close to it, taking in the starchy, wet scent deeply enough so that I could taste it floating on my tongue.

"Ew. That's gross." She was pressing her elbows into her bladder, her pigtails brushing the cement floor as she rested her chin on her covered knees.

"When you have to go, you have to go."

"It's gross!" She had a habit of always being right. We were playing a game of one sort or the other, and she made the rules. My moral streak disagreed. And so started

wails of “not fairs,” a volley of verbal kicks. My mother noticed and here we were, an hour into the punishment, placing ourselves as far away as possible form the other, refusing to talk. The heat only thickened my anger.

“When will she open the door!? I have to go so bad!” With no response from me, she stood, slightly wobbling to the stacks of white, green, brown plastic cones minus the points. I pretended not to look. She would never do it if I seemed interested in her humiliation.

“But then, where would we get rid of it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe hide it till night, and then get rid of it.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“You’re the one that has to go.”

Then the door opened.

My mother has a small frame whose shadow fell longer than she would ever be. My sister ran past, clutching her right pigtail in slight agitation.

“She had to go pee.”

She grinned, amused, “Aren’t you coming in?”

“No.”

Her smile left, “No?”

“No.”

The door shut again and the click of the lock left me feeling superiorly defiant. In a way, I liked these afternoons. It was better than most things, garage timeouts. I could imagine a whole world. The red shovel and I would complain of the heat and how wonderful it was to eat snow. I’d fiddle a song or two with the broom and a rope. I could

maybe hammer a nail into one of the planks, bring the whole condo crashing down. Mostly though, I liked the faint smell of old gasoline.

Until Health class. Mr. Marshall was the wrestling coach who happened to have a soft spot for girls who didn't talk much. After the crowd started working in their groups to copy definitions from the glossary, he strolled among us, stopping frequently to small talk. His smile was traced with a shabby mustache that amazed me. Golden mustaches were so very different from black ones.

"And how are you?"

"Fine."

"What did you learn today?"

"That sniffing gasoline is bad."

He would emit a rumbling laugh from the back of his throat as if there was no such thing as forced humor.

I hid my head in my lap for months after I watched that video on inhaling substances. They sent the kid to a white ER room and had to restart his heart. Something about electric shocks terrified me. The jolt that sent his body inches above the white bed, his legs and arms catching up with him seconds later, uncontrolled. My father caught me one day.

"Why do you do that?"

"Gasoline is bad for you."

"Said who?"

"My health teacher."

"Gasoline is not bad for you. It's only bad if you do it intentionally and too

much."

I still scrunched my nose at it. Simply because I loved gasoline so much and knew I shouldn't.

It was the same with books. There was Eugene Vortiella, almost next to me alphabetically. A taller boy with thick glasses that made him appear slightly cross-eyed in all his school pictures. Everyone eventually forgot his full name and a slashed sobriquet stuck.

"Hey Vorti, how many pages are you up to?"

"5,786."

"Oh." I was always a hundred or so behind. He read every classic on the shelf, Little Women too. Even Laura Ingalls Wilder wasn't girly for him. It was the digits compiled and listed at the end of each name that kept him alive. That and his membership in the junior football team. Then he wasn't just Vorti. He was *the* Vorti, fastest runner on the team. At the end of the year, Mrs. Baker with her tinted eye glasses stood near the large poster board, messy and almost out of space, adding the numbers up on the back of her bookmark. She printed banners for the top three with their respective pages and hung them outside the door for everyone to admire. Vorti came in third. His mother was there at the pages auction, with matching eyes and glasses, clapping generously when he won a bid and returned to his seat clutching a prize.

My name held first place. 15,743 pages. My mother didn't know so she couldn't care.

I read hungrily, without paying much attention to the literature. I stuck to series and suspense, thrilled at the clever twists and bang endings, even if it was something

simple like the Boxcar Children finding a missing exotic pet. I sat on the edge of the old couch under the hanging money plant which had branches so long my father had pinned them around the square perimeter against the ceiling. On that corner, I went places. Egyptian crypts, Loch Ness, classical music concerts, skiing in the Rockies, Washington D.C.

Until I heard footsteps in the hallway. It was a secret, taciturn blessing my brother was born during the year of my page races. He preoccupied much of my parents time. In most of the family videos of his growing months, I remained MIA. My sister never missed the chance, prancing in and out of the frame frequently. There is a ten minute shot of my four month old brother being bathed at the kitchen sink in which the soundtrack was generously provided by her bittersweet 8 year old voice. She made up jingles about the baby falling sick if left in the water too long. Nobody corrected her. But with a seven-year-old and a newborn, my parents didn't mind my absence.

I was so engrossed in Farmer Boy that I didn't hear the hallway carpet rustle. Almanzo's eye was being patched by his father after his potato blew up in the roasting fire. My toes were freezing as his were, sitting in pre-dawn at first frost to save the corn plants before the sunlight hit.

"What are you doing?" My father's voice seared the jungle. The book fell gently to my lap after that first initial jolt back into reality. I was on page 134.

"Reading."

"For school? Or for fun?" He wanted to see if I was going to lie.

"For fun. And for school."

"Are you done with your homework?"

"Yes."

"Put that thing down and practice your penmanship."

I was assigned to sit next to Andre Rochester. He wore sweaters and slacks. Or jeans and polo shirts. Or shorts and striped t-shirts. They were always ironed. I don't remember when I first started noticing. He was a prodigy, it seemed, in music class. Mrs. Quille, the music teacher with thin chin length hair that whipped in a fan every time she turned her head, would have him sing solos at concerts and count beats for the rest of us. I admit he had a nice voice. I admit I was jealous. Despite all this, he was nice to his neighbors, his motto written in the profile of his character: smile politely, address politely, talk politely, lend politely. He was class President. I even voted for him. But what had caught my father's attention during the midterm open house as we all stood around the same clump of desks was his handwriting. Angelic, perfect penmanship. His wrists would wave, much like when he was counting beats in music class, and his fingers would give way to a row of beautiful letters. I wasn't jealous this time for some reason. I didn't care.

"But Daddy…"

"No buts. You shouldn't waste your time like this."

"It's a good book."

"You need to be practicing math or spelling or penmanship."

Eventually, he threatened to take them away. My mother wouldn't let me read at the table during breakfast anymore. If I wanted to read, I had to bring my adventures to the new couch, surrounded by squeals and questions. Evenings became my day's dread. I couldn't ride my bike, I couldn't jump rope, I couldn't toss a ball to my squirmy sister

who hardly ever caught it, and now, I couldn't read either. But desperation created spotlights on places that had never occurred before: By far the best trick was to lock myself in the small hallway bathroom with the fan on, using the covered toilet as my humble chair. I stuck the book between my pants and underwear, careful that my shirt was loose so that no imprints struck against the cotton. I watched the time on the flower outlined clock my mother had hung and set 10 minutes fast to scare our mornings, and around twenty minutes past, I flushed the toilet, smoothed out the green Berber cloth cover I had been sitting on and made sure that the water was fast enough for them to hear me washing my hands and feet in the tub.

But even then, it was only twenty minutes. And twenty minutes would get me nowhere close to Vorti. My pages were slipping. I stared at the ceiling often, listening to my sister snoring lightly, feeling horrible for wasting all that good water. And then I fell asleep, knowing that I would do it again the next day and the next. There had to be some way to beat Vorti, and if wasting water was one of them, so be it.

Until I realized the magic of car rides. The first vehicle my father ever owned in this country was a silver Ford Windstar. He bought it nearly eight years after his arrival as a PhD student. Everything he ever bought during those first years was always secondhand. He had planned so that at the end of his research, if he had to return to the country he came from, everything that he had to throw away would total $1500. My mother was no different. The rug we fought, danced and hula hooped on back then still graces a stretch of tiles in her now 3,500 square foot home. The minivan remained the costliest thing they owned until they bought a house three years later.

It was in the far back seat of this sensitively colored van that I continued my

various journeys with words. I forgot about the farms I loved watching as their corn filled fields passed by the window. The belt strap that often cut into my neck was no longer a bother. My mother was suddenly freed from the countless reprimands she'd have to hang in the atmosphere to keep my sister and me from kicking each other secretly in mutual hatred over whose space was whose. My mind was gone. I existed nowhere but the story. My father couldn't ask me to practice penmanship in here. So I relished it. And my numbers augmented. Vorti was the one asking me five weeks after I was banned to read alone,

"How many now?"

"10,098."

"Jeez."

Of course, it wasn't long till my father found another excuse. Two weeks after winning class title and coming home with a handful of toys I would hardly ever play with, he called my name and caught my eyes in the rear mirror.

"Tell me how to get to Kroger."

We were at a stoplight, waiting to make a left turn.

"Kroger?"

"Yes. How do we get there?"

"I don't know."

"You take a left here and then go straight and then make a right and then go straight and then you find Kroger!" My sister couldn't hold it in any longer.

His coffee irises stared at me considerately, "Put that book down and pay attention to where you're going."

Alas, there went another place of peace. At least on highways I'd still be free. But that summer was not filled with highways or bathroom visitations. It was the summer of being alone and angry in the garage. Of being good and angelic. Of being bookless.

Until the biographies. My father's advisory professor was a kindly middle aged south Indian with a delightfully loving American wife who let us call her Karen and still sends yearly Christmas greetings that make my mother smile guiltily. She was shocked at the very prospect of such a happy union and visibly blushed when she first shook Karen's out stretched hand. The sole time we visited his house for a congratulatory dinner in the middle of a piney Pennsylvanian forest, my sister almost wet herself. Waiting till the last minute, as was her wont, she almost failed in pulling down the stretchy pink leggings that matched her frilled blushing dress. I helped her and closed the door, waiting patiently at the golden handle. It was the biggest house I had ever been in. The carpet, soft, like stepping on a smooth sea of teddy bears and the windows, tall enough to make my neck grimace in the lack of stretching practice. Even the wall paper was warm with a brush of crispness. I imagined scratching it to make it smell like apple pie. Peeking down the yellow lit hallway, a glass pane caught my attention. I hesitated. My mother's face loomed in my head.

"Don't wander. Stay where you are supposed to be."

"Yes Mummi."

"Don't touch anything. And don't leave your sister alone."

"OK."

"And try not to rip your dress." She had fixed my bow, gently patted my cheek.

I dared anyway.

It was a library. A library in a house! I was seven years old and my tippy-toes were of no help in trying to read the titles on the leather binding, but the fascination never escaped me. Standing among row after row after row of books, it seemed as if the walls had disappeared. I traced with my palm chaises with beaded red blankets thrown across their backs and a squashy melted chocolate tinted futon facing a fantastic fireplace. It was overwhelming. Who could read books so fast!? And books that were so thick!?

"Do you like it?"

I started. It was the professor, his woolen v-necked sweater hiding his slightly hanging belly.

"Yes sir," I nodded dutifully, pulling my hand away from the polished wood of the chair. My mother had warned me to be polite. I played timidly with the edge of the purple dress, my fingers conscious of the ridges and seam lines.

"Can you read yet?"

"Yes sir. But only thin books."

He laughed. I liked the way his glasses reflected the light. It reminded me of stars.

"Would you like to have a book?"

My mother's specter floated into presence: "Don't take anything." Luckily, he didn't wait for an answer. He handed me a hardcover book, thin, animated cartoons on the front. There was a tiny rip on the edge.

"Have you read that book?"

"No sir."

"It's by a very good writer whose name is Dr. Seuss."

"Oh."

“Keep it. It’s yours.”

“Thank you!” I hugged it, adoring the corners pressing into my collarbone, and smiled up at his round, solemn face.

“Now, I think you had better come with me to see why your sister is crying by the bathroom.”

That night, my mother, a petite woman in all senses but manner, frowned at the title and read the lines grudgingly. She loved arithmetic, setting us page after page of multiplication tables. We had notebooks of pencil lined columns which we were required to complete in the course of a year. She would use a small chalk board she found at the dollar store to show us how to form the curves of our mother language, drawing pictures next to it to remind us of sounds, careful not to squeal the chalk against it. We would race to wet the paper towel that wiped the white dust at the end. She would give us spelling tests every day, drilling us at the breakfast table as we scooped soggy cereal into our reciting mouths. She could’ve donned the white of teachers in the country of her birth. Yet when it came to reading English story books, the vigor drained itself in disinterest.

“I do not like them, Sam-I-am. I do not like green eggs and ham.” She closed the book and switched languages. “This is the silliest thing I have ever read. There is nothing in it! And it’s all wrong!”

“Can you finish it still? Please?” I begged. My sister was already dream-kicking the wall.

“Maybe another day. Go to sleep,” she kissed my forehead and left the door a crack open so that a triangle of light splashed on the brown carpet until she turned it off altogether.

The another day never came. And I never asked again.

We were stringent vegetarians after all.

That deprived summer after beating Vorti, I hunted for books, often wishing my house had a replica of that far-fetched chamber I had seen years ago. My own small collection pitifully pouted, admitting one shelf filled with required reading titles they had given to us to keep from school. I threw open cabinet doors that I had forgotten about. I looked under beds. I looked in cobwebbed boxes in the garage. Nothing. Nowhere. It occurred to me that I had never seen either of my parents sit down and read a book before. And if I had, they were always books that were religiously related, books in a language I couldn't read so well anyway. I checked the last space I could think of.

Voila. The cabinet under the television. Two neat stacks of books and a third one that was dust collecting. My hopes were too high. I sifted through most of them, heart sinking as each sprawled a string of my mother tongue. The last pile was English. A History of Time. Food Science and Ice Cream. A couple of old magazines on gardening which I flipped through to catch a glimpse of my favorite flower. The Life of George Washington Carver. Carver? George Washington was a carver? And why is the person on the cover black? The book was worn, bearing a red crossed library coding on the bridge. It took me three days to read. The English was easy enough, but I read it in hiding, as I always did. I learned about this man. His childhood. His work. His mind. His passion. His love for science and his fulfilling days.

"Daddy, who was George Washington Carver?"

He stopped over his fresh dal and planted his eyes thoughtfully into mine. "You tell me."

He had seen me after all. “It was a good book.”

“It’s called a biography.”

“I liked it. Do you have more?”

“No. But maybe the public library…”

And so my summer was saved halfway through. My father took me to the library and helped me choose one life after another: the genius of Thomas Edison, the morality of Benjamin Franklin, the fan love of Babe Ruth, the law making Thomas Jefferson, the brave abolitionist Harriet Tubman, the determination of Helen Keller, the real stories of Harriet Beecher Stowe, even the poetic soul of Phillis Wheatley. They were written for older children, authorless, printed in bold fonts across 200 or so solid, aged pages, all the notorious parts life offered buffered or tamed. My father was careful, as he always was. He let Marilyn Monroe pass. He warned me dutifully, expecting no changes in my math worksheets and language studies. He limited it to one book per week. But at least I didn’t have to screen all of this. I sat on that corner and read away, watching lives already lived. Free.

Until I fell in love with numbers all over again. Mr. Scemants was a burly build whose ears would rise with the edges of his mouth so that the tips flattened the hairs right below his temples. He taught Social Studies and substituted for the school band teacher when he was away performing with his symphony. He would guide us during pep rallies, lifting his short arms above his head to call a “Rest” before the crowd answered to the mini skirted cheerleaders tempting “Hey Tigers!” Eighth graders always won “the loudest” title. They were the group with the most male like voices after all. Mr. Scemants always voted for the youngest regardless. He also patrolled the cafeteria.

My brown bag meeting was usually with a book, and occasionally with classmates who, having nowhere to sit, took the freedom to join me. I slaked my hunger with a daily, sticky peanut butter sandwich, a juice pouch and two cookies. I had figured out by 1st grade that I was an ersatz lunch personality. A real person packed their own lunch, filled with a crust trimmed sandwich that usually ended up in the trash, replaced enthusiastically with a pack of fruit snacks or cakes or cookies or even a bunch of favorite candy. It agonized me, watching the delicacy of the boy in front gently bite into his third Twinkie with the expression of an angel being graced under the hand of God Himself. Soon the crowd succumbed to Lunchables with miniature pizzas and hotdogs. Then Gatorade and a bag of chips. I remained the control.

I only noticed Mr. Scemants because he noticed me. Pacing past in a curious promenade, he finally stopped completely, hands clasped behind, his ears at their maximum height.

"Is that an Oreo?"

"The fake kind."

"I haven't had one in years!"

I took one of the pair out of the Ziplock, holding it out for his receiving.

"Oh no! I couldn't eat your lunch."

"It's just a cookie."

"Alright. If you insist," he took it with two fingers and bit in, crumbs falling and sticking to his upper lip.

"Mmm. Delicious. Thank you!"

"You're welcome," I returned his smile, pushing my specs up.

“What are you reading?”

“A book.”

He laughed and left me to my one piece dessert and five minute reading time.

Eventually, it became a habit. He would stop by with a fond “Where’s my cookie?” and I’d share a sometimes stale cookie with him. He never complained.

“You know, I’ll have to pay you back sometime for all these cookies.”

“They are just cookies. It’s OK.”

“Hmm. How about this? Every week, I’ll bring you a book to read. If you like the book, it’s yours to keep. If you don’t, you may give it back to me. If you don’t finish it by the time I bring another one, I’ll take it back just the same.”

My mind was already calculating the numbers. We shook hands, and I gave him both my cookies that day.

As weeks passed, I brought home book after ragged book. They were used, or from the school librarians box of toss-outs that teachers had first priority to. I sank into passionate retellings of historic events. Stories of humans living through the Battle of Gettysburg, the Bubonic Plague, the Great Wars on American soil. I became the boy who observed the helium balloon burst into flames, the girl who witnessed the construction and grand opening of the Statue of Liberty, the teenager who watched her friend burn in the locked sewing factory on the one day she was late. In the bitterness of history, definitions suddenly had meanings.

The pile swelled. My mother lifted the bed skirt one day to find no space to vacuum. My father heard about it.

“Where did you get all those books?”

"From one of my teachers, Daddy."

"Are you sure? You haven't stolen them from the library have you?"

"No! No, Daddy! I don't steal!"

"Well, I think you had better taken them back."

"But… Daddy, they are mine!"

"What are you going to do with them? Hmm?"

"I dunno… Keep them?"

"Where?"

"Under my bed, I guess."

His eyes never left mine, "I think they best go back to the teacher, yes?"

"OK, Daddy."

"And don't read so much. Concentrate on what you need to be doing better. Your science A minus can be better you know," he patted my cheek lovingly. I smiled back.

I returned the books one by one, saving my favorite one for last. I told Mr. Scemants I didn't like them anymore. I pretended to never have finished another book he brought for me tucked under his right arm, though I always did in some covert way or another. He would shake his head and tell me I was slipping, and wiped the crumbs from his fingers halfheartedly.

"Are you sure you don't like this one?"

"Yes."

"Positive?"

"Yes."

"It was your favorite a couple of weeks ago!"

"I know. Not anymore," I shrugged heavily, the intricacy of the action shielded by the vest my mother had forced upon me that morning. He took it back, hovering between the urge to thrust it back into my hands or slip it under his own arm. Eventually, he accepted every lie I gave him, still spending enough time to eat a cookie with me.

Mr. Scemants was quietly upset the week before 6th grade camp.

"I noticed you weren't on the list for camp."

"Yeah. I can't go."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to," I looked up helplessly.

"Hmmm," he took a cookie and chewed slowly, unbelieving. I sat, barely tasting my own share.

"I mean, it's just a bunch of games and stuff. And I can't eat anything there."

"What do you mean?"

"They don't have stuff for vegetarians, do they?"

He peered at my face, eyebrows connecting, nose slightly drawn up in surprise.

"Is that the only reason why you don't want to go?"

"I think so."

He sent me home that day with a note to my parents, his polite tone arousing my father's smile as he read it through, me standing dutifully at his elbow.

"This is very kind of him, but no, I don't think we'll send you to camp."

"But Daddy, he said everything would be fine!"

"No béta, it's not just about food. You can't take care of yourself still."

"But I want to go!"

“You really haven’t proved yourself, dear. I still see your bed unmade and your clothes on the floor.”

“Please Daddy? Pretty please? I’ll stop reading! I really will!”

“I think you better stay at school. And cut down on the reading nevertheless.”

I returned an equally polite note of refusal to Mr. Scemants. I only know because I opened the envelope on the school bus and read it:

Dear Mr. Scemants,

As much as I appreciate your concern about our daughter's wishes to go to the annual camp, we feel it best that she should remain at school. We feel that there would be too many things for her to be responsible for, including her diet and religious duties. She will benefit from staying and studying, especially in Mathematics which is so very difficult for her at the moment. Again, thank you so much for the concern and care you've shown our daughter.

Sincerely yours,

N.V.

Mr. Scemants sighed and smiled at me.

“Is this why you don’t want your books anymore?” he asked.

I didn’t say anything. He ate his cookie and left, note clutched harshly, squeezing out between his fingers.

I spent three days in a gloomy detention room. The seats were hard and I stared at the back of a fellow classmates black graphic shirt. He picked the erasers off of each pencil, working with his nails and teeth. We filled out science, math and reading comprehension worksheets generously left by their respective teachers. Mr. Scemants left

a book for me instead.

On the last day of school, he slipped a brown paper wrapped package to me in the hallway, winking behind his glasses, his ears high. I ripped it open on the bus, his spidery scrawl on the inside cover of the book, slanting upwards:

To the bookworm,

Thank you for the many cookies! Keep reading. Keep learning. And keep smiling. Good luck with everything and have a wonderful summer!

Mr. Scemants

It was my favorite. I let a salty splash explode into a perfect circle on the glossy cover, then hastily wiped it away. My first *new* book. All mine.

Until the disappearance. Summer weekends, we shared two meals in a day as a family. The sun was high and we were eating a favorite recipe, a combination of delicacies loved and wordlessly devoured. My sister's swinging legs occasionally grazed my shins, a practice with no reaction. My brother opened his mouth obediently as my father delicately stuffed his two year old mouth with food. His little lips would part, grasp the spoon and leave it clean. He could eat by himself fine, but he liked being fed. My father was the one who had fed us all, his patience teaching us to keep quiet until he was ready, to take the food neatly, to never complain of food openly, to finish every morsel on our plates. The one day we had fussed about being full he had rented a video from the library. It was filled with Somalian children in their sticklike states and big begging eyes. We had wept.

My father lifted his head to meet my face with a calculated grin.

"I hope you don't mind that we are giving your books away."

The spoon continued digging at the soup, lifting nothing, pouring nothing. "What?"

"Your mother and I saw some books in your room that were pretty old and childish and since we're planning on moving, we thought of giving away a box to Goodwill. I am sure other children will find great use of them."

My books! My books! My books! "Did you take all of them Daddy?"

He nodded goodheartedly, sipping slurp-lessly. "You don't need them. You read too much anyway."

"Daddy, I liked those books."

"You like everything."

"But I…"

"Think of all the children who'll thankfully read them!"

I bowed my head. Fingers would rip pages, crayons would mar words, edges would be chewed. My eyes burned. I looked up and his were watching me.

"Sure, Daddy."

"You're such a good girl." My mother reached over and held out a slice of cucumber to place on my plate.

Later, I sat facing my one shelf. Dust outlined the slots of where thirteen books had once stood. My one shelf of ghost titles.

"You have nothing to read now!" My sister taunted.

"Go away!"

"You are always reading. You never play anything with me anymore."

"I said go away!"

“Meanie. I am gonna tell on you.”

“Go and tell. I don’t care.”

“Yes you do.” Her pigtails were eliminated and she wore her waist length hair in a single braid that traced her spine. She would amuse her friends by sitting on it, giggling with them, admitting it was horrible to manage.

“I don’t.”

“You do too.”

“Aww, can’t you just go away!?”

“Can’t you forget about those dumb books? They were just books!”

“No they weren’t,” I felt my lower lip shaking, “they were my books.”

“Big whoop.”

“What’s going on here?” My father’s voice steered itself gently, assuredly into the corners, reflecting smoothly to the next, the walls sinking in the baritone. It reminded me of strawberry glaze being poured onto a white cake, saturating slowly, resistively, wholly.

“Nothing.” My sister and I replied synonymously.

“Well, something was wrong. You both weren’t yelling for no reason.” His tall frame leaned against the door planks.

“She was staring at her books.”

My father eyed the vacant shelf and then me, my hand resting unconsciously on it, dust rearranging to outline the bony fingers with trimmed nails. He turned to my sister.

“Sweet, go see if your mother needs help.”

She left, haughtily twisting her snake braid in her fingers.

“You don’t like it do you?” He asked.

“I don’t mind,” I said hurriedly, my eyes on the carpet.

“You don’t like it,” he affirmed. I said nothing.

“I don’t like you reading books.” He pointed at the shelf in disdain, “I don’t like that you spend so much time in your world of fiction.”

“But it’s beautiful Daddy. It’s like seeing things you never get to see!”

“Not as beautiful as other things.”

“I got straight A’s, Daddy.”

“That’s not the point, béta. The point is you don’t do anything now but read.”

“I do Daddy. I help Mom. I ride my bike. I sometimes play. I make things out of clay and Lego.”

“You are not so creative. You are not so productive when you read.”

“I like it, Daddy.”

“Sometimes what you like is not always right.”

“Like smoking.”

His visage lighted up happily, the glow lifting his shoulders, brushing a sweet clearness to his chestnut tinted irises, “Exactly!”

“But I am not smoking.”

“No, but you don’t see how much time you’re wasting. Use your time wisely.”

I hung my head.

“You do something productive, something great, and then read as many books as you want, OK?”

“OK, Daddy.”

“Good girl. You’re going to make me so proud one day.”

He left me standing, the patch of un-shadowed sun spilling a sloppy rectangle on the blue carpet. I lifted my shirt, slid out and set the one book I had managed to salvage on my shelf. Staring at it, joys jumped and sorrows swooped. It was still my book. My favorite.

My father collected the trash each week. Gathered the plastic bags from each room and amassed them at the end with the kitchen garbage to set it in the black can on the edge of the driveway. I was reading when he walked into me.

"Give me the book."

I handed it to him, my fingers trembling.

"Fragments," he flipped through the fresh pages. Surprisingly, he held it out to me again. I took it, clutching it instinctively to my chest, eyes shielded.

"Open the book."

"What?" I slowly lifted my face to his.

"Open the book."

I did.

"Rip that page out."

"Daddy?" My stun sounded.

"Rip that page out."

I felt the edge of the page cutting into my palm lines. I lifted it, its weight bearing down.

"Tear it. Go on."

I closed my eyes, and immediately re-opened them. Closed eyes meant cowardice. It meant shame. It meant surrender. I heard the page tear, the vibration seeping through

each vein, through the hollows of the heart, through the arteries, through the emptiness of my being. My hands were pale.

"And the next page. Tear it too."

One by one, page by page, I tore. I tore till the bare bones of spine and cover lay in my hand. I tore till I was in a sea of wilted petals, a fragmented cadaver. I tore till the jungle's echoing was muffled to silence. I tore till I collapsed to my knees, head bent, hands folded. It was done. Over.

"Get up."

I did so.

"Come here."

I stood inches away from his toes. We matched. His fingers lifted my chin. I stared into his sober, sheathed, solid eyes.

"That was hard wasn't it?"

I managed a hard smile.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to learn the hard way," his voice melted against the walls. I felt my eyes cloud, and pushed the bad weather away. He bent, kissed my forehead.

"You made me proud today."

"I know, Daddy."

He helped fill it all in a bag. He tied it firmly, his fingers lacing wrinkles that equaled with those on his brow. I watched him from the garage, placing the corpse bearing coffin precisely in spot, the scent of gasoline familiar, fine, filtered.

Engulfed with nose unwrinkled.

THOSE WHO KNEW

I saw her because I was waiting for her. In my twenty-seven years, I had only seen her once. That was three years ago when she was waiting in the lobby area of the reception hall where her engagement was held. She had looked like a Bollywood actress, decked up so much that I thought she might fall under the heaviness of all she carried. Her face then had been impossible to stare at. But when she sat down in front of my wedding mandap, choosing the last row to keep from being seen, I knew it was her. When I got up from my throne-like chair to do my circles around the fire with my new wife, she waved at me lightly from where she sat in a blue sari. When I looked that way again after I had gently smeared a bit of red vermillion into my wife's center hairline, she was gone.

I didn't think of her after that for some hours. I was busy listening to the old pujari chant age-old shlokas, following his instructions as my bride and I awkwardly fed each other a piece of molasses, accepting congratulatory cheers, gently caressing my wife's fingers with mine as we walked into the reception hall nervously, happily. Then garba started and I found my seat, surrounded by closest friends. One of them handed me a glass of water. I couldn't take more than a sip. He shook my shoulder playfully,

"What's the matter, black? Being married already tiring you out?"

I shook my head, "Nah, man. Just the dancing. Can't stand the dancing."

I looked out to the large crowd of women circling around the floor in measured steps, my wife at the lead, looking like she always did to me: beautiful. I sat watching all those colorful, heavily jeweled saris twinkling in the light, grateful that this first round of garba tunes were for women alone. I took another sip of water. Some of the guys around me were laughing about something. I turned my head to Mitul, who sat next to me wiping

his hands on a handkerchief. Mitul had been five when we first met. Of the many people who had attached and unattached themselves in my life, he was one of the few who would never have that ability. He was there like a mountain. When I looked, he was there. Always an inch shorter than me, but what he couldn't show in height, he showed with his voice. Calm, calculated voice. Even when he laughed, he never lost control. People didn't want to be around him when he was in control.

"Having fun, bro?" I asked.

"The last time I saw something like this," he nodded towards the dance floor, "was when she was leading the line."

Mitul was remembering three years ago. He was remembering her.

"Yeah. She was a good dancer too."

He scoffed, "Man, no need to be nice."

"I'm just saying."

He looked at me and smiled hard, "It was you, wasn't it? You're the one who invited her."

I drained the stiff plastic cup of water and swallowed, "Would you be pissed if I said yes?"

"Maybe."

"Then yeah, man. I did invite her. She's like a sister. You know that."

"Just because she sends you rakhis?"

I laughed. There was no kidding with Mitul. When he wanted to know something, he knew it. Fact was, his ex-fiancee had been sending me rakhis, the thick thread a sister ties to the wrist of a brother for protection, ever since he had met her. Mitul had

introduced her to me through chat, since she had been across the country.

Tulsi's mind was fun to be around. She could talk politics, bitch about stock prices, play fantasy basketball, and have long, intense, debates about philosophical ideas. Once, we had spent half a day trying to understand what goes on in a baby's mind so that he/she has moral sensitivity. Tulsi wasn't the best logician, but she was never too far off. Mitul would point out a flaw and she would easily accept it. I could see why Mitul loved her. We both would forget often that she was a woman. But when she was, it made her endearing. She was fond of me, listened with an open heart, always gave me the other perspective when I was frustrated with my own woman. Tulsi took care of me like that.

“Look, I am sorry I invited her without your permission. But you gotta admit, the wedding is mine.”

“You don't need my permission, asshole. I just don't like the aftermath.”

“Aftermath? What aftermath?”

But by then, the ladies had finished the second dance, and my wife called to me, beckoning with her lovely hand in the air, my name forming on her lips.

“Go on. We'll talk later,” Mitul nodded to the dance floor. And for the rest of that night, she never came up again.

It wasn't until post-honeymoon two weeks later that I thought of her again. My wife was sorting through the large pile of mail and handed me a card-holding envelope. From the handwritten address, I knew it was her. From the card fell a check and a note:

Hey Bhai,

Chuck the card (or give it to the wife), keep the check. Buy yourself something nice for your camera or something. Hope you and the wife are happy and will always be

happy.

Cheers,

Tul

I passed the card along to my wife who smiled sweetly and placed it with the dozen others on the lamp table by my favorite spot on the sofa.

“How is she, anyway?” she asked, kissing my cheek as she passed.

“Fine.”

“I hope so. They gave her such a hard time at the wedding.”

Shweta was a sweet woman. Someone who would serve breakfast on a tray in bed if I so desired. Or bake a cake late at night before her hospital shift so that we could have dessert the next evening. A cardiologist in training, she had an intelligence that intimidated me sometimes, but when her logic failed, she was a woman. Bugs scared her, she cared about Valentine's day, she loved flowers out of the blue, and often, she wanted things before having the means to want them. She was a package I cherished, dearly. But she was a woman, and she never hesitated reminding me of it.

“What do you mean, hard time?”

“Oh, didn't Mitul tell you?”

“Tell me what? Look, I know nothing. I just know she came, and she left.”

Shweta raised an eyebrow, as if a joke was being made, “Wow, you really don't know?”

“Well, spit it out already!”

Only then, her work phone rang and she jumped to grab it. Before I could press her further, she was waving to me from the door, mouthing 'emergency! I'll call later!' and

was gone.

It wasn't that I didn't think before inviting Tulsi to the wedding. I did. In closely knit communities, especially religious communities, there was always the danger of shame. When a woman stood up for herself against the world, there were consequences. What Tulsi did to Mitul and his family wasn't a pleasant matter. What the world could do back to her would be uglier. Regardless, Mitul and his family had reacted to her decision as sane, loving people. They had thrown out the wedding invitations away a week before they were going to send them, and told Tulsi should she ever need their help, they would be there. Tulsi had bowed her head gratefully and never bothered them again. Her own family had not talked to her for months. She never bothered them again either. The entire community was thrown into a state of bewilderment. Those who knew asked: How could such a good satsangi girl do this to a good satsangi family? Wasn't being a satsangi a sure guarantee that a young person would do things the right way? Was Tulsi just abnormal? Was Tulsi bad company? Who was Tulsi? Shame! Tulsi was shame. Tulsi had never come to the mandir after that. But it had been three years since the incident and I had thought it safe to ask her to come. I wore her rakhis on my wrist. She should come to a brother's wedding.

Shweta left me anxious. It bothered me to not know things she knew. That I was left unknowing of a crime that might be solely my responsibility. I called Mitul and he laughed a little before agreeing to meet me at the nearest Taco Bell.

I was waiting in line when he entered, his shortness immediately noticeable. We both ordered the same burrito and sat with the largest glasses of Sprite. This was how we talked, stuffing ourselves as the heart stuffing poured out.

“How was the honeymoon?”

“Let's skip all that dude,” I insisted, taking a gulp of the drink, “what the hell happened to Tulsi?”

He swallowed the food he was chewing, and without hesitating, took another bite.

“Cripes, bro.”

“I'm not talking until I finish this,” he said, mid mouthful.

So we sat there, eating like fools, the inside of me crippling itself slowly as time passed. When he finished, he balled the paper and made a shot at the paper bag on the empty table next to us. It fell in, and he looked at me with a smile.

“I knew I was born for basketball.”

“Shortness ain't matching, bro.”

“When Tulsi walked in, my aunt saw her,” Mitul sighed.

“Which one?”

“Kalpnafoi.”

“Oh god.”

“Yeah.”

“Is she still super pissed?”

“Well, you'd think she'd have let it go by now,” Mitul took his glasses off and tried wiping them on his shirt, “goddamn these things. I always need water to clean them.”

“Go on.”

“She caught Tulsi on her way out, and right in the middle of the lobby, started cussing her out.”

“Oh god.”

“Tulsi actually went up to her and tried to calm her down. For a minute, it seemed she was succeeding. I know this because I was a couple of feet away. But then, Kalpnafoi grabbed her arm and dragged her into the ladies room.”

“Cripes. Did you follow?”

“Fuck, no. It's the ladies room. For all I know, fat aunties might've been changing in there.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, I heard Kalpnafoi screaming some more, and then after a while, Tulsi comes out with her head all wet.”

“Her head?”

“Yeah. Hair wet, face wet, everything dripping into her sari.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, I tried to get to her, but other people were already gathering around her. I heard her say, 'It's alright... it's just water. Don't worry. Please, don't touch me! It'll make you unclean. No, no... I'll go home and take a shower. No need to worry.'” Mitul sighed, “It was exactly the Tulsi way of handling shit. Never bothersome. Always holding her own head. And then she was out.”

“Wait, Kalpnafoi dunked her head in the toilet?” I exclaimed, my burrito sliding from my fingers.

“Yeah.” Mitul looked out the window, then back at me, “A toilet full of her own piss.”

And then laughter spilled from me. It was twenty fucking twelve and there were women out here in this world who could do shit that was valid punishment hundreds of

years ago. Women who could hold their fucking grudges and be bitter. Time can go to hell, they must think. Time can go to hell. I couldn't stop laughing. Mitul sat watching me, his straight line of a mouth slowly curving into a smile until finally he too was laughing as hard as I had ever heard him laugh. People looked over and shook their heads as we smacked the table, crying, “Pissed! Pissed! She was pissed! Pissed!” When at last we couldn't breathe, we sat back and stared at the unfinished food. Collecting it all, I tossed it in the trash, and we walked out to the parking lot. At his car, Mitul held out a hand,

“So, see you Sunday?”

“Yeah bro.”

“Cool.”

As he stepped in, I stopped him, “Yo, thanks.”

He smiled, a hint of apprehension smeared into the expression, “Yeah.”

That night, Shweta cooked up her favorite recipes, using her new kitchenware. I dipped a piece of rotli into the curry and froze. I couldn't bring it to my mouth. Shweta noticed and stared for a bit.

“Is something wrong? Does it smell weird?”

“No.”

“You sure? You haven't even had a bite.”

“Just give me a moment.”

“You're not sick are you?” she went to get up. I shook my head and motioned to her to sit down again. She sat, and didn't stop staring until I finally brought the food to my mouth and chewed.

All I could taste was piss.

SHAG

The boy was only ten years old, officer, sir. He did not understand very much about being like me.

He had almost white hair, some yellow in it when he was outside. And his eyes. They were blue, blue, blue like, sky. When he stood in front of his ball machine, he stuck out his bum a little. Just a little. I laughed at him when I first saw that. He got mad and pushed me until I stopped. He was so mad, that little white boy. When he went inside, I thought, done. He was done. But no, he came back. He came back and said to me,

“Shag, look! Look at this!” and in his hand was a little card in hard plastic. The man on that card was sticking his bum out, too. Just like the boy. Just like little Alex. I laughed and said,

“Okay, sorry Alex-ji, sorry. Sorry!” Only then he played again.

Alex was a good boy. His father was too rich. That is how come I was there, catching Alex's baseballs and putting them back into the machine. The machine was very interesting, shooting out balls to Alex so he could hit them as hard as he could. Alex had remote with him to control speed of ball thrown by machine. But when his father saw that Alex must stop every few minutes to go get the balls, he decided to put ad in the paper. I was looking since Burger King was looking for young people in summer. So I went only part-time. I saw many ads for yard and garden help, but I am not interested in flowers. Then, I saw that paper ad and it was simple. When I called, the man asked me how old I was.

I am thirty-four years. At first, Mr. Chester Grey said no.

“You're too old. You're as old as I am.”

I said, “But, sir, let me prove to you. Let me show you.”

So I showed him very well, how I could play with ball. How fast I could run after it. I didn't lose breath even! It reminded me of being back home, waiting for my brother to bowl while I stood with cricket bat. Aare Chintan! he would yell, Aare Chintan, look at the ball! Look and hit far! I never hit far. But when I was in field, I could run like bullet. Fast, very fast. Mr. Chester Grey, he saw how fast I can run. He told me,

“All right, Cheen-tan, come back tomorrow at ten in the morning. I will introduce you to my son then.”

That is how come I know Alex. The first day, he came out with his full baseball suit, black gloves, everything. He handed me a baseball glove. I told him I will not need it. I catch with bare hands. Mr. Chester Grey laughed at me and left. Alex, he tried to say my name right. I said,

“It's like 'chin' plus 'tan.' Chin-tan. Say very fast.”

He looked at me with blue eyes squinting and said, “Is it okay if I called you 'shag'?”

So I became Shag. I played with this little boy for one hour and half every day except Sunday. Mr. Chester Grey had a very big house and a very big yard. It was as big as a real field almost. The grass was always green, green, green like, unripe mangoes. There, in one corner, Alex would set up ball machine, and hit ball after ball after ball. Sometimes slow speed balls, but many times, fast speed balls. I would run after them and make sure the machine was never empty. Alex was a very good hitter. He could hit far,

farther than me when I was ten. Most of the time though, he was not happy with his hitting. He would stand and shake his head like some old man watching his dunce son plow uneven lines into the earth. Then out his bum stuck again, and again, he hit another ball. Sometimes, I would say,

"Good one! Good one Alex-ji!"

He only would spit and say, "Not far enough!"

Alex was very serious with hitting. He would do non-stop for forty minutes, then have ten minute break, then non-stop again, forty minutes. When he got used to me, he only wore baseball suit on Saturday before his real game. The rest of the days he wore white shirt and shorts. I liked watching the little boy become mad and try again. He spit and spit more. And made me run farther and farther as summer went on. Because we played in the morning, the sun was not so hot for me. Alex got red though. Red like his skin had very bad itch. Then, like a young tree too dry, his skin peeled. He would hand me cream and I would put some on his lower neck, a place he could not reach still. He complained,

"Shag, how come you don't get burned?"

"In India, the sun is always so hot. So God made our skin already tan!"

"Does that mean you don't have snow in India?"

"No Alex-ji, we don't have snow, never. Maybe in mountains, yes. But in my village, never."

"Why do you say that? Why do you say 'Alex-jee'?"

“It's respect. When someone respect someone else, you add, -ji,” I closed the cream tube and gave it back.

“That's weird.”

“Not weird, Alex-ji. Just what we do.”

Alex also had lot of brown spots on his face. They grew darker and darker as his skin does. I have lived here, almost thirteen years. Sometimes, I saw white people with brown spots like Alex, especially little children. They came to Burger King and I always wanted to ask them what they are. But we don't talk more when we work. We simply work. But Alex was not one of them. Alex was almost like a little friend. So I asked him,

“Alex-ji? I want to ask something.”

He stopped drinking his lemonade. “What, Shag?”

“What are those brown spots around your nose? It is normal? It is sickness?”

He looked a little scared. “What do you mean, Shag?”

“Brown spots! Do you see in mirror?”

And little Alex, he ran. He dropped bat and ran to his big house with a balcony on every floor. I was happy that Mr. Chester Grey was not on his favorite balcony, watching. I thought maybe I scared Alex too much. But I was only curious. When I saw him coming back, he had arms crossed and a very mad, mad, face looking at me.

“Shag! You tricked me!”

“Trick? What trick, Alex-ji?” I looked down at the boy. He gave me push, and then another push,

“Shag, you scared me!”

“But why? Why Alex-ji?”

“You made me think I had something wrong with my face!”

“You mean your face is okay?”

Alex gave me another big push, enough to make me move back, “Shag! Stop it!” he shouted.

“But Alex-ji, please! I just want to know! What is on your face, I don't know!”

Alex stared up very, very hard. “You don't know?”

“No! No I don't know, Alex-ji!”

All at once, his face started changing. From mad to childish. And then, he laughed! He laughed and laughed until he was at my feet. His stomach hurting.

“Shag! Shag you crack me up!”

“Alex-ji! You must stop laughing! You'll be sick!”

“Freckles, Shag!” he kept laughing.

“Freea-kals?”

That only made him laugh even more. I learned then that brown spots are only freckles. Only harmless. Alex never forgot it. Then every day, he asked,

“Shag! How's my face, Shag?”

“Perfect, Alex-ji,” I always said.

So the summer went like this. I played with Alex, and he taught me some things. Then one day in August, Mr. Chester Grey said,

"Cheen-tan, Alex will be going back to boarding school soon. Please let me know if you'll be around next summer. I think Alex likes you very much!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Chester Grey," I said.

That very same day, Alex was hitting fastest balls. So fast, that sometimes the machine became empty before I could refill it. But at the end, Alex forgot to pause ball machine, and whoom, a ball hit him straight in stomach. Very fast. Very hard. He was in so much pain, poor little boy. I ran to his little body on the grass and told him,

"Breathe, Alex-ji. Breathe!"

I looked up at the house, looking for Mr. Chester Grey. He was not on any balcony. I picked up my little white boy who was hurting and hurting. When I reached the backyard door of the house, I was not sure what to do. Alex needed bed. He needed to lie down. With one hand, I opened the heavy white door. Inside, it was so quiet. So big, quiet, and clean. I took off my slippers, and walked on that cold marble floor. It reminded me of temple at home, where in summer, even marble was too hot to walk on. The little boy in my arms was still hurting too much. I walked on in that house, looking and looking for stairs. That floor was so smooth and cold. There was so much equipment for so many things. I saw row of bats. I saw row of many different sticks with many different ends. I saw a big net folded up. I saw too much things I did not understand. I saw no bed. No bed anywhere. No stairs. Nothing but big space with too many things I do not know.

Alex still cried.

“Alex-ji, I want to help. Tell me, your room is where?”

But my little boy did not hear me. He was crying and crying so hard. I decided quick I needed to take him somewhere I know. I returned to door where I came in, put on my slippers and ran. I ran out of the big green yard, and the gate. I ran down one street and next. I ran holding the little boy so that his head did not bump against my chest. My home was not too far. It was not too far when I ran. In fifteen minutes, I was knocking.

“Aiee, aiee,” my wife called, “coming, coming!”

When my big metal door lifted, my wife stood, staring at me and the boy. The boy who was not crying any more but looking so tired.

“Don't ask right now,” I told my wife, “just spread clean sheet on bed. Quick, quick!” Dharmi did as she was told, and as I put Alex on bed, she brought something cool to put on his head.

“What have you done?” she whispered sternly, “you know we can't be found!”

“He's in pain. I couldn't find anyone. I didn't know what else to do.”

“Why didn't you call for help? You could have just called and left!”

“I couldn't just leave him, Dharmi! He needed someone there. Besides, I don't know where they kept phones. Alex never has cell phone on him during batting.”

After some time, Dharmi put on a tapeli of chaa, and we waited for Alex, who had fallen asleep, to wake up. When he did, I was there by him. I held his little white hand. He looked at me and smiled, then looked around him. His blue eyes became more and more confused.

“Shag, where am I?”

“It's okay, Alex-ji, you are very safe. This is my home.”

The boy sat up slowly, holding his stomach which had become blue and black like, dark pearls. His white hair stuck up from behind so I gently patted it down as he looked around more and more.

“Shag, you're kidding right?”

“Kidding, Alex-ji? About what?”

“You really live here? In a garage?”

The boy was right. We did live in two car garage. We had it rented from another kind desi family. They never bothered us, and we never bothered them. There was a bed in one corner with some storage shelves for clothes. In the opposite corner, we had a small kerosene range and a small laundry tub. Some more storage shelves for pots, pans, dishes. In the third corner farthest away from the side door we had our mandir. Our place for the Lord. Dharmi lighted a devo every day, and sometimes, when we could, we bought incense sticks. Then the whole room would smell like jasmine.

The concrete floor we covered with old rugs we got from here and there. We had small fans everywhere during summer, and in winter, the family lent us a small heating unit for five dollars more. There was a side entrance which we used more than the big metal door. Outside that door was small attached toilet and shower. For me and my wife, this was enough. To live in America, this was enough.

I held the boy's hand again and said, “Yes, Alex-ji. I am not like you.”

The boy threw off the clean cover, and went to get off the bed. He seemed a little upset, like he don't know what to think. Or what to say. His feet hit the floor.

"Where are my shoes? I want my shoes!"

"Alex-ji, wait here. I bring your shoes to you. Wait here."

"No!" the boy yelled, "I want my shoes now! I want to go home! I want to go home now!"

"We will go to home, Alex-ji. Let me get your-"

But the boy was not listening. He was crying, big fat water drops coming from blue eyes. I tried to take his hand and he pulled away. I went to the side door, grabbed his shoes, and quickly tied them to his feet. The boy kept crying, but took my hand.

"Alex-ji, I brought you here because I could not find anything at your home. Now, I take you home. Please, stop crying."

He looked up at me and nodded, still crying a little. Dharmi came closer and handed the boy a piece of chocolate we saved from Halloween every year. The children in the house always gave us what they did not like. He took it, and sniffling, wiped his eyes with the same hand. Dharmi reached down with a tissue and wiped the little white boy's nose.

"Ready, Alex-ji?" I said.

The boy nodded. We walked towards the door. Everything would be fine, I thought. Only it was not. Once on the road, a police car spot us and he said something in the radio.

Soon, seven police cars were around us, loud, bright lights everywhere. Alex held on to my hand hard. Then, all of sudden, he yelled,

"Dad!"

And then he was gone. Running to police car where Mr. Chester Grey stood. He picked up his little boy and hugged him hard. I wanted to warn him, don't squeeze too hard! His stomach! But before I could, cops were handcuffing me, and then Dharmi was besides me, crying, and in handcuffs also. I saw Alex one more time, yelling at me from his cop car as it drove away,

"Shag! Shag!"

They took us to police station, and I explained. They talked to Alex alone, and I don't know what he said, but then Mr. Chester Grey came to see me and shook my hand, and gave me an envelope with my last pay.

"I'm sorry about all this, Cheen-tan. Alex liked you very much."

"Please, Mr. Chester Grey, Alex is a good boy. Please tell him from me."

Now I am here, in front of you, officer, sir, at this embassy. I think I will never see Alex again. Or Mr. Chester Grey with one hand in pocket, one hand on cell phone, watching on his balcony. Or many white people again, will I, officer, sir? You're going to send me back to my home country still. Even if I did nothing bad, I will be back on plane to my country where I will have nothing. Zero. I will have nothing, officer, sir, but maybe some good memories. Good memories of Alex with his almost white hair, some yellow in it when he was outside. Freckles everywhere on his handsome face. His bum stuck out, his bat, ready always.

WHERE SHE WOULD BE PROUD OF HER FATHER

When I had come to this country, I had only fifty dollars. It had been my very first plane ride, and something in me was fluttering because I was not the pilot I had always wanted to be. Instead, I was going to America for a PhD in dairy science. I had left behind a pregnant wife and a two year old daughter. My daughter, Hema, had not really understood. She had not cried like everyone else gathered there at the airport. Everyone had come, piled in one jeep, carrying them into the city on rough dirt roads from my little village. My four brothers, my cousins, my father with a red fento wrapped around his head proudly, my mother with her arthritis walk, everyone. And everyone had cried, tears being wiped away by thin saris and cotton handkerchiefs. But not my daughter. She had clung to me until they announced boarding, had given me a kiss on the cheek, and had waved her little hand from my wife's arms, calling,

"Aavjo, Daddy! Daddy, aavjo!"

She was the only one who made me cry that day. I sat in my seat next to the window and cried thinking, what a terrible father I make, leaving my daughter like this. But for the next year and one half, I reminded myself each time I missed her big eyes looking at me that she would be with me soon. She would be with me, here, in this country where she could be whatever she wanted to be. Where no board exams would torture her future goals, where she could study whatever she wanted if she wanted to badly enough, where she would grow up and be proud of her father who left her to bring her here: This great country of opportunity.

And when she had come to me, with my wife and our second daughter whom I had not even met, she had come running. I had been waiting for two hours by then.

Waiting and waiting to catch a glimpse of my little family walking out of customs. I was the only one left, and no matter what I had said to the security officer there, he had not let me pass.

"Please, sir, my wife is not very good at English. She might need my help. She has two young children. Please, sir, could you please let me go in and at least help?"

He had looked at me sympathetically, "No, I'm sorry. I can't. They will help her out, don't worry."

"But, sir, please… they are my family."

"I'm sorry."

So I had waited there, standing, for two hours, and finally there they were. There she was. Hema had yelled,

"Daddy! Daddy!" She had let go of her mother's dress and come to me running as fast as she could, as if nothing, nothing in this world entire would come to stop her little feet from getting to me. Up she had been swung in my arms. I had held her so tightly, that little girl of mine. My wife had come sobbing, telling me that the bags were missing, and oh, she was so tired. So tired. I had held her briefly with one arm, handed her a tissue and told her not to worry. And the daughter I had never met would not come to me. She had not known what to do with me, an unknown man. But Hema, I had not let her go. I had not let her go until we had reached the rental car and I had buckled her belt. Hema was finally here.

And she grew. She was four when I had decided to put her in school. My wife had wept, being the sensitive person she is,

"But isn't it too soon? She doesn't know a word of English! Not a word! And

you're going to send her to school? How will she tell the teacher she needs to use the bathroom? What if she needs me? How will she tell the teacher she needs to call me? She's only four!"

"She will learn. She will do fine."

And I had sent her off on a little school bus, her face pressed against the window, waving to me,

"Aavjo, Daddy!!" I had seen her mouth moving. That entire day, I had run three trials for my research project, talked with my advisor about his classes I was assisting, and felt my heart leap at every call that passed through the lab. Hema's little face had haunted me. What kind of father, I thought, pushes his child into school like this? Maybe my wife was right. Maybe I should have waited a year so that Hema could speak English. At three in the afternoon I rushed home, though it was a good half hour brisk walk from the lab. I had opened the door to the face of a very surprised wife and Hema playing with Leena some hand-clapping game.

"What are you—is everything alright?" my wife had asked anxiously.

"Everything is alright. How is Hema?"

And at my voice, Hema had leaped up and come running, as she always did. My heart had only slowed after I heard her sweet voice say,

"Daddy! Daddy! School was fun! The teacher was nice."

Hema learned English. She learned to eat everything on her plate. She learned never to ask for things that she did not need.

She had asked me directly, "But Daddy, why can't I have that doll?"

"Because you do not need it. You have so many dolls, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you need this one also?"

She had shrugged and said, "I don't need it."

"All right then. When you need a doll, I will get it for you."

She had happily taken my hand and skipped along as we walked away from that aisle of toys.

When I graduated, she was seven. She could ride a bike, she had enough clothes to wear something different everyday for two weeks, and she owned a plastic doctor's kit.

"Daddy," she had said, glowing up at me in my square hat waving a tassel, "you're my favorite person in the whole wide world."

I had kissed her forehead and stood proudly.

So many stories came to me these days. Stories of my Hema growing up in this country. Flashes of memory where my now thin, sad-eyed, tired, stubborn, adult daughter suddenly becomes nine and is flying a kite with me, marveling at the little speck in the sky, eleven and is helping me plant the first garden in our new backyard, planning where to put the okra, fifteen and is struggling with chemistry homework while we ate slices of apples late into the night, nineteen and is telling me over the phone she won a prestigious scholarship,

"Daddy, I called you first! I had to call you first."

The memories stopped as I heard her voice again, a different voice, hard,

"If you wanted me to be like all those girls in India, all those girls who do exactly as their father's tell them to, all those girls who marry at their father's will, why did you bring me here? Why did you bring me here?"

My wife was about to slap Hema. I caught her arm and shook my head. Hema looked back at us. She was not afraid of us. She was twenty-two, educated, beautiful. She had the world open to her. She had everything this country had to offer her. She needed nothing of us anymore.

"Go ahead, Mummi, hit me."

"Insolent woman! Do you have any idea what you just said to your father?" my wife screamed, angry tears filling her eyes.

"Well, answer the question. Go on, tell me! If you wanted me to live the life of a proper daughter you've always dreamed of, why did you bring me here? To this place? To this country that is so wrong for you? This country which you feel poisons my mind? Why even bother bringing me here?"

This is, I thought, my failure. This is all my failure. This woman, my daughter is the product of my failure. What kind of father makes such a daughter? I looked at her, and said,

"I only wanted what was best for you. So I brought you here. What is best for you at this point is to get married, like I am imploring you to. That is all."

"Of course," she scoffed, "everything is for the best of me."

"Yes. Always. I have no gains. You will have a good life with this man. And that is all I want. I want you to have a good life. That is all."

She turned away. She picked up her duffle bag, the same one I had bought her ten years ago, and walked slowly to the door. She slipped on her shoes, bent her knee to lift each leg up to secure them, and twisted the door handle. There was something in me fluttering. Fluttering frantically, helplessly.

“I’m going. You can’t stop me. You won’t stop me. You brought me here. And I am who I am because of it. Because of you.”

I watched her step outside the door, and as she went to pull it close, she caught my eyes. She paused, half her face visible.

“Aavjo, Daddy,” she whispered, and the door shut quietly.