

## ABSTRACT

TITLE OF DISSERTATION: GHETTO PROCLIVITIES: RACE  
AND CLASS IN A MODEL  
MINORITY MEMOIR

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This dissertation explores the relationship between Model Minorities and Black Americans through the lens of memoir. Drawing on approaches in self-ethnography and cultural biography, the memoir details my experience growing up South Asian in Langley Park, a poor “inner ring” suburb of Washington, DC that had, at the time (1978-1995), a majority Black population. The memoir is supplemented by an introduction, three interlude essays and a conclusion that consider the social and cultural contexts in which my experience of shifting identifications took place.

Blackness, both as a construct to define what is American, as well as a barometer for exclusion from America, is examined alongside the Model Minority Myth in terms of how each, in competing and often unequal measure, can affect South Asian identity construction in ways that can complicate conventional ethnic and class identity. The discourse of the myth, with its reliance on an “invisible”

structurally based lineage, bequeaths entitlements to Asians akin to white privilege. This “presumptive capital” can manifest in real world byproducts even in the absence of economic privilege, even when said model minority shares class kinship, geography and aesthetic with historically disadvantaged Black Americans from low-income circumstances. This relationship—contested, mercurial and contingent—reveals the necessity of surveying the racialized American landscape with a panoramic lens that acknowledges the interrelated, dependent spaces upon which we all draw and to which we all contribute. This dissertation assesses some of the complex, multiple ways in which a single life within a specific community can be influenced by Black American, White American and Asian American racial and cultural constructions.

Ghetto Proclivities: Race and Class Identity in a Model Minority Memoir

By

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Prologue.....	30
Chapter One.....	32
Chapter Two.....	56
Chapter Three.....	76
Chapter Four.....	93
Interlude One: On Inner-ring Suburbs, Langley Park, and Ghetto as an Ideological Construct.....	107
Chapter Five.....	136
Chapter Six.....	152
Chapter Seven.....	169
Chapter Eight.....	181
Interlude Two: On Dolls and Identification with Blackness As a Classed Identity.....	197
Chapter Nine.....	222
Chapter Ten.....	248
Chapter Eleven.....	275
Interlude Three: On Malcolm, Hip Hop, Black as ‘Cool,’ And the Model Minority Myth as ‘Presumptive Capital’.....	396
Conclusion.....	322
References.....	331

## Introduction

In 1988, Reebok Shoes—stuck in a sales stalemate with Nike over specialized sneakers—launched an unconventional and what would be ultimately a quickly abandoned ad campaign. The “Let U.B.U.” commercials featured absurdist scenes like a ballerina vacuuming an oriental rug on a lawn and elderly couples gleefully promenading in bizarre red costumes, paired with a voiceover pitching disjointed axioms about the merits of individualism. Although widely dismissed as an expensive dud—pricey Chiat/Day was responsible for the failure—I found the commercials magical.

At the time I was a sixth grader with bulky glasses. I memorized the panegyric, studiously scribbling down what I could decipher each time I saw the ads—like most American children of that era I spent days in front of the television. It didn’t entirely make sense, but phrases like “hobgoblin of little minds” enchanted me, as did the grand proclamation that anything could be resolutely genius. The unnamed author who fixated me turned out to be the at times grandiloquent but always brilliant Emerson; over vaudevillian violins the “Let U.B.U.” ads quoted non-sequentially from his 1832 essay “Self-Reliance.”

Who so would be a man, must be a non-conformist...A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds...To be great, is to be misunderstood...There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance...Insist on yourself, never imitate...To believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Youtube.com, “REEKBOK UBU,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgG9AB0YYyo> (3/20/06).

I wouldn't discover Emerson until years later, but the whole moment—from the ironic, ahistorical commercials themselves, to my disconnected fascination by a disembodied, philosopher anonymous to me—is an example of all things postmodern: kitsch, random difference, pastiche, an aesthetic aroused by decontextualization and “integrated into commodity production.”<sup>2</sup> A brown kid from working poor circumstances unknowingly gets turned onto Emerson by Reebok, a company whose alleged sweatshops in Vietnam and Honduras validate, however anecdotally, Jameson's claim that in the era of international postmodernism, “the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and terror.”<sup>3</sup> In the American Century, the largest stage upon which postmodernism enacts itself is simultaneously “global, yet American,”<sup>4</sup> and what is more American than the individualism espoused by transcendentalism? What is more American than identity construction via a product like a pair of running shoes? Million dollar technology employed for rescuing, neither trees nor those with AIDS, but the over-pronating arches of weekend athletes?

This is, of course, a cheap and incomplete analysis, if it can be said to be an analysis at all. My purpose here is neither to reiterate nor impeach any particular theoretical assertion about postmodernism, consumerism or even the relevance of inane advertising; rather it is to make a case for the potentiality of individual experiences to illuminate theoretical claims and spark new questions about the interplay of cultural forces. How postmodern that I stumbled upon transcendentalism

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<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Culture Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 2 (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/JAMESON/jameson.html>) (1/28/07).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

in a campy commercial for exorbitantly priced shoes likely produced in sweatshops across the planet without even knowing or needing to know what was happening as I enjoyed the commercials. American Studies relies upon numerous, often intersecting lenses to reveal the American landscape: histories, surveys, qualitative research, ethnography and literature to name only a handful. My angle—personal narrative—draws upon (self)ethnography and literature as its main modes of cultural inquiry. Considering the uniqueness of my perspective, demographically speaking and also in terms of what has been published thus far, I posit my this culturally oriented memoir as a novel contribution to the study of American society.

Thus, in addition to sharing and departing from thematic narratives in canonical memoirs of poverty, it is my hope that my memoir provides—in ways that most South Asian writing has yet to do—some insights into how race, ethnicity and class overlap and elide one another in individual experience on the polycultural American landscape. Specifically, what is the cultural relationship between minorities who reside in proximity with one another? What is the socio-economic connection between members of minority groups who share class identity or just geographic location? How does structural and individual racism impact related individuals of groups differently? What elements of class manifest in racial/ethnic identity? How is class identity infused with racial/ethnic identity? On what occasions might the two supplant each other? Be used interchangeably? In what ways are constructions of racial/ethnic identity, as well as notions of Americanness for immigrants, colored by the metaphor of Blackness?

Moreover how is Blackness, a botched “common sense” essentialism, nevertheless a metaphor for exclusion and American “cool,” central to certain American stories, most especially those of some modern immigrants newly negotiating the American landscape? After all, whether through the Tupac t-shirt sold in Ghanaian villages or the Billie Holliday sung in high-end jazz bars in Japan, Blackness is America’s main aesthetic export. In exploring cross-cultural, inter-ethnic, class-related subjects through the cultural intersections in my life, I hope to contribute to both the much-acclaimed body of South Asian creative writing as well as to the subgenre of poverty memoirs by involving American Blackness in interrogating my own American identity. This is a practice each of us enacts in varying increments, though it is much under-excavated process.

Diasporic studies, poverty studies and critical race theory usually find their home in scholarly writing and although I have conducted some conventional research on these subjects—the most colorful being an ethnographic study of the usage of the n-word by youngish second generation South Asian men—I wanted to explore the interplay of race, class and ethnicity in a longitudinal format that might allow for some unexpected conclusions that match and challenge in the concrete what others stipulate in more theoretical writing. Although there is no shortage of South Asian writers who anatomize the immigrant experience—the bulk of whom tend to be women—I am demographically rare: my parents did not arrive in the US armed with graduate degrees and our family’s trajectory during its first two decades does not trail the route of in, up and out social mobility that is common to most post-1965 “model minority” immigrants.

Sometime unforgivably late in my progress as a deliberate reader, and consequently as a writer, I decided to look for my own experience in the pages I was so voraciously reading. Like the young black girl Richard Rodriguez conjures—the one who “notices her absence” in her favorite Austen, I too wondered where I could find stories more similar to mine.<sup>5</sup> I would, however briefly, put aside the working class lullabies of Steinbeck and the cantankerous James Baldwin for contemporary writers writing from a South Asian immigrant point of view. I wasn’t naïve enough to expect my precise demographic or political temperament; I knew South Asian women from working poor neighborhoods would be anomalies if we were represented at all in the literature easily available to me. I write easily available because of course the dearth wasn’t nearly as absolute as I perceived it; non-canonical books and short stories could be found in small, independent presses or databases of unpublished work. Yet the madly popular South Asian-American authors elbowing for space on bookstore bookshelves, were written from a largely homogenous point of view in terms of class and ethnic identity construction: middle to upper middle class immigrants wrestled most often with whiteness—at least explicitly.

Like the literature written by Chicana authors such as Gloria Anzaldua who raged against white America with vitriolic talk about barbed wire and tongues that had to cut or the sweetly stinging invectives of Puerto Rican Judith Ortiz Cofer or the biting humor of Native American Sherman Alexie or the unfiltered, delirious outrage of islander Jamaica Kincaid, canonical South Asian immigrant novels and short stories discussed race. And to an equal extent as other “ethnic” authors, South Asian

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Rodriguez, *Brown* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 13.

writing seemed to dwell, perhaps reasonably, on the relationship between immigrant and the hegemonic dominant when it approached the subject of race. The silent “black” elephant in the room, Black people and Blackness—one essential metaphor for all things American—was peripherally, if at all, acknowledged. The class component of racial identity, which itself is always measured against Blackness in part too, was usually roundly ignored. When the subjects of race and class were touched upon, Black people, both literally and figuratively, didn’t show up much, however much I would argue they were latently present, smoldering with capacious if unacknowledged influence.

Instead I found food. A useful metaphor for assimilation, most South Asian stories wrestled with the daily business of how much to integrate white culture into South Asian lives. Whole collections explored the topic of assimilation in American culture, which was often portrayed as a monolithically white space. Even in awarding winning writer Chitra Divakaruni’s “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter,” a story where the opportunity for the discussion of race arises when the main character is shamed by a white neighbor, the central theme remained adjustment to America and the loss of a recognizable Indian identity in the main character’s son and new daughter in law.<sup>6</sup> In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* a mother and daughter are called “nigger” while being chased by white teenagers yet the story is silent about the conflation or equation of Blackness and brownness. Considering how integral Blackness is to all things American—either as definitional or as construct to define

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<sup>6</sup> Chitra Divakaruni, “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter,” in *Best American Stories 1999*, ed. Amy Tan with Katrina Kenison (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 29-47.

against, this may be an oversight that could be mined for a richer portrayal of a uniquely, categorically American experience.

Jhumpa Lahiri, recent recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies* lauded notably by the *New York Times* for her “restraint” as a writer<sup>7</sup>, focuses mainly on middle class, seemingly racially neutral adjustments. The characters, more often than not Ivy League graduate school types, are ensconced in the bothersome enterprise of building an American life with an Indian twist. This is reiterated in her follow up novel, the sweeping story of *The Namesake*, where the main character wrestles with how to swirl white America and his Indian background, which is symbolically exemplified to him by his given name, the Ukrainian Gogol.<sup>8</sup> In the entire book, there is no mention of black people with the exception of Dr. King’s assassination (which is mentioned as a means to set the historical period of a flashback) and the incidental fact that a minor character—a judge—is black. The rest of the book is populated with Indian and white folks. This binate is replicated from Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* to Seth Vikram’s *An Equal Music*. Countless stories and novels focus on a dichotomist culture clash—unwelcome in-law houseguests from India, the American habit of shutting doors,<sup>9</sup> the South Asian taboo against premarital sex, the symbolic possibilities of spices.

Although class and race appear to be under-examined, I should point out that South Asian writers wrestle vividly with gender based issues, reaching into the depths of a global patriarchy that trails South Asians to America to breed anew. For

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<sup>7</sup> Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), rear cover.

<sup>8</sup> Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Laura Leach, “Conflict over Privacy in Indo-American Short Fiction,” in *Ethnicity and the American Short Story*, ed. Julie Brown (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 100.

characters fleeing the unapologetic sexual repression of the “Third World,” the US can be viewed as a space in which one can, as scholar Ambreen Hai claims, “construct a new self invention.”<sup>10</sup> America, however flawed a space, does offer some women more freedom and protection from violence than many South Asian nations, although this too often hinges on class. But again, this usually becomes a bipolar conversation about white America and the old world and exactly how much one should or can accommodate the ethnic remnants embodied by old world husbands, parents and in laws.

I don’t mean to argue that assimilation into the mainstream is unworthy of examination or irrelevant to the South Asian immigrant experience. Assimilation to white middle class culture is wholly a representative subject; it is a main undercurrent in my own memoir, despite the fact that mine was a working poor, not middle class childhood. All immigrants negotiate the murky waters of acculturation to the mainstream and moreover, many South Asian Americans are children of or are themselves well-educated immigrants who face largely middle-class battles. Statistically speaking, South Asians are over-represented in high-income brackets, top universities and exclusive neighborhoods.

In fact, the authors delineated above each write from a personal point of view that is congruous with their characters: accomplished immigrants familiar with middle class universes of experience and the requisite adaptation to white culture demanded of them there. If writers mainly draw from the realm of their own lives it is not unusual that none of the above mentioned authors would focus their work on

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<sup>10</sup>Women Crossing, “Teaching recent South Asian Women Writers: Issues of Gender in Literature and Theory,” <http://womencrossing.org/hai/html> (December 2004).

backgrounds disparate from the middle to upper class backgrounds from which they hail. Though their experiences of quiet alienation have unfamiliar contours for me, they are undoubtedly the lived experience of many South Asians who arrived here under the auspices of the 1965 Immigration Act.

Moreover, South Asian literature is not unique in failing to mention Blackness and Black Americans, as well as other minority groups, despite scholarly “calls for situating South Asians in relation to other local racial and ethnic groups.”<sup>11</sup> Creative writing by other racialized authors does not habitually refer to the experiences of other minority groups. I would only suggest that America, perhaps even especially white America, is so informed by Blackness that Blackness itself is a fecund place to unearth elements of the immigrant experience even when Black people themselves are not literally present. This must be true if, as Richard Rodriguez asserts, black Americans “remain at the center of the moral imagination of America.”<sup>12</sup>

This dissertation hopes to address the above by filling three specific gaps, the first being the total absence of South Asian-American memoirs.<sup>13</sup> The one partial exception being *Burnt Bread and Chutney*, a memoir written by a Jewish author of partial Indian descent that dwells as much on Israeli turf as it does American.<sup>14</sup> Although there are scores of novels and short story collections as well as a few mixed genre collections that include nonfiction, there is a surprising South Asian American

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<sup>11</sup> Karen Leonard, review of *Nation and Migration: the Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Peter Van Der Veer, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vol. 2, No. 3 (September 1996): 579.

<sup>12</sup> Rodriguez, 30.

<sup>13</sup> There are currently no memoirs written by South Asian American authors published by any major presses.

<sup>14</sup> Carmit Delman, *Burnt Bread and Chutney, Growing Up Between Cultures: Memoir of an Indian Jewish Girl* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002).

silence on the first person front. The handful of Indian memoirs that do exist are written by native born South Asian writers who write primarily about being an Indian in India who may travel and live abroad briefly as an adult. Meena Alexander's memoir, *Fault Lines*, is one such book; her days in New York come at the tail end of her life, much of which was spent in Kerala and Khartoum.<sup>15</sup> This scarcity of nonfiction narratives by second generation South Asians is especially notable considering the vast commercial success of South Asian-American fiction writers and the increasing visibility of South Asians in the media, particularly in film.

Secondly, instead of the usual dual cultural focus of South Asian American writing mentioned above, where characters navigate between “ethnic” cultural traditions of Indian ancestry and an American set of cultural practices that are generally coded as “white,” I move between multiple racialized cultural systems: the white hegemonic dominant of the mainstream that flows in all things American, the remnants of India embodied by my extended immigrant family, and the (sub)urban classed Black culture of my surroundings in Langley Park which I ultimately valued above the other two. This gradual shifting in emphasis occurred over the course of my adolescence as my definition of what constituted membership in each of the cultural worlds evolved, as my family and I connected and disconnected with each and as the racial make up of my surroundings adjusted. This progression was framed by the eternal immigrant quest for an American identity that satisfies the multiplicity of varied and often competing longings.

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<sup>15</sup> Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines* (New York: Feminist Press of SUNY, 1993).

The primacy of American identity construction is not unique to my memoir, of course. Elaine H. Kim posits that “the most recurrent theme” in Asian American writing (distinct from but related to South Asian American writing) is the “overarching collective concern for the invention of an American identity.”<sup>16</sup> My memoir is utterly in line with this mode of meaning-making through hybridity and a situatedness that is defined by a kind of in-betweenness. What distinguishes my memoir is that, unlike much of South Asian American writing, the forces that impinge upon and upon which I draw are neither binate nor middle class nor focused primarily on white constructions of Americanization.

Thirdly, this last piece—the sourcing of non-white Americanness for identity construction— has the somewhat unexpected product of privileging class identity over ethnic/racial identity. This too is relatively unusual for South Asian writing. As Kim puts it, “It’s hard to think of an Asian American writer who is not immediately identified as such.”<sup>17</sup> Although I surely am a South Asian writer who dwells significantly on this component of my cultural identity, my ethnic identification as Indian does not end up being the principal element of my cultural influences. Jhumpa Lahiri’s fictional work on the South Asian American experience provides some useful spaces I can employ to demonstrate how my work departs from the norm, a standard she has artfully done much to set.

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<sup>16</sup>Elaine H. Kim, “Defining Asian American Realities Through Literature.” *Cultural Critique* No. 6 (Spring, 1987): 88.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 93.

Ketu H. Katrak points out that “Lahiri’s characters remain self-consciously aware of their ethnicity”<sup>18</sup> as an attribute that is the distinctive source of their Otherness. I would argue that the bulk of popular South Asian writing pivots on this ethnic axis and how it can mark the South Asian American experience as separate. Although my memoir does not diverge from what Meena Alexander calls the “aesthetics of dislocation,”<sup>19</sup> my sense of displacement and disidentification was not simply from the white mainstream or from the native homeland of my parents that floods my physical body, but from conventional class related definitions of *desi*<sup>20</sup> Indianness. In Lahiri’s title story, *Interpreter of Maladies*, from the collection of the same name, a wealthy Indian woman returns to India from the US. As a driver totes her family to tourist sites, she reflects on how “someone who shares her ethnicity but is divided from her in every other way, especially in class privilege, is a reminder that the gap dividing them is more significant than their common ethnicity.”<sup>21</sup>

Although this type of split between *desis* or other immigrants in the States is not explored much by either Lahiri or other writers of South Asian American experience, it is the type of division between Indian immigrants as a group that I investigate in this dissertation. It is a disjunction that was complicated by a class-based kinship with Blackness. Thus my personal emphasis on class identity not only swerves from the middle class preoccupations delineated above, it manifests *racially* in complex, compelling and problematic ways.

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<sup>18</sup> Ketu H. Katrak, “The Aesthetics of Dislocation: Writing the Hybrid Lives of South Asian Americans.” *The Women’s Review of Books* vol. 19 No. 5 (February 2002): 6.

<sup>19</sup> Meena Alexander, “Is There an Asian American Aesthetic?” *South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection* (Winter 1992): 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Desi* refers to a person of South Asian descent who does not reside in the “home” of South Asia.

<sup>21</sup> Katrak, 6.

Michael Frye Jacobson argued that “to write about race in American culture is to exclude virtually nothing.”<sup>22</sup> I would argue that this assertion demands at least a nod to the historic and contemporary presence of Black Americans in American consciousness as a means to amplify racial discussions of all sorts. Perhaps we can speculate then that the converse of Jacobson’s claim holds some truth. To write about an aspect of American culture, particularly race itself, while skirting Black Americans is a shortcoming worth remedying. It is a misdemeanor that may indict many South Asian writers who miss an opening to do some heavy critical lifting. After all, David Lionel Smith echoes other scholars when he proclaims that, “Literary artists are among our most valuable cultural critics.”<sup>23</sup> Considering the interrelated, hierarchical nature of race, class and identity, this is an area where I aim for my memoir to reveal something new. It is my goal to position myself as both an author and a cultural critic and in doing so offer some fodder to a currently neglected subject area.

Not that I am the first to employ the method of examining one’s own experience through the revealing gaze of others’ lives and vice versa.

Sociologist Dalton Conley explores the intersectional nature of race and class in his memoir, *Honky*.<sup>24</sup> Though he is primarily a sociologist and scholar—Conley is the Director of the Center for Advanced Social Science Research at New York University—this memoir was well received by authors and reviewers alike, earning him praise from creative nonfiction giants like Phillip Lopate, who recognized strands

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>23</sup> David Lionel Smith, “What is Black Culture?” in *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage, 1998), 190.

<sup>24</sup> Dalton Conley, *Honky* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

from his own childhood experiences twenty years earlier in Fort Greene, NY. A record of a white boy growing up in the black and Puerto Rican world of Manhattan's Lower East Side as well as Harlem, *Honky* is decidedly a study of poverty and racial capital as well as a darkly comic piece of literature. Opening with the joke, "Your momma is so white, she went to her own wedding naked," Conley writes candidly about the qualified class kinship he shared with his black friends and neighbors in housing projects, while being clear about the privileges his skin accorded him whatever his class disadvantages. The book is more than a load-bearing personal account, it is informed by the skill set honed by his credentials in sociology and cultural study. His academic training gives the riveting stories theoretical meaning and cultural teeth.

My memoir shoots for something similar, explicating how class commonalities might be complicated by racial/ethnic privilege not only for whites living in impoverished black—and Latino—communities, but for South Asians, too. Wielding my background in ethnography, life-writing and critical race theory, this self-study digs into the intimacy of my life stories and applies the lens of cultural criticism to extract broader, socially relevant meaning from them. This is achieved by three essays that are interspersed in the memoir to explicate the stories as cultural sites. The stories, though mine, extend beyond my personal, individual experience to include the cultural, interlocking experiences of my family, neighbors, peers, and cohort. As an American Studies scholar, I can do more than relay my stories in creative writing, I can situate them in a cultural landscape that has academic

resonance and social insight by investigating them with more traditional theoretical writing as well.

This book will be the first in South Asian immigrant literature to do so. Although there is some reference to the intersectionality of ethnic and immigrant experience in theoretical writing—although this is too often limited to footnoted asides or optimistic but vague calls for it—the a wide lull in creative writing by South Asian authors is one that I hope to begin to fill. The following pages should demonstrate how the Model Minority Myth can operate in a single life in such a way as to transcend class barriers to become a kind of cultural capital that I call *presumptive capital*—bound with the economic in terms of its origins and its manifestations, but not limited to them.

Presumptive capital does not necessarily have any internal content—no legacy of class-based knowledge or networks— and in fact functions most plainly when it does not. Presumptive capital operates instead externally; it relies on the presumption by others that one owns traditional cultural capital regardless of whether one actually does. This auspicious assumption, however baseless or misplaced as it was in my case, stems from the expansive proliferation of the Model Minority Myth. The myth has its genetic roots in true cultural capitals based on class, of course. East and South Asian immigrants invited into the US during the post-Sputnik panic were powerfully educated, with the expendable dollars necessary to make a trans-continental move. Generations later, this translated into a misappropriative yet mostly favorably reputation for a tiny and somewhat homogenous minority.

In the *Karma of Brown Folk*, Vijay Prashad handily provides an historical rendering of the myth and demonstrates how its evolution—from its legislative birth in the Immigrant Act of 1965 that coincided with the remunerative Civil Rights Act of 1964 to its rhetorical appearance in countless conservative arguments—has been costly more to Black Americans than to Asians themselves. After all, however essentialist positive stereotyping may be to the eponymous model minority, its true victims are those the myth implicitly indicts. My memoir expands upon these claims by examining how South Asian privilege manifests even in the absence of the economic privilege associated with model minorities, even when that model minority shares, adapts and co-opts Black culture. Geographic proximity, class kinship, even if temporary, can complicate conventional notions of “authentic” racial and ethnic identities.

This exposes a key theoretical framework for this memoir: polyculturalism. Vijay Prashad explicates this antidote to multiculturalism in his *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*.<sup>25</sup> Instead of static and purist notions of culture and race which Prashad calls “historically ridiculous,” polyculturalism acknowledges that “the cultures we see in motion around us are dynamically generated by various and complex interactions.”<sup>26</sup> Prashad’s conceptualization of culture as a process is derived in part from Robin Kelley who argued that all of us, not only “mixed race” children are polycultural. “The framework of polyculturalism uncouples the notions of origins and authenticity from that of culture...Therefore, no cultural actor can, in good faith,

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<sup>25</sup> Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Vijay Prashad, interview by Ethel Leona Futo, *The Lioness’s Den: Beyond the Political Spectrum* (April 29, 2008): [http://ethelslionessden.blogspot.com/2008/\\_04\\_01\\_archive.html](http://ethelslionessden.blogspot.com/2008/_04_01_archive.html)

claim proprietary interest in what is claimed to be his or her authentic culture.”<sup>27</sup> An easy example of this are my father’s colloquialisms that are peppered throughout the memoir. My father called lines at the bank, “queues,” the dresses I wore, “frocks,” the braids Amma put in my hair, “plaits.” These were British phrases, the products of colonialism, but weren’t they also now Indian, too? When an Indian immigrant to the US shouts, “bloody hell, mate!” when he curses, is it British? Is it “purely” Indian? This is the type of “mulatto history” that Prashad and Robin Kelley assert operates beneath all our assumptions about discrete cultures.

My memoir draws upon this conceptualization of culture to explicate and qualify my adolescent claims on certain aspects of the Black culture in which I was immersed. I do not mean, of course, that this legitimates an ownership of a Black identity or that I was in any real way black myself, but rather this is an acknowledgement of the hybridity of all American, including black and desi, cultures that, even when they “appear to be relatively discrete groups,” are in fact “fairly porous.”<sup>28</sup>

This is dramatically illustrated by a scene that did not make the memoir. My childhood friend Shereen and I are in the basement of a predominantly Indian church in Langley Park where her father is pastor. Shereen is the graham cracker-skinned teenager who emigrated from Kerala when she was seven. Sligo Church’s services, unlike the all white Episcopalian church I attend with my family, seems more social event than religious obligation to me. Here Indian immigrants from the same villages,

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<sup>27</sup> Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*, 65-66.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

cities and colleges back in India, congregate in their best clothes to re-cement the cultural memory that eroded during the week.

We are in the basement bathroom where we can still hear the muffled service ongoing upstairs. In the stall behind us, another Indian friend is taking a pregnancy test while her boyfriend—a white boy who so identifies with Black culture that he is called, not necessarily unkindly, a *wigger*— waits anxiously at home for her to page him the results by spelling the words through the letters marked on each digit of the phone pad: 937 for yes, 66 for no.

Shereen and I are side by side at the sinks, primping in the mirror. Our reflection is a caricature in clash: though we are each dressed in sparkly saris, our hair is cropped short in twin bobs, mine cut asymmetrically like the Black girls' hair, with finger waves gelled in place like cement. It is a poor match for our traditional garb. We each should have sported a simple middle part that culminated at our napes in a single braid long enough to brush our butts. Eighteen years old in India, we would have been portraits of virginal modesty. Here we were graceless without our typical ghetto prep look—roomy jeans crumpled over white tennis shoes. Here we looked like American wolves in Indian clothing, unsure even of how to walk without coaxing our saris to slip inappropriately from our shoulders, revealing—much like a bikini would—the skin between our bras and belly buttons. In that moment we are at once American, Indian and “hood,” each separate cultural world embodied harmoniously within us. We do not even flinch from the task of simultaneous performance so complete is our conception of hybridity.

The faces in the mirror combine, quite literally, the aesthetic and sensibility of our immigrant heritage and the Black Americanness in which we participated and by which we were surrounded. It is an example of what Prashad describes “polyrhythms, many different rhythms operating together to produce a whole song.”<sup>29</sup> For me and Shereen, the Indian and Black influences, here manifested in style, slip easily into concert with one another. Neither influence is whole or permanent. The following year Shereen’s father, a doting but conservative man with a Masters’ in theology, will move their family to a brand new four bedroom house complete with a two car garage that will house a classic Mercedes and a government issue-type black SUV, but for now we both jokingly put up gang signs before we exit the bathroom. An L with our index finger and thumb and an upside down “ok” gesture for a P: Langley Park.

In American Studies, there is no shortage of these moments as points of entry into deeper inquiry. From Rhonda M. Williams pondering how race, class and sexuality are revealed during a trip to the park with a baby stroller to George Lipsitz recalling the day he heard about the murder of white activist Bill Moore, pivotal memories have continually sparked and sustained cultural inquiry by following Lipsitz’s mandate that we “study the concrete.”<sup>30</sup> One way this is fulfilled in American Studies is illustrated in the demand for more and more reflexivity that moves ethnography—a staple of American Studies—towards autoethnography, another way to name memoir.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> George Lipsitz, “Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn: Pop Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies,” in Maddox, ed., *Locating American Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 310.

According to one of its premier proponents and scholars, Carolyn Ellis, autoethnography is a term that is referenced by no less than sixty words including personal narratives, personal essays, self-ethnography, personal writing, ethnographic memoir, narrative ethnography, native ethnography<sup>31</sup>. It has been in usage for over two decades<sup>32</sup>, and is credited to David Hayano who conducted a brand of native ethnography when he studied a group to which he belonged: professional poker players. Previously, the “I” was occasionally inserted into ethnographic texts to give them authority but its decidedly sporadic appearances “masked the biography of the ethnographer.”<sup>33</sup>

By the 80’s self-reflexivity was becoming more and more in vogue with scholars, and ethnography as it was traditionally conceived collapsed, though its usefulness as a method and form of knowledge building was not abolished, only altered. George Marcus points out that, “Although the old forms of ethnography may have been called into question, ethnography itself, in its possibilities beyond its disciplinary uses so far, has not been.”<sup>34</sup> More and more of ethnography’s previously passive stance was being replaced by avowedly present authors who recognized the profound presence of privilege and hegemony; Abedi’s *Advocacy After Bhopal* and Stewart’s *A Space on the Side of the Road*, to name two seminal examples.

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<sup>31</sup> Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner, “Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oakes: Sage, 2000) as quoted in Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004), 40.

<sup>32</sup> Deborah E. Reed Danahay, “Introduction” in *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, ed. Deborah E. Reed Danahay (New York: Oxford, 1997), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Judith Okley and Helen Callaway, *Anthropology and Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 1992), xi.

<sup>34</sup> George Marcus, “What Comes (Just) After the ‘Post’?” in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oakes: Sage Publications, 1998), 387.

Life writing, defined by Marlene Kadar as, “texts that are written by an author who does not continuously write about someone else, and who also does not pretend to be absent from the text,”<sup>35</sup> has a lengthy and contested history in terms of its legitimacy. It is often viewed as the less formal, and thus less valuable, form of autobiography—an insulting distinction considering the ugly stepchild status autobiography is only recently beginning to shake. It was an inclusive term—diaries, letters—ever since its inception in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and it continues to be a comprehensive term still, one that corrals personal narrative, personal essay, native ethnography, self-reflexive ethnography, ethnographic autobiography, life history, memoir, autoethnography, amongst others, each with their own lines of emphasis.

I first held doubts about the viability of self-ethnography and personal narrative as anything more than literature. It seemed hazardous to reduce one’s compass to such a narrow scope. How could a single life purport to make claims about anything outside its tiny realm? Wouldn’t overlapping identities, idiosyncrasies and irreducible factors ruin any far reaching conclusions? In the same way that no one person can withstand the weight of a generality, no classification could be narrow enough for one person to be its perfect delegate. Yet this is the key to self-ethnography/autoethnography’s academic allure. In many ways pioneer John Caughey describes self-ethnography succinctly when he asserts that life history is cultural study “in reverse.”<sup>36</sup> In the past we cemented our ideas about a single culture by studying a large group of people simultaneously in order to make the

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<sup>35</sup> Marlene Kadar, “Coming to Terms with Life Writing—From Genre to Critical Practice,” in *Essays on Life Writing*, ed. Marlene Kadar (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 10.

<sup>36</sup>John Caughey, “The Ethnography of Everyday Life.” *American Quarterly* 34 (1982).

generalizations believed to be so necessary to social science. With life history and self-ethnography, the researcher develops an understanding of many cultures—every individual is housed in multiples groups of identity—through the in depth study of a single life.

This method allows for the multiplicity of real lives and the intersectionality of all identities. By examining single lives microscopically we can extrapolate how identities, locations and cultures inform, overlap and contradict one another in the messy way that replicates life, not in the terms of some pre-conceived category isolated from context. This type of writing experiments with inquiry by avoiding “ready made concepts”<sup>37</sup> as much as possible and by inviting inconclusivity. By focusing its scrutiny on a single subject and allowing for an investigation of the diversity of one person’s identity, in this case the author’s. When we look at a single life we stop the conversation not at black culture nor at poor black culture nor at urban poor black culture, but are able to view the complex junction of innumerable demographic “identities” in a single subject. In my case my class, ethnic, geographic and religious identities qualified and expanded my membership in each group. To examine any single identity without the synchronizing it with the others would have been more than inadequate; it would have been obscurantist.

There are numerous examples of this type of writing: Alice Kaplan’s literary *French Lessons*, about French complicity with Nazis, Kaye Redfield Jamison’s *The Unquiet Mind* a clinical and personal look at manic depression and Jose Limon’s *Dancing with the Devil* an extremely self-reflexive account of Chicanos representing

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<sup>37</sup> Marcus, 391.

Mexicans by a Chicano representing Chicanos and Mexicans. There are also countless examples of more technical works by authors who hail from fields like education and psychology; for instance like Linda J. Rogers' *Wish I Were*, a "collection of intimate stories and essays" about psychoanalysis and Carlos Alberto Torres' *Education, Power and Personal Biography*, a set of interviews, Carl Grant's *Education and Multicultural Research: A Reflective Engagement*, a synthesis of narrative writing and work that falls in tradition of the *testimonio*. Each sets a valuable precedent for how personal narrative can yield useful insights into culture and is a model for the cultural study that I hope my memoir is.

One specific example of how the form can be used is in Black and "ethnic" literature. Black autobiography, a derivative of the slave narrative, is often considered the fountainhead of Black literature and with some disdain. It reflects the mainstream's resistance to the theoretical ideas put forth by Black thinkers by choosing instead to valorize only their stories.

It is a fair generalization to say that a disproportionate number of the books in the African-American tradition that have been canonized as central texts have been autobiographies...a fair amount of attention [is paid] to African-American autobiography, and relatively little to the theory and philosophy produced by African Americans.<sup>38</sup>

Though I agree that the impetus for canonizing first person narratives above other types of black writing had more to do with the devaluation of autobiographical writing than anything else, I believe the current trend in self-reflexivity, can act as a

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<sup>38</sup> Crispin Sartwell, *Act Like You Know* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.

windfall for these writers and their work by exposing the cultural and theoretical truths that wait within.

But what claims can autobiography and memoir make when their authors are neither trained anthropologists nor avow the same goals of objective subjectivity that autoethnographers declare? Shirley Rose points out “one’s experience is defined by socio-cultural factors.” These determinants are present in every description of a scene, snippet of dialogue, and paragraph of exposition. Through the act of writing, “writers reveal shared cultural values and assumptions.”<sup>39</sup>

The autobiographer’s discourse re-creates the patterns and plots which her socio-cultural experience has taught her. Her discourse thus reflects and reinforces, by retelling her culture’s collectively created version of reality. As a contributor to this collective reality, autobiography is a cultural document, a source of information for anyone seeking a better understanding of the myths and ideology of the culture in which and from which it arises.<sup>40</sup>

This is demonstrated by the social truths exposed by the divergent branch of autobiography written by marginalized groups. Instead of trumpeting individuality or lone heroes in what many call the “Great Man’ tradition that speaks of individual linear progress and power,”<sup>41</sup> autobiographies by previously unheard ethnic minorities are “communal” in that they discuss the “shared life, shared suffering, shared triumph and communal responsibility” of a group united by oppression. This

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<sup>39</sup> Shirley Rose, “Metaphors and Myths of Cross-Cultural Literacy: Autobiographical Narratives by Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, and Malcolm X.” *MELUS*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Ethnic Autobiography (Spring, 1987): 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Okely, “Anthropology and Autobiography: Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge,” in *Anthropology and Autobiography*, eds. Okely and Callaway (New York: Routledge, 1992), 5.

self, unlike the autonomous individual in traditional autobiography, “belongs to the people and the people find voice in the self.”<sup>42</sup>

In this way, autobiography and memoir inform us not only of the workings of a single, isolated soul but, like autoethnography, it can show us the Other as vividly as any other form. The forces that exclude, or other, are always present in personal nonfiction composed by othered authors. They automatically “represent the self collectively, as a subject shaped by those forces that designate the less powerful as ‘other.’”<sup>43</sup> Autobiography can do the legwork and the analysis of the excluded other for which anthropology aimed.

Rusk describes how literature by disenfranchised groups can represent more than just their immediate experience. Whenever Virginia Woolf or James Baldwin describes a meaningful event “‘the individual concern’ is ‘magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it’—the story of the group.”<sup>44</sup> This is not only true for the black autobiography, of course; consider the first line to Rigoberta Menchu’s memoir, *I, Rigoberta*, a great example of the *testimonio* sub-genre. “My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.”<sup>45</sup>

Many books, like Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Women Warrior*, are now being titled “hybrid” works because of their contributions to literature and cultural criticism. Consider W.E.B. Dubois’ autobiography, notably

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<sup>42</sup> Deck, p. 273.

<sup>43</sup> Rusk, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a More Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986), 17.

<sup>45</sup>It is important to note that Menchu’s memoir was disputed, most notably her eyewitness accounts of some aspects of her story.

titled: *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* [emphasis mine]. Or James Baldwin's numerous scathing social critiques both here and abroad. "To show the world what's wrong with Europe and America, Baldwin recounted highly charged events in his personal history."<sup>46</sup> What an ironic and appropriate inversion of the Orientalist "reverse mirror image knowledge"<sup>47</sup> for which Said disparages western scholarship. Instead of getting at the "surfaces" that Geertz was incrementally chiseling, memoir, like autoethnography, can get at not only the single life about whom the author knowledgeably speaks, but also the culture(s) from where she hails.

All of this hinges on memory of course. The reliability of the narrator is difficult both to dispute and trust; the contemporary disarray of the field, from the embellished drug experiences of *A Million Little Pieces* to totally faked gang memoirs from LA, fuels a reasonable skepticism.

How can I, for example, claim to recall the first scene of the memoir when I am only four? There is some research that asserts that memory making begins near the age a child learns to read—some go even further to the acquisition of language. Considering that Einstein didn't speak a word till he was five and Reverend Al Sharpton was preaching sermons by three, I don't know whether the fact that I was reading by three is evidence of the solidity of my memories or not. I do know that I realized early on the drama of my home life, if not the socio-economic layers that

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<sup>45</sup> Rusk, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Rudolph, p. 149.

informed that drama. I have been telling and retelling these stories since before the stories themselves were complete.

From as early as seven, I recall crafting monologues in the shower modeled after interviews given on PBS documentaries. The painful bizarreness of my mother's behavior, the poignancy of my father's struggles, the quiet dignity of my brother's travails, the oddity of my entire family! was evident to me as a young child. How badly I wanted everyone to see my father for who he was: a tragic American hero, akin to the sad characters I found in dreary plays, Willie Lomans, Terry Malloys. It was this urge that drove me to tell our stories to friends, to journals, to teachers in the form of fiction stories (I first wrote the story of Appa and the junkyard in elementary school). It drove me to empty my brain to the guidance counselor Ms. Emigg who singles me out in Chapter Three. It became a habit, the means to satisfy the desire to be known for who I was, which was so entwined with how my family was.

This motivation was altered after I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in high school. At that point, I began the process of situating our story, however unique to us, in the larger terrain of our intersecting cultures: working poor, immigrant, Langley Park, model minority, ghetto. The stories remained the same but their meanings grew more complex as I learned to contextualize them. Within my story, segments of a more collective narrative, one that overlapped and departed from mine, began to emerge. How to embed my story in that landscape, how to identify elements of that broader narrative in my stories, and eventually move my gaze from the navel of my own events to a more panoramic view are the goals of this dissertation. Some of these themes are addressed in a scholarly essay that follows each section of the

memoir. Following the first three chapters, I examine Langley Park, the place where I spent the first eight years of my life, as a inner-ring suburb; after the second section, I explore the malleability of racial and class identification, especially via consumer goods such as the white and black dolls with which I played as a girl; and finally, following the third section, I delve into the competing and complimentary cultural currencies of blackness, hip hop, and the model minority myth, each variably contingent upon the other in the social worlds of my life in Langley Park, and always problematical. In each of these essays, I aimed to connect specific periods in my life to grander abstractions about the cultural forces that influenced my American life.

I did not simply recollect, however. I scoured old yearbooks, photo albums, boxes of notes from childhood friends; I found old school records; I visited old neighborhoods and childhood haunts; I located old friends; I dug into public records; I time-lined and researched trends and events; I looked up song lyrics, statistics, prices, dates; I looked at Appa's old AAA maps; I fingered the BEST FRIENDS FOREVER charm Alice made for me when we were seven; I sat in the yard of 555 Southhampton Drive where the tree from my childhood remains. I listened to endless versions of events, some that even contradicted my own recollections.

For example, one of the major events in the evolution of my family—the moment that inaugurated the transferal of head of household from my father to my brother— was when in Chapter Eight Anna, my big brother, stands up to the patriarch of our extended clan, our uncle. Our uncle chastises my father for permitting my brother to purchase an over-sized sound system for the family car. It was the kind of wasteful showiness in which Black boys indulged. This was a painful and powerful

memory that I wanted to get down just right. After recounting with my brother and father, I talked with my much younger cousin—who was also there—several times to gain her perspective. Did she remember, for example, what she was wearing? Where she sat? She did not.<sup>48</sup> I eventually sat down with my uncle to ask him about it. “That’s not how it happened,” he remarked about my version, “but it’s a good story.”<sup>49</sup> It was a slow, uncomfortable conversation that ensured that the scene aspired to as much veracity as a decades old memory could. That scene concludes one of the most revealing segments of the memoir. The installation of a “booming system” by a South Asian teenager into the albatross of the white Chevy Blazer in a neighborhood experiencing rapid “white flight” during the era of “The Murder Capital DC,” the LA riots and the origins of hip hop, is a great example of the cultural truths that can be examined in the concrete instances of personal history. It is my hope that my book is populated with such moments, heretofore unexplored in contemporary South Asian American creative writing.

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<sup>48</sup> Vasanthi Abraham, interview by A. Sandosharaj, December 28, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Darmadas Abraham, interview by A. Sandosharaj, January 11, 2008.

## Prologue

The only dynamic record of my childhood is a three-minute video made by my parents with equipment belonging to unremembered owners. In 1981, a video camera—they weren't yet camcorders—would have cost several hundred dollars. It was an item that would have satisfied the American appetite for luxury my family had newly acquired, but would never fully indulge. In fact, there is the urge on my part to use British vernacular to characterize my childhood, primarily because of my parents, though decades, three continents, and mutiny had distilled it. Britain oozed through two mountain ranges, one snowy, the second tropical, down to the tear shaped isle of Ceylon, where it instructed my father and mother in the King's proper English. Thus, it would be conceivable to describe our indigence as *a la Dickens*, though we found ourselves in Washington D.C., and my parents were no longer British subjects.

My father typically slept standing up either preparing for a minimum wage shift or returning from one; my mother charged friends and neighbors for the task of babysitting their children, although she bullied and teased more than she acted as custodian. One reliable gauge of poverty is innovation; my father resourcefully invented hot dog curry, a dish he made with sliced hot dogs when there wasn't money for real meat.

In the video I perform *barathanatym*, classical Indian dance—akin to ballet in decorum and cultural import while not as sedate in costume. Although this particular dance, the Peacock Dance, is a folksy number requiring a large cast, I am alone in the footage and soundless, the quavering dubbed voice is that of my dance instructor,

Rani Auntie. I am unsmiling—which is appropriate for well-behaved Indian children—even grim.

I soberly execute the moves, arms making swooping overhead motions, fingers pursed together in shadow puppet shapes. A bright light blanches my skin, making me shades lighter than I really am. Beside me is the couch my father inherited from a Holiday Inn lobby, staple-gunned with an itchy brown fabric. Speckled on it and all over the carpet are remains of household disarray: a purple comb, a plastic toy gun, several empty cassette tape cases. Nothing has been cleaned up for posterity except me.

There are 22K gold bracelets and necklaces looped around my limbs, dangly gold earrings that drape across my cheek and attach to my nose and even more pure gold tracing the traditional middle part in my hair till the chain crowns in a pendant on my forehead. This I know all belonged to my family. In India, gold is not always a marker of wealth; rather, when it amounts to a few rings and bangles embedded with plastic looking faux stones, it translates only as evidence of family, a relative who considered you enough to save and not to sell whatever negligible inheritance was bequeathed to them.

## Chapter One

The year before I entered kindergarten I was preoccupied with a single worry: how to avoid the charge of masturbation launched at me daily by my mother. It was a peculiar crime to charge a four year old with—how old I was when it started—but I knew, like most children, what to do with vague accusations: dodge first, then deny. It became a full time racket. As Child and Housewife, my mother and I spent uninterrupted weeks together to our mutual vexation, though in a kind of joint venture. We, Brown Child and Recently Immigrated Wife, were wrestling mainly with each other, yes, but also with the confounding chore of living an American life.

Each morning I woke to her flushing mousetrapped mice down the toilet or clanging yesterday's dirty pots while she sang along with a Tamil song from the hundreds of cassettes she stockpiled. Occasionally, in a moment of uncommon cheeriness, she would warble Culture Club's *Karma Chameleon*. When she discovered the Eurhythmics—another band typical of the 80's, complete with androgynous lead singer—I would hear her thin voice an octave above comfort, more haunting than Annie Lennox's deep intonation, *Sweet dreams are made of these... who am I to disagree?*

One morning, I heard a pause in her fractious noise making and quickly slithered back into bed from the windowsill where I had been on tiptoe observing a pigeon. Underneath the covers, I tried to achieve the motionless of sleep. I always faked sleep; there is a photograph of me, eyes serenely shut though I am sitting upright in a chair, my hands seized around a children's encyclopedia. Caught for posterity as a reader and an actress.

From beneath the chilly sheets, I heard Amma's pounding heels. Though small, she lacked light-footedness. Around the house Amma wore the drawstring cotton slippers women tucked their saris into. They didn't swish the way pants might nor did they rustle like a heavier fabric would; Amma could have been quite stealth if it weren't for her manly stomp. Despite my charade of sleep, I could not keep still. I quaked from the sheets' coolness. Moreover, I had yet to learn that feigning sleep required a slackness in the eyelids, a drop in the jaw. I, on the other hand, simply shut my eyes and hoped for an undemanding inspection.

"Ehne punnah?" What are you doing? Amma asked. She crossed the room as soon as she saw that I was awake.

What *was* I doing? I should have stayed at the window, I scolded myself.

Amma whipped my blanket aside. She loomed over me, her arm outstretching the blanket like a matador's cape. When she found me shivering, arms hugging ashy knees, nightgown pulled primly to my equally white ankles, she was relieved.

"I'm *cold*." I tried to glare, but her eyes were impossible targets. Having already dropped the blanket to the floor—where it would remain, we never made beds—she spun out of the room. I had been found innocent again, though I was not gaveled out of guilt once and for all. A string of future auditions awaited me, at least as numerous and predictable as the succession that preceded this one. I would inadvertently tumble onto this stage again and once there, naked in the tub or caught with my hands tucked in corduroy pockets, a spotlight would freeze me and accuse, what are you *doing*?

“Come,” she echoed as she disappeared down the slender hall, adding, “What are you doing in there alone?”

I returned to the window, now empty of the pigeon I had been dancing with. Before Amma had heard me, inches from the bird through the glass, I had been imitating its bobbing throat, undulating like the neck of an *Barathanatym* dancer. There was little to make the pigeon skittish. Long gone school children left the courtyard vacant and the rest of neighborhood was just beginning to wake.

Despite the cheerless start to the day, I was happy. The sun had sympathetically frosted Langley Park’s brick tenements with an orange glow and I could count only two “bad guys,” idling in the courtyard, anonymous black men I had already learned to label dangerous though the unkind acts I’d witnessed always involved white players. Today the sunny emptiness of the courtyard made them appear above misgiving, too. I felt safe. I sped to the living room to find Amma before she got suspicious.

Amma had accusations for everyone in our family excepting my older brother who was regularly beaten, but recognized in some way for his wholesomeness and general decency. For example, according to Amma my father allegedly—and magically, I mocked when I was old enough—found huge sums to surreptitiously send home to his female cousins back in Trincomali. My father had no family, neither in this hemisphere nor in the geography of his birth other than those cousins and my mother begrudged him even those.

This imaginary fraudulence prompted her to bizarre retaliation. She would not bathe for weeks, coming to bed oily and smelling, due to her predatory sense of

timing, of menstrual blood. During the last days of the month, Appa had to be alert or else lose that month's MasterCard bill or worse, some correspondence about the status of the elusive green card. My father was mild and often jolly, but inevitably, despite his unwillingness, they would brawl. Now and then something would prompt her to be unusually creative, like the day she scrawled a bedroom wall in red crayon.

“Who is going to paint? Who has time?” Appa had the habit of expressing anger in questions. “Paint is free?”

Appa stopped unraveling his tie as he waited for her answer. His outfits never wavered: button down, slacks and cheap dress shoes. Even under the hood of a car he never wore jeans. He didn't own sneakers.

“Ask your spoiled cousins for the money.” Amma replied. She couldn't help herself.

“Why?” Appa crowed, arm cocked beside his neck, ready to slap. “Why would I send money, when my own children cannot eat?”

Amma stood with her arms folded, braced against the gas stove. The kitchen—a linoleum cubby whose walls were yellowed from years of frying grease—was where she was when Appa found her artwork, a mural that spanned the entire length of our bedroom. She never shied from these scimmages. She would be as ungiving as a fort, almost courageous, even when Appa left her sullen and sanctimonious with black eyes.

“You think I am machine?” He inched closer, infuriated by her staring.

She continued to gape.

“Working, working, working,” he barked. “For fun?” He volunteered his disbelief around the room to invisible onlookers. “For *fun*, she thinks I am working?”

She responded inaudibly from where I stood in the living room, and Appa shot out of my view deeper into the kitchen.

A fleshy thud.

Then another?

Amma yelled, at once wild and helpless, and despite agreeing with Appa’s fury, I filled with protective pity for her. Kneeling on the couch, I began to bounce, ramming my knees into the cushions, using my arms to thrust me down hard. The springs twinged musically. In the kitchen, a tin tumbler danced riotously to the floor. Panic forced me to cry out, “Appa!” I regretted it immediately.

“Ehnethe?” What is it? Appa swung his furious attention towards me, recharged.

I had no reason to fear my father. Even if he chose to hit me then, it would have been a short affair, more thunderous chase than actual smack. His beatings were always one hit wonders followed by shy, pleading apologies. Sorry, ma, he would say, sheepish. The appeals of good-looking people are difficult to snub and Appa was as conventionally handsome as Ricky Ricardo. As a teenager my brother would sprout with a clearly inherited but amalgamated beauty, a more regal nose, a more sandalwood than ginger skin tone, a slightly weaker chin that he began disguising early with a fearsome goatee. He, too, like Appa was hard to reject when he beseeched in earnest.

If my brother and I were especially obstinate, Appa might oil our forgiveness with a trip to McDonalds or an invitation for a ride. *Vanga, ma*. Come with me dear. We would join him on some errand to the junkyard or hardware store and return with gnarled McDonald's nuggets. Only my mother beat with vacuum cleaner cords and wire hangers and did so without remorse.

Regardless, it was Appa, pivoted at the hip, one foot in the kitchen, the other aimed at me, who was ready to pounce in either direction. A devilish caricature had replaced my father's normally pleasant face and I felt an overall fear, unspecific to this particular moment.

I ducked beneath the couch and peed an oval on the carpet.

Crouched over the wet warmth, I could now hear Appa slamming his forehead against a wall as unwavering as a metronome. I relaxed. It was one of a few familiar decrescendos to these fights. Sometimes he simply sat in the living room as if nothing unusual had happened, the only indication of war being the lifeless television—which was perpetually on—and Amma scowling as she dutifully swept the butter-colored polka dots of lentils that had been spilled.

Widening my stance over the spreading stain, I waited for my father to stop cussing his life. Then, as he sighed and hissed like a deflating tire, I got rags to clean up the mess of my piss.

My mother had adorned the bedroom wall with a cavernous ten-foot mouth that represented, with hyperbole, what Amma believed to be my affected, saccharine disposition. Unlike my brother who was mischievous, I had the demeanor of child who was aware of the universal adorability children can employ to hold attention

from grown ups. Even now I have little sense of what was peculiar to my mother's universe and what might otherwise be characterized as ideals genuine to her culture—which at times can feel about as antediluvian as beating laundry on a rock—but at the time I was not conflicted on the subject. My lack of shyness was a problem. I was six going on seventeen. What Americans call precocious. Stated differently, I had a big mouth, especially for a little Indian girl.

This was a result of two forces, my mother explained. I was *chellum*, Tamil for spoiled and worse, I was too American. How could I have no shyness? I approached any uncle's handshake, a grave impropriety in my mother view, evidence—to her, and perhaps with some fairness it was—of a self-conscious sexuality. I chatted too comfortably with adults, joked with them without the timid diffidence associated with little girls. Where was my shyness? I never demurred, never balked at a question, never coyly hid behind my mother's sari. If shyness was a byproduct of innocence, they were both, necessarily, absent in me.

More importantly to Amma perhaps was how this peculiar confidence overlapped into my interactions with her nemesis: Appa. I had the indecency to be attached to him. Did I see my female cousins lounge in their father's lap? Did they trail him to the Laundromat, the Safeway, to the junkyard of all places? Like a boy? To be fair, my mother's was an unremarkable jealousy, one that I would see bloom from many mother-daughter relationships framed by bad marriages. The oedipal can be found all over.

Days after that last skirmish, Amma was still annoyed with me. When Appa left for his night shift at the Holiday Inn, I parked myself a few feet from the oven-

sized television to watch *Dukes of Hazard*, where the only characters of color were outsiders either visiting or marauding. Next was *Night Rider*.

When pulsing theme music indicated that David Haselhoff, somehow both virile and harmless, had solved another crime, I knew the night was mostly over. KITT, his chatty Firebird, cruised through the desert, the digital ticker on his hood throbbing like a heartbeat. It was ten o'clock, time for bed. At first, I waited for Amma to sigh, flap her magazine closed and progress to our bedroom. When this did not occur, I turned to a book. Soon, the book could no longer sway my lids. It was time for bed.

“I want to sleep.” I sat stubbornly at her feet on the kitchen floor eating plain rice from the rice cooker, grouchy from drowsiness.

“Your brother can sleep alone,” said Amma. Noting my look of chagrin, she continued, “Why can’t you?”

I had no response. It was true that Anna slept alone in the tiny second room. I would have gladly slept there too, in the twin bed reserved for my grandfather’s visits, but it was “not nice” for brothers and sisters to sleep alone together. This didn’t seem to translate in India, however, where whole families shared bedrooms and even pallets. I slept, as I would into my early adolescence, between my parents in their bedroom, hemmed by their snoring and leg twitching. I was too scared to sleep there—in a twin shoved against a full—unaccompanied.

Her feet were cracked with deep canyons, so dry they scraped across the floor as she clanked glass—mayonnaise jars filled with turmeric and cumin and coriander

left over from recent days' meal preparations—into cupboards too tall for her to reach.

“Why won't you go?” Amma repeated. “I will come.”

At thirty-three, Amma was more like an ornery older sibling than parent. She rarely bossed me but was instead desperate to be free, however briefly, of needy children and the disorder we left behind. Flanking her now were towers of dirty dishes. Everywhere were the remnants of cooking: spills dried into crust on the stove, every kind of container sat out of place, and the cabinet doors stood open, exposing leaking sacks of spices and sticky discharges of syrup. This last indolence, baffling in its excess, would hound me as an adult. Though I would unsurprisingly become a cleanliness nut, my kitchen would always hold several yawning cupboards—though their contents would be tidy.

“Then I won't come,” she threatened when I refused to leave. She closed her eyes. “I'll sleep in the kitchen.”

That was fine with me. I pulled open a cabinet door to partition the room, thinking we had arrived at a solution. “You stay on that side.”

Unfortunately, I had left Amma the half of the kitchen that included the doorway to the rest of the apartment.

“You wait for your Appa, then. Shyam and I will run away,” she replied, unable to control her giggles. She darted out of the room, triumphant in her luck. I didn't puzzle over Appa's haphazard inclusion in our fight. He was a given in all of our tussles.

I knew when I was beat, when Amma had to be waited out. I went to the bedroom and sat with the light on. Intermittently, I heard the papery scratch of pages turning in the living room. Outside, there was the occasional burst of rowdiness, teenaged boys shouted at each other from their stoops. The Good Humor truck jingle-jangled by, mysteriously selling ice cream in the dark. Fear forced my eyes to remain open, while I boiled from Amma's indifference. Crimson jaws smirked at me from the wall, the crayon smile making the room look as if it belonged to an unruly child.

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Shyam was my parents' name for my brother—a fact that provoked acute resentment from me; I desired the likeability implied in a nickname. Though his first name was Alfred—proof that Indian parents have the propensity to match their children's names like a set—I had to call him Anna, a title that literally meant Older Brother. My concept of Brother was inseparable from the maleness I wished I owned. I was anguished over missing tackle football and being compelled to wear dresses when it was time to look nice. I wanted to be a boy. Amma was no less irritated by my attachment to Anna than she was with my fidelity to our father. Despite Amma's attempts to segregate us into two camps, Anna was as devoted to our father as I was. Once he even hid himself in Appa's Plymouth and rode undiscovered until Appa heard him tittering under a blanket, halfway to the Holiday Inn.

Anna's relationship with our mother was more amiable than mine, though he suffered more brutally than I ever did. Their bond had been established in isolation; he lived in Ceylon with our mother prior to my birth during Appa's three-year departure to the US. On the stormy island, in the five years before I was born my

brother had lived a lifetime without either Appa or me; only he knew how Amma reacted to being left on a jungle beach during a civil war while her groom embarked on an American adventure without her.

Anna, like most big brothers, was a newspaper. His authority was conveyed to me most powerfully by his black and white baby pictures. Anna, I was impressed to see, was old enough to be photographed in the forgiving nostalgia of black and white. The photos were squarish, some even with scalloped trim; in them, our mother usually looks sour—she never bothered to fake a smile, her face was melancholy in posed and candid shots. My brother is naked and our father is notably absent, having gone to the States shortly after Anna's birth like many Indian men after the dismantling of US immigration quotas, to find work.

Anna was no sweeter than most boys his age and certainly no less tough than the baby thugs in our neighborhood, but he had a core of integrity that even then was obvious. The only notable thing about me, on the other hand, was my exuberant self-importance. Even my love of books could not save me since I was eternally too engrossed in them to sweep the floor or observe how to cook a dish. Not that Anna, either by his goodness or by his intimacy with Amma during those years in Ceylon, was shielded from her ire. Like everyone she recognized how special he was, but that realization made no imprint on her patience.

Once when I was a baby Anna asked her for the salt shaker during a rare meal that she had prepared herself, a thin chicken curry with *rasaam*—a watery, spicy soup.

“*Ethehica?*” Why, she wanted to know.

Before he could answer, she located the blue Epson Salt canister with the metal spigot. She poured a saucer full of salt for him—about a half a cup—instructing him not to leave the table until he had eaten all of it, since he liked salt so much.

He sat there, Anna told me, for hours while our mother first read her *Kumathum* magazine, then while she embroidered pillowcases from a pattern of loopy flowers. He licked at the pile, occasionally attempting big mouthfuls that choked him. Streetlights slid through the blinds. Langley Park grew its nightly shadows. I was put to bed. Finally, well beyond *The Dukes of Hazard* and the Nightly News, Anna finished the briny dish and was allowed to go to bed.

I insulted her cooking, he reflected. With peculiar maturity, he spoke of these events—only eleven years old—without anger: can openers flung at his already bleeding face, Amma threatening suicide, informing him he would be to blame if she killed herself with sleeping pills and left him all alone. Who will love you then, she would ask, at once cruel and pathetic. All of these tales dropped from his mouth with the emotion that one gives a sad but distant story—like hearing about a mudslide in Malaysia or a plane crash in Sweden. Unfortunate, regrettable, but expected in the eventuality of things.

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That fall, to my relief, I started kindergarten. I recognized it immediately as a loan of time where I could perform what I understood to be a normal child. I happily left behind, like many kids do, the private humiliations of home, praying they would remain in place and out of view. Broad Acres Elementary was my theater, unpleasant

at times with its patrols and snapping teachers, but an enjoyable charade nonetheless. Here I was just a sassy little girl. Maybe even cute.

Not that Amma didn't intrude on my haven. Her outlandish mistrust extended beyond me to other children as well, though it usually aimed itself at my black schoolmates.

"Stay away from that nasty girl," Amma ordered by the second week of school. She pointed through the swirling mass of playground children: Kelly, a toothy black girl whose two piggy-tail puffs I envied. Amma was inept at all forms of grooming and I was forced to rig my own plain ponytail everyday. Kelly had somehow earned my mother's disgust in the few minutes before school officially started, most likely because she did not stop grinning once. Amma labeled her nasty, her word for the sexuality she thought I would exhibit if unwatched.

When the bell signaled the school day, I timed my walk to the door so that I would be at the end of the line, as far from Kelly as possible. I knew Amma, still behind me at the fence, would be vigilant.

Inside freedom flooded me like a warm drink, though my teachers—Ms Diamond, fittingly sharp-beaked and angular, and Ms. Brown, as drab as her name indicated—seemed to dislike my personality as much as Amma.

I *was* irritating. Though I still carried a heavy accent—Tamil being my inaugural language—I had taught myself to read by the time I was four, the lucky culmination to the rather sad pattern of too much *Sesame Street* and too many afternoons spent watching Amma absorbed in her magazines. I could read whatever my teachers left lying around—to their dismay—and having deciphered how they

rotated groups, I would skip group gatherings and wait presumptuously by the appropriate station. I designated myself teacher's pet without the necessary sanction from said teacher. They scolded me—fairly—for mixing the other kids up with my daily disruptions. Or perhaps they chaffed, legitimately, at my desire to be acknowledged above my peers. My teachers did what they were compelled to do, both emotionally and pedagogically: they tried their best to mitigate my ego at the expense of my ego.

Fat chance. Somehow—and by somehow I do not mean to be coy but to wonder sincerely, *how?*—they could not shake me of my self-importance whatever its alien source. I guess that Amma's unfailing certainty that everyone was motivated out of some malevolent biblical urge—greed, jealousy, lust—prevented me at least in part from taking their criticisms seriously. If my own mother could be so wrong about what crept in my heart, then why should I buy censure from strangers?

Once they took us to the Thinking Rug, which was just a space on the carpeted floor that made a sloppy round shape. We were told to list as many kinds of cats as we could count. I waited, with conceited endurance, for lion, tiger, and cheetah to pass.

“Rosie,” said Shannon. Shannon, whom I knew because he lived porches away, was affectionate because he was well-loved. His room was packed with Hot Wheels racetracks, gerbil and parakeet cages and whole militaries of action figures. Though he lived with just his mother—his father mostly just a happy face in frame—he was always jolly. His mother, creamy and young, encouraged me to call her Yvonne. She, unlike Amma, never suspected Shannon and me whatever game we

concocted in his room. His innocence only compounded with her confidence in it. A few years later when he visited me during puberty, his crushing hugs were platonic but I could not stop myself from tensing at the thought of being embraced by a boy.

“She’s *my* cat,” Shannon explained to the rest of our kindergarten class.

I felt the time was right. There were no other options. I swelled at the prospect of awing everyone.

“Lynx,” I nominated proudly. I scanned Ms. Brown for a hint that she was impressed.

“We’re just naming cats, Alice,” Ms. Brown scolded, her face dimpled by how tightly she pursed her lips at me. She started to call on another child.

“That *is* a cat,” I insisted. I was certain. From somewhere, Appa procured dated copies of *National Geographic*, a magazine I knew did not deal in fantastical creatures.

“If it is,” Ms. Brown replied sarcastically, settling for me the absurdity in believing adults always knew better, “then it’s one *I’ve* never heard of.”

Steaming, I vowed to locate a book with a photo of the cat in question. The book mobile from White Oak’s library came once a week, a generosity born in Maryland at the turn of the century. Mary Titcomb’s original drive had been to spread books to adults in rural areas. In Langley Park, the once book “wagon” brought reading to the children of ghetto burbs. Every Thursday a crowd of us kids would walk four blocks to where the book mobile parked for two hours.

On one such trip, Sally shocked me. Despite the sexuality of my invented crimes, I didn't believe Sally when she offered me her limited understanding of sex while we walked to the book mobile stop.

Sally was the object of my mother's total adoration, being better than white by being Jewish. She had, in Amma's view, the prominence of white people without the rough absence of culture she thought typical of Americans. Sally could even read Hebrew. Anna and I could only speak our native Tamil and even that was with an increasingly American accent. Moreover, Sally's ethnicity was both biblical and tropical. To my mother, religious and homesick, Sally was talisman.

I liked Sally, too. She and her ever-growing brood of siblings were scrappy and unabashedly nosy. When the Chinese family upstairs threw out their wayward daughter—an American teenager with jeans and short punk hair—Sally and her siblings hustled to the sidewalk to shamelessly watch her assemble her duffle bags and unsmudge her eyeliner.

I especially enjoyed the freedom I could employ in her company. Though Anna was somewhere ahead of us amongst his own Huffy-riding friends, Sally and I enjoyed some independence on the long walk to the book mobile. She started to share.

“They put their thing,” she pointed at the crotch of her jeans, “in here.”

I giggled out of politeness, though I didn't believe her. She was just being nasty. I would have tattled on Sally with the mean hope that I could shrivel her image in Amma's eyes, but there was no way to introduce the subject without indicting myself in the conversation. Moreover, I enjoyed being Sally's friend. Once I spent a

whole afternoon at a local park with her large family—four younger siblings, including Simon whose proficiency in vulgarity matched the older boys my brother knew. Dribbling ice cream cone in their station wagon on the ride home, it was the first time I felt the painful urge to be part of someone else's normalcy. I would covet it years later with white families who were uncomfortable with me, though I would never seek the same refuge with my black friends. Deep down I feared they would sense that I detested my own color and would relate it—naturally, sensibly—to a dislike for theirs.

Sally and I secured a spot on the curb, right where the book mobile would park. Within minutes a neat line had formed, children with flat books wrapped in transparent plastic, parents waiting on the hoods of neighbors' cars. The book mobile was a hollowed metro bus filled with children's and adolescent literature, a hundred books at the most. Though limited, it brought books to children whose parents were unable, for whatever good or worthless reason, to take them to the actual library. When it finally pulled up, the summer sun blushed low from behind tree branches. We gave our usual cheer and muscled into its crowded space.

I headed directly to the shelf with Judy Blume's books. Head cocked to read the perpendicular titles, I became giddy at the prospect of entering some girl's world of acceptable American problems. I scanned the covers for the accoutrements of normal young womanhood: spiral bound notebooks splayed across a desk, a window seat, a languid cat coiled on a patterned bedspread. I longed for those mundane objects, to lie on my stomach or with my hands on my hips and be this regular white girl with a pensive look. The covers were always drawn in the lusterless Technicolor

shades that made real life figures look slightly cartoonish and therefore appropriate for children. I daydreamed in those faded colors, wishing for divorce and bullies.

I greedily read Blume's amatory books, novels that traversed the rocky, libidinous terrain of pubescent life, though I understood nothing of puberty or its mechanics. Like pimples or cancer, I thought the production of babies was caused by biological luck; if you were lucky, you'd be married when your body decided to yield one. Being unmarried and pregnant was a transgression contingent on chance and I only hoped I would not be luckless. What I did not understand about menstruation or sexuality, I simply read over, although I knew enough to skirt certain buzzwords.

That evening, I read my new book, *Tiger Eyes*, aloud to my mother. When I came across the line, *He was the first person she ever had sex with*, I acted with instinct.

"He was the first person she ever had *bex* with," I read, satisfied by my quick thinking. Bex sounded like a real word.

"What?" Amma hoisted herself up from where she was laying.

I pretended to run my eyes over the page. "He was the first person she ever had bex with," I repeated. When I looked up, I gave her two big blinks. She took the book.

That night I hugged Appa's belly while he shaved for work. I squeezed enough to hurt my forearms, then I let go.

"Bring me some candy," I ordered. I hopped onto the toilet to watch him roll his razor around his face for the second time that day. Appa was stocky, but had the looks of what Indians call a "film star." Though he had an overbite, his smile was at

once wide and sad. With his thick black coif and jaw sculpted as square as a box, he looked a little like cartoon gangster to me.

“Alice,” Appa cautioned though his eyes still appraised the mirror, “that kind of book is no good for you.”

I flinched with humiliation. To have Appa think of me as nasty was a shame I could not stomach. I muttered an okay and dashed off. Until then Amma’s accusations were private. The thought of Appa viewing me as the dirty monster Amma saw was a punch in the throat.

Judy Blume notwithstanding, I could use reading to get out of nearly any duty since books were tangentially related to school and school was the ultimate endorsement. Connect an afternoon activity or laziness to school and you were in the clear. It wasn’t that Amma and Appa valued education in any concrete way; Amma had not graduated high school and Appa had only done so. They simply understood that school was The Ticket, The Key. It was the sole reason my father trekked across continents alone, the only motivation my mother had for trickling behind years later. Indian children were characteristically obedient, yes, but even more importantly they were smart. They became doctors. Any deviation was treason.

Books were therefore good by definition, even if I didn’t always demonstrate the sense to select the suitable ones. I read rabidly, mimicking my mother who sometimes ditched her magazines to tackle thick novels like *Dr. Zhivago* and *Mill on the Floss*. She devoured Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* in less than a week, though it took her longer to get over the book’s sadism and language. More than anything she loved the Tamil gossip magazines Appa brought home from his job as a clerk at the

Indian Embassy—a job I once confused with his being a diplomat. It wasn't until Anna asked me with great sarcasm, “Why would we be living in Langley Park if Appa had an important job?” that the tumblers of logic rotated into place. Langley Park was the hood.

Anna, having the luck to be not just older but also a boy, was permitted to freely rove in Langley Park, a one-mile swath of low-income brick tenements and compact ranchers. There were the typical numbers of drug dealers and hoodlums, and the standard amounts of trash associated with the ghetto, but also a sense of non-white community. By the late seventies, the area had already become linked by bands of shopping centers devoted to the necessities of its brown, black and yellow populations. Although the area would eventually become predominantly Latino, initially Langley Park's population was mostly Black. This shifted long after its postwar establishment, when commercial real estate adjusted. There was the recently developed International Mall—which failed to ever fill to its capacity—and countless small businesses: India Emporium, Maxim Asian Market, India Sari Palace, The Latino Video Rental, Gomez International Travel Services. And there was always the Nicaraguan lady who sold papooses from a handcart on an island on University Boulevard, just miles west of the sculpted lawns of the University Maryland.

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During recess the day we received our class photos, Ms. Diamond warned us to stay on the blacktop away from all the playground equipment. There had been a stabbing in the yard and the body had been placed the previous night, with some

effort, onto the slide. In an unusual act of disclosure, Anna had relayed the information; teachers had judged sixth graders old enough for gory truth.

“Wasn’t somebody killed here last night?” I asked. When I told my classmates, they had not leaned forward with awe as I had expected. They didn’t believe me.

“Never mind, Alice.” Looking upward, Ms. Diamond inhaled slowly, and shrugged her shoulders at Ms. Brown, whose face aped hers. She did not give me her back and instead allowed me to see, from my lowly vantage, her mouth, “What a brat.”

I considered the murder only after school had been let out for the morning and Amma did not appear as she normally did to walk me the three blocks home. I assumed her absence was due either to her inability to remember a daily task or her willingness to neglect me. That, or I was being punished for a recent failure of mine. I envisioned my mother phoning the school to inquire about the class photo.

“Yes, this is Alice’s mom,” she would announce with careful pronunciation and an affected falsetto meant to imply politeness and female gentility. Amma was always very deliberate with her phone voice. I would often hear her from another room practicing hellos. She was, like all other Indian adults I knew, obsessed with exhibiting to white authority figures the gracious propriety she had gleaned from her brief British schooling in Sri Lanka. It was meant to distinguish her from other folks with whom she might be unwillingly lumped.

“What can I do for you, Mrs. Sandosharaj?”

“Today, did Alice get the school picture?” my mother would ask.

“Yes.”

“Where, can you tell me, is Alice sitting?”

I had been seated, quite unexpectedly, beside a grinning and navy-suited Kelly.

After waiting with the anxiety particular to children who are not picked up exactly when they had anticipated, I geared myself for the short walk home. Feeling as brave and remarkable as a soldier, I was preparing to confront murderers and menacing older kids when I saw Amma pushing a baby stroller, trailed by what appeared to be a fourth grader. Amma had a plain face though she was quite fair—a big factor in Indian looks. She had small eyes that squinted whenever she smiled or frowned or changed expression at all. At the sight of her, I released my shoulders and unclenched my mouth.

“You forgot me,” I declared, already forgetting the guilty class photo in my book bag.

“No, ma,” said Amma. She smiled sympathetically, touched that I would feel deserted. “One lady came today, must be a Spanish lady.”

She nodded at the baby girl in the stroller, a happy-faced two year old with faint ribbons of blood vessels in her cheeks. Her mother was an attractive but bedraggled housepainter who had knocked on our door at random, searching for any trustworthy looking woman to watch her two kids so she could avoid being fired that day. She was, by force of unforgiving circumstance, both desperate and reckless, and Amma felt for this workingwoman a pity she could not feel for her husband. Amma’s

empathies were polar; she had little for most occasions but periodically she was moved to extravagant gestures by her understanding of propriety.

“What could I do?” Amma concluded.

Rani and Brett joined a somewhat motley assemblage of Indian children who came on various days to be babysat by Amma. Poor Brett was the oldest, relegated to playing childish games with much younger children. He would have loved to tag along with Anna but had no bike, at least none at our place; furthermore, the span between twelve and nine were dog years. At nine, Brett was too young for the grown up antics of sixth graders.

Instead of pedaling off with Anna, every afternoon he trucked in to eat the frozen pizzas his mother left. He joined the rest of us, but with reluctance. We would record ourselves a tape recorder—like Amma did when she airily sang Tamil songs. Brett was happiest then, doing a Howard Cossell impression that we all pretended to recognize. Some afternoons we played dress up with dirty laundry though only when Sally was around. Otherwise, Amma was leery about us kids gathered in the storage room, rooting for clothes in our underwear.

The stray cat we kept, whom we fed but never allowed inside, provided some entertainment, too. I recall nothing of Punitha’s color or shape really, only that she had a loving demeanor especially for a stray. She was not guarded like most outdoor cats. Both Amma and Appa recoiled at the thought of allowing her inside; in the hospitable climate of Ceylon, there was never any reason to keep a pet indoors. Still, Appa bought cans of cheap cat food every week and served it to Punitha on the porch.

We played with her roughly but without meanness, chasing her with water pistols or setting her high in a tree just to watch her slither down.

Sometime during our play, we would begin teasing Brett, bolstered by Amma's dislike for him. Often she would even join in, at least until we made Brett cry. It is the only memory I have of being unkind to another child. Brett had done nothing to incur Amma's contempt. He suffered the worst out of all us, having no recourse from his tormentors. The rest of us could, at least theoretically, complain to Amma if another child pestered us too fiercely. Sometimes Amma would punish Brett—though she never disciplined anyone else—by relegating him to a chair where he would sit all afternoon, full of angry despair, while we tried to pull more tears out of him. Then we would run off—perhaps to the dumpsters in search of usable trash—and leave him alone with his ugly fate.

Though the other children did not suffer like Brett, neither did they receive tender care. Most of them were children of co-workers Appa shuttled to work at the Embassy. He did this for extra money, as he repaired their cars, fixed their plumbing and did even some of their electrical work, debugging flaky television sets and installing ceiling fans. Appa was handy. Sometime before my memory he had taken a few classes on car mechanics; as a child he ordered transistor radios to crack them apart so he could find a way to raise them from the dead. His abilities were so prodigious that his friends often joked—sadly, I thought—that he should have been a designer of bridges, a builder of infrastructure. Amma resented his talents, the time he spent at other people's houses, and the gratitude he earned.

What scorned her worst was that Appa's aptitude for knowing how things worked applied even to the womanlier realm of chores. His curry had layers of flavor, unlike hers, which was simply hot or conversely, bland. Frequently, he was the one who made the lunches he brought to work at the Embassy. When his co-workers sampled his meals, they made sure to tell him to compliment his wife: her *sambar* was the best they had ever tasted. Amma learned about the ruse at some function, smiling stiffly as some uncle praised her for dishes so robust she knew she had never cooked them.

In this way, Appa humiliated her while at the same time freeing her from her obligations. Since his meals were far tastier and his work ethic so superior, she rarely cooked, never learned to navigate the Laundromat, scarcely saw her husband, and seldom did more than read and spend her days children, each—even her own—unfamiliar in their Americaness. Our apartment, filled with the discarded hotel furniture Appa hauled home, was always Armageddon as Amma grew more isolated in what must have seemed to her an ugly, husbandless, asphalt world.

## Chapter Two

Our first trip alone was to the discount store, Zayres. Amma pulled a few firsts amongst Indian women in our community, though envy of Appa and disinterest with housework—not feminist liberation—propelled her. She would eventually, for example, acquire her drivers' license—after six grueling attempts—before nearly all of the Indian women in our community. Later, she would total five cars, managing somehow to never hit anything unless it was one of our other cars, a tree, a road island or a ditch. It made you wonder if she was crashing cars deliberately. How else could one manage to obliterate vehicle after vehicle without injury to any one else? She was consistently contrite afterwards, however, humbly accepting our denunciations and swearing off the radio and speeding as evil vices.

She started her exploits on the Metro bus with me in tow. Amma dressed in a polyester sari, wore the eyeglasses—spectacles—that she despised, and donned sandals because socks and walking shoes were still too alien to her. I was put insensibly in a dress—frock—, most likely one she had stitched herself.

On the bus, I smelled gasoline.

“I feel dizzy,” I said and leaned over into Amma's lap. Her sari had the gritty feel of cheap panty hose.

“Look out the window.” Amma nudged me off her lap. “You don't have to act cute,” she added quietly in Tamil.

I sat up. Hurt, I did what I always did, what I could not even stop myself from doing. I read. I scoured the front of the bus for things to read. A sign above our heads read: These seats reserved for Disabled and Elderly Persons. Persons? Wasn't the

correct plural of person, people? I mentioned this to Amma, but she assured me that this, too, was correct.

I turned my attention to the signs we passed as we crept up New Hampshire Avenue towards Zayres. I found one sign curious in its informality. It sounded like slang. The sign stood alone on a triangular shaped road island. *No littering*, it stated. Beneath that, *\$1000 Fine*. I had never encountered the word fine as a noun and interpreted the sign to mean that generally no one was permitted to litter there, but for one thousand dollars, fine! Litter all you want. I was about to point the oddly unofficial sign, when Amma reached to tug the yellow stop cord. It made its muted *dink*, though we were still blocks from Zayres.

“Shouldn’t we get off later?” I asked. The store was a hike away; we were only as far north as the Presidential Towers Apartment Complex. “Closer?”

Amma pinched an inch of fleshy tenderness from the underside of my arm. Her thumb nail dug in, isolating strands of painful fat. Then she gathered her purse.

Amma rarely wore her much needed glasses and outside of the few buildings around our apartment complex, she never knew where she was, how far anything might be, how to get there or how to get back. Often Anna and I would taunt her during car rides, asking her which way do we turn to get home? How far are we from Sears? What happens if we go keep going straight here? Then we would shake our heads, feeling worldly like our father who already knew the intricate loops of D.C., the unmarked roads in Rock Creek and nearly all of Maryland and nearby VA.

Fortunately, this was a straight walk north. We broiled in the sun the rest of the distance. Beside us thrashed the heavy traffic of New Hampshire Avenue, cars

slicing on and off the D.C. Beltway. It wasn't until I was much older that I figured out that living inside the Beltway did not mean I lived in DC. The metropolitan Washington area was what I heard about on the news, the name of the newspaper we read, where the museums were and where Appa went to work. I thought DC was everywhere.

Though there was a sidewalk and even other perambulators, I was mortified to on foot on New Hampshire Avenue. This was no dawdling stroll; we were walking because Amma had no car of her own. I imagined a menacing pity from the cars idling at intersections. We have a car, I wanted to tell them. We don't always have to walk.

Amma held her handbag over her head the entire time, fifteen minutes or so, to shade her face. Her skin was as light as peanut butter, as was Anna's, whereas I was whiskey dark like my father.

"You should drink a lot of milk, ma," she advised. I could tell she wished she had brought a cap to wear. "It will keep you fair."

I nodded, having heard this speech innumerable times, usually when I played too long in the sun. Dark and ugly were synonyms, I knew.

At the store, I roamed the aisles in dazzling florescent light, a row or two from Amma. I lingered at the Ken dolls only until I saw Amma coming; Barbie was scandalous enough with her nubile curves. Hanging on a wall with other cellophane-bagged dolls, I spotted an imitation Barbie sporting a yellow bathing suit. One piece. She was a cheap doll, the kind with hollow limbs and torso.

"Amma?" I held out the package. "Can I have this?"

It would be the first of two such dolls in my life, the second being an actual Mattel Brand Barbie doll with snap-shut make-up case; both were white and achingly blond. I must have seen that the doll didn't resemble me at all; and I can only guess that I would have wanted a brown-skinned doll if it were labeled "Indian," but I would not consider a doll with dark skin until I was a few years older for what seemed obvious reasons. Dark-skinned dolls were for black girls. I wasn't black.

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The morning Amma nearly severed her baby toe Punitha had kittens, though we wouldn't find out till the next morning. Despite our friendly excursions around Langley Park, my mother was still eager to be left alone, if only for a few hours. Unlike Anna, who ran with a pack of black boys, I was not always outdoors. I was not always between pages either; sometimes I was around in the unexceptionally bothersome way six year olds are. I plunked myself on the couch, ready for television.

Amma, wanting to watch what she considered an adult episode of *I Love Lucy*, told me to beat it.

"*Tholay!*" Go away, she ordered, not looking at me. "Play in the other room."

"No."

"*Po yeh?*" Why don't you go? She asked, more to herself than me. She knew why; I was scared to be alone in any room, though our apartment was tiny and divided by only a few walls. I was the quintessential scaredy-cat.

When I refused to leave, wanting either to watch the rerun very badly or simply to disobey what seemed a groundless command, my mother slammed herself up in the bedroom with a smaller black and white TV.

“Fine!” I shouted.

Sitting outside the door, I throttled my urge to taunt her. I am still here, I wanted to say. I can hear the show. I kept quiet, however; my embarrassment at being such a nuisance surpassed my inclination to annoy. I knew I should not have been frightened to play alone, especially in the luminous sunlight of noon.

Later, when Amma tried to open the door, I heard her cussing.

“*Enethe?*” What is this? She asked irritably, unable to pry open the door. It had wedged itself. A lounge chair from Holiday Inn bumped and burped across the floor. From atop it, she tugged at the upper part of the door.

“*Madian!*” Idiot, she cursed and moved the chair back. With another firm yank, the door jerked open, its edge ripping into the flesh between her two smallest toes. The gash was serious—her little toe was nearly guillotined. Days later I would laugh at her with Anna. That’s what you get for being so mean, we’d bait. But there, with her yowling and sizzling her breath, I detonated into tears. It was, after all, my fault.

Waiting for Appa to bring her home from the hospital, my grief ebbed. I felt the luxury of parentlessness. The lighting in the apartment, which usually seemed yellow and dull, now felt cozy. The place was a monastery; the white noise of rain only augmented the quiet. I snuggled on the couch with *Alan Mendelson and the Boy From Mars*.

When I heard Punitha, I was surprised. She never came around after evening, having learned quickly that we would not permit her inside for the night. She rarely mewed or begged or made any audible sounds at all. Now she was in concert. I called for Anna.

“She’s right on the sill,” I said. She had never done that before either.

“She must want something.” Anna replied and returned to his room.

Duh, I thought.

I felt sorry for the animal. Wet and beseeching, her head ducked up and down in an attempt to catch my gaze. I let drop the red sheet of lace we used as curtains.

Later, when Appa brought Amma home, Punitha tried to duck inside between Appa’s feet.

“What is this?” Appa asked, dodging and then giving her a gentle shove onto the stoop. He stood at the window where Punitha had returned, bewildered by her behavior. “Did you feed it?”

“Ahmah.” Yes, Amma answered from the couch. She had glued herself there, bandaged and ornery. “One tuna can.”

Punitha’s recital lasted after Appa departed for work and at least until Amma and I went to bed, probably longer. Her crying blended with the rain, washed away by our indifferent snoring and the steady purr of water surging through drain pipes.

The next morning, the tiny Chinese woman from upstairs beat our screen door against the jamb. It was how she knocked.

“Come,” she directed, waving us to follow her.

In a box beneath her cement porch, beside her granddaughters' two-wheelers, was Punitha and her litter. We crouched there and counted them; Punitha allowing us, despite our fresh apathy, to adjust her while she fed so we could see. Four kittens, each completely different than the others in size, coat and color. We named them unimaginatively: Cutie, Blacky, Scratchy, and Junior. Until we gave them away one by one, Amma agreed to let them stay in the laundry room in a cardboard box she swore she would burn afterwards. I was surprised she had acquiesced.

Although her adjustment was incremental, Amma did adapt. The genderless neutrality of 80's pop music continued to suit her; she grew to love Michael Jackson, claiming that his gyrating reminded her of Elvis. Even the onslaught of icky accusations and his gradual resemblance to sister Latoya, did not sway Amma. She only felt sorry for his strangeness.

Amma was enthusiastic about American customs that concerned Anna and me as long as they were innocuous, which to her meant compatible with British habits of culture. Until the next year I would believe, for example, that Santa Claus had brought me my first perfume, the girlishly pink, phallus-shaped bottle of Love's Baby Soft. When Anna asked me, standing in two feet of pre-Christmas snow, did I really think reindeer could fly? I did not feel duped, as I suspect most children might. Rather I looked towards our mother—perpetually at the window—watching me, Anna, and his friends, dig a snow-tunnel wide enough to fit through. I felt a wistful pang, incongruous for my age and also for my present circumstance: a full-fledged, though temporary, member of Anna's snow tunnel building crew. My mother, I was moved to find out, had gone through the trouble of a charade on my behalf.

When I lost my first tooth, I knew, like most American kids, what the event required of me and what I could look forward to receiving. The next morning, the tooth I had positioned underneath my pillow was gone, but there was nothing left to replace it.

“Amma,” I called from the bedroom. “The tooth fairy forgot.”

“No,” said Amma. She thought I was trying to fool with her. “She took your tooth.”

“But there is nothing else there.” I stood beside her, empty-handed. I was more puzzled than anything. Did I get the free cash part wrong? “She forgot my money.”

Amma considered this. “Maybe,” she said, pulling herself up off the couch. “Let me go see.”

“Go look now,” she said when she returned. “Look better.”

There, beneath my pillow, was a dollar and a pack of Dentyne. I must have suspected the charade then but I didn’t grill her about where she found the goods. I also didn’t mention that Shannon only got a quarter for his detached teeth.

I wiggled my tongue through the window in my mouth, tickled by the electric nerve endings in my sensitive gums. When I tried to suck my thumb, however, the gap made complete suction impossible. This was a problem.

I was a big thumb-sucker, as I would be until my early twenties. No amount of gauze, castor oil or put down could remove that opposable appendage from my mouth. It was too soothing. I would lay awake for hours when I tried to quit sucking my thumb, groggy and tired but unable to sleep. A blister swelled right at the joint of

my thumb, discolored and numb, from where my bottom teeth grated the skin. I didn't care. It was a small, easily disguised defect.

When my brother dashed indoors to grab something, he found me ramming my thumb deep into my face, trying to achieve an airtight seal.

"Why don't you suck on your whole hand?" he asked.

"I lost that tooth." I flexed my lips to show him.

"You're going to lose them all," he teased.

"No, I won't."

"Yes, you will." Anna, like the bulk of big brothers, was a genius at sniffing out aplomb that was really veiled credulity. Worse—and again like most older siblings—he could not resist any good shot at seeing me cry. I, on the other hand, accommodated him too much. It took little to infuriate me beyond consolation, to make me shriek until I lost my voice.

He walked towards the front door, football sandwiched beneath his arm. "First, your teeth will come out at right angles from all your dumb thumb-sucking."

"No—," I started although I didn't know what a right triangle was.

"Then," he interrupted, halfway through the door, "you'll look like Jerry Lewis from the old movies." He jutted his front teeth over his bottom lip in grotesque exaggeration of my over bite, flaring his nostrils for emphasis.

I flipped out.

Anna, realizing that my reaction was only going to escalate, tried—in his own childish way—to reel me back in by inciting me further.

"Keep screaming!" he yelled back. "Come on, *scream!*"

The anger physically jerked in my throat. I hated him.

“Make your throat bleed, stupid!” he goaded, assuming that I would contain myself when I realized how closely my screaming mimicked a toddler’s tantrum.

I would not.

I carried on, long after the matter had passed, long after it had been resolved, long after Amma came in and chastised Anna for his *chetah*—mischievousness—long after I could recall what had agitated me so much. I screeched so much and so regularly that both my parents thought I was crazy. They wondered aloud if I needed professional help. Why did I have to shout like that? What was bothering me so much?

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In my first-second grade split classroom, I was the only child who received a “free” not “reduced” lunch ticket, a distinction I thought warranted merit. Not having to pay felt like an award or at minimum a special arrangement devised just for me. I still had an obnoxious sense of pride, racing the other students in completing work, always beating my closest competitor, Ruben.

“Finished,” I would congratulate myself in a whisper that was loud enough for everyone to hear. Mrs. Sasamore’s student chart, which now seems an unnecessarily overt method of ranking children, stood at the front of the room on an easel. With her red marker I would check off my assignments, creating a new series of marks. My line extended beyond the pack like a supercilious red neck, but only for a few minutes.

My desk was inched forward to the second grade side of the room and by the end of the first quarter I had sped through all the reading groups in the second, third, fourth, and fifth grades. Having never read storybooks, I never felt awed by any book. Books were composed of words and words were easy enough to read. This was strange for my teachers.

I wasn't that bright—not any more so than many other children in my class—I just read unusually well. This now seems easy enough to explain: I had a great deal of practice. If they had asked me why this was so, I think I could have told them. Books were like 3-D television, only I could disappear more completely into those worlds and for larger chunks of time. There were no commercials to disrupt the world of a book; even better, you didn't have to share what was happening with those sitting with you. When I read I fell happily into a hole. My teachers, of course, never asked me why I read so well, they only wanted to determine whether or not all this shuffling to different classrooms was damaging me. I reveled in their constant interrogations.

“Will you read aloud?” instructed a counselor, pen arched over yellow pad.

Sitting amongst sixth graders in the highest reading group the school offered, I read aloud a story about a Danish boy who stuck his finger in a dam to prevent the leak from flooding his town.

The counselor wanted this to be a casual visit. She scooted her chair right beside mine so that, despite the under-sized chair she sat on, her waist approached my shoulders. When she crossed her legs panty hose stretched tight across her knees so that I could see tiny hairs through a grid of cobweb-fine lines. Beneath her thigh, I

saw a sliver of slip. She stared at me pleasantly, as if we were old girlfriends. She was just stopping by. Maybe, just for kicks, she'd guide the discussion.

“Can you answer the first question?” She asked after I had finished.

I did.

“How about the next two?”

The spotlight contracted. This was no ordinary reading group meeting. This quiz was just for me. I waited for the sighs and eye rolls of my much older classmates to wilt before answering correctly.

“Can you read the next question to the whole group?”

I obeyed.

Despite my indisputable performance—I got all the questions right—I was removed from the group and returned to a fourth grade class I had passed in a week.

“She said you didn't look comfortable,” Mrs. Sasamore told me when I asked why I had been put back. “Isn't it easier anyway?”

The administration at Broad Acres Elementary determined that I would gain much more academically and socially if I reread the books I'd read before as opposed to over-exerting myself with reading more skill level appropriate.

My parents were neither notified nor consulted.

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Our family attended to church regularly. My parents were devout enough but surely some of their religiosity was inspired by the fashionability of church in the Indian community. We were Episcopalian, yet another lingering repercussion of British colonialism in our daily lives. As Anglophiles, the Anglican Church was the

right place. They were so conscientious that they even orchestrated my brother's confirmation at the area's most grandiose location, The National Cathedral. In the gift shop afterwards, they purchased a lacquered wooden heart glued with a pair of clasped white hands. Beneath it read: The family that prays together, stays together. The irony of its placement on the wall—beside the nail where Anna would jokingly suspend the wire hanger Amma beat me with—chaffed me even then.

At Church of Our Savior, where I had been baptized, we always sat in the rear left pews, inconspicuous. We slid out immediately after the last hymn was sung, shyly shaking hands with clergy who never learned our names though we would attend faithfully for decades and eventually outlast four reverends. In fact, during the religious period that preceded the agnosticism I would subscribe to as an adult, I would twice preach sermons before the entire congregation during its annual Youth Service. My second effort was inspired; I managed to parabilize a Stephen King short story about an unhappy divorcee who kills herself in a conventional way—by belly flopping from something tall. I twisted the plot into a treatise on faith (though the object of faith in the story is the divorcee's inattentive brother who actually fails her in the end) by hijacking the pattern I had heard Father Black and Father Keopke employ Sunday after Sunday. Here's a story. Now that I've finished, do you remember that one tiny part in the back, near the corner, behind the point? It got me thinking about Jesus. And on and on till the reflective pause and the Amen.

Church of Our Savior was beautifully sculpted in sherbet brick. I spent much of service daydreaming in the building's lofty ceilings, imagining myself leaping from the wooden beams to chandeliers. Light fell through enormous stained-glass

windows, jeweled walls high above the congregation, one facing east, the other west. I marched obediently to Sunday School singing *Jesus Loves Me This I Know* and folded lopsided crosses for Palm Sunday.

I believed in religion, at least the version of it conveyed to me from what parts of the Eucharist I understood, and I feared God, which seemed to be the bottom line. I felt him invading my brain and stalking me, compelling me to behave and punishing me in ways that would have been imperceptible if I didn't already know how closely he was paying attention. The power he wielded was intelligent; he used a weapon he knew I would feel: embarrassment. I knew, for instance, that skidding in my slick Mary Janes after communion blessing—in full view of the entire choir and all the parishioners, not to mention corn-haired Jerry Wamaling—was instant retribution for wishing church would be over already. I wrestled with the fury I felt at this incursion into my privacy, constantly digging for some level of consciousness that either God was not privy to, or I was not accountable for.

My belief in God's moral entitlement was not an affectation, though my piety was. My behavior generally reflected good Christian values—outside of munching chocolate covered malt balls while Appa shopped at the Giant—but I could not restrain my doubt. The veracity of Santa Claus had been easily tested: reindeer obviously could not fly. When I applied the same formulaic logic to Jesus—who performed similar though certainly more grandiose miracles—I felt him eavesdropping from space. I could practically see him parceling out fireballs with my faithless name all over them.

We took many daytrips after church—posing for pictures still dressed in our formal clothing— to the National Zoo, Harper’s Ferry, Sky Line Drive. Appa even took us on mini-vacations to New York, Chicago, Niagara Falls, Orlando, Boston. The trips were truncated and dense; Appa could afford only three days off and he would squeeze in an inhuman number of ferry rides to Ellis Island and hours at Sea World.

In the rental car, Anna and I would rotate for the front seat, though I occasionally recall Amma up front, too. During those times Anna and I would pretend to play with the cheap plastic travel games we had badgered Appa into buying until at some point Anna, motivated by a sibling itch or simply by opportunism, would launch me off into a screaming fit, whereupon Appa would become your average harried family vacation dad simultaneously steering and swatting at his children in the back seat. Immediately afterwards one of us would be back up front again.

Once we were checked into a Holiday Inn where Appa received a discount, we never unpacked. Instead we would spend the day looking for standard museums and tourist sights Appa had highlighted in his AAA guidebook. Appa was expert at navigating new cities, deftly avoiding toll roads and knowing—instinctively it seems now—where to park. Years later, stoned on Highway One on the Oregon coast with college friends, lost at 2am on a remote interstate on the Wyoming-Colorado border, and again wheeling around Greenwich Village amidst legions of armored cabs, I would remember the ease with which Appa had conducted our outings. Nothing ever compared to the Smithsonian exhibits we saw for free at home, but there we’d be, on

some warship docked in a Boston Harbor posturing for Appa's Nikon until he was ready to drive again.

In Boston, we had been delayed by Amma's determination to visit the Indian section of town. She hoped to secure a sari or pair of earrings that no one from home had seen the likes of. What she found disappointed her; an event we all foretold. What would be here, that wasn't at home? By the time we packed the car, it was night. Appa had to make the ten-hour drive after a day of sightseeing with two cranky children and an bad-tempered wife.

"You're not tired, Appa?" I asked. He looked sleepy. In fact, he always did.

"What is there?" he replied chuckling. It was his phrase for what's the big deal?

Though Amma understood nothing of fatigue, and Anna had complete confidence in Appa, I refused to sleep, choosing instead to watch my father's eyes droop and flicker wide again. On the Jersey Turnpike, the lanes narrowed to two and the yellow dashes to our left whipped hypnotically by.

I recalled Krishna, a lanky son of Appa's friend who was victim to an excruciatingly shyness. He had broken his leg driving home from the graveyard shift Bob's Big Boy.

"Remember Kris?" I shortened his name as if I were doing him a favor. "He fell asleep that time."

"He should have stopped on the side," Appa said sagely. "Take a little rest."

I nodded.

"If not, *tuck*—" he clucked his tongue, "that's it."

By now Amma was snoring like a man.

“Insurance will pay or not pay, but always they raise the price,” he finished. Though Appa routinely spouted the axiom, health is wealth, it was this increase in rates that worried him. The leg, after all, would heal, while the bigger bill remained until some other mistake made it even larger.

Appa knew what he was talking about when it came to sleep since he was eternally exhausted. He could drop off at any instant: waiting for me at the doctor’s office, in the car during stand still traffic, on the couch if no one spoke to him for a few minutes.

I pushed down the armrest and lodged my shoulder between the two front seats. While Amma’s head lolled to my right, I played sentinel. I was ready to slap Appa awake and encouraged myself to be bold enough to take the wheel if necessary.

“Do you like this song?” I asked Appa whenever his eyes glazed. I reached to adjust the knob.

“Whatever you like, ma,” he answered.

I shut off the radio when I figured out it was, to Appa’s ears, spellbinding in its sameness. Telephone poles unfurled on each side of us like mammoth crucifixes, a line of crosses tracing our dark ride south.

When we left the turnpike for the well-lit interstate, I began reading the large green signs aloud. The places sounded familiar as the miles to D.C. decreased. Baltimore. Beltsville. Despite myself, I dozed, too.

My anxiety, however, was unwarranted. I awoke to the hilarity of being still zippered and hooded in my winter coat, teetering on the edge of the bed. If I had

leaned forward a centimeter or tried to turn over, I would have been hugging the floor. I had been dreaming, not surprisingly, that I was plunging from a cliff. Appa always got us all safely home, never failing to return a rental on time. He drove and drove like he was part of the engine himself until he collapsed at home, just in time for his next shift. Not that he slept for long or could remain still when he wasn't at work. On the weekends, in addition to laundry and grocery shopping, he repaired friends' cars as well as ours.

On the way to Appa's favorite junkyard one Saturday Anna reminded me that Appa used to work at 7-Eleven. By then I had heard jokes about dot heads in convenience stores, and had refused to take offense. Though *technically* an Indian girl in an apartment complex teeming with blacks, browns and yellows, I had already begun feeling American, unbrown.

"Which 7-Eleven?" It could have been one of twenty; Langley Park, if somewhat lacking in greenery and affordable grocery stores, had its fill of urban staples—liquor stores, ice-cream trucks that came at all hours dubiously selling frozen treats, and Lego-like apartment buildings, row after row in their monotony.

"The one on University, before the library."

"How old was I then?" I began to remember Appa dressed in an orange patterned housecoat, behind a high pharmacy-style counter, mumbling to impatient customers in poor broken English.

"You were just a baby, Alice," Anna replied, already bored with the conversation the way only older brothers can be.

I cringed, picturing it. I imagined Appa in ugly orange, his young face hung with his incongruously jaundiced eyes, dull under fluorescent lights. I could see teenagers and morning commuters insulting him with abrupt slang, Appa only misunderstanding, nodding and smiling, handing over bills and change, cigarettes and coffee, *yes thank you have nice day*.

What a world it would be if Appa would learn perfect English and erase the brownness from his language, his clothes, his walk. I longed for the day my father would lose his residual confusion and appear as poised as Yvonne, Shannon's mom. Yvonne, as she instructed me to call her though I avoided addressing her altogether, came to teacher conferences with questions, ready for eye contact. She would never just smile and nod. She was someone whom Ms. Diamond would axiomatically respect.

The memory of 7-Eleven did not sting too much, largely because by then I had already grown accustomed to the discomfort of seeing Appa dressed in bright franchise colors. Every morning he came through the door, careful not to let the screen slam, dressed in an equally distasteful green blazer, Holiday Inn patch sewn on the lapel. He would have in his pocket mint chocolates wrapped in bright green foil. I called them Holiday Inn candy, slipping them into a pocket of my own, to sample in deliciously tiny increments. It wasn't until years later that Anna spotted them on a shelf in the candy isle at the Giant in a long flat box, Ande's Candies.

In Anna's memory were not only the mysteries before my birth, but parts of my life I never knew happened, pieces of me I didn't know, words I'd said, places I

had been, things I used to know. Anna would mention them by chance whenever something triggered a recollection. It was a haphazard way of getting information.

Driving one day with Appa, Anna pointed at a Kentucky Fried Chicken. “Appa used to work there, too.”

“When?” I tried to remember him coming home with a bucket of fried chicken, but the only fast food I could recall were chicken McNuggets and fried apple pie that came in a green sleeve.

“Must have been a small baby then.” Appa smiled at me in the rearview mirror. “I used to work in all the places.”

As long as I could remember Appa had worked two jobs a day, five days a week. After a day of carpooling and working as a “clerk/typist” for the Embassy, he would come home at seven, make dinner while Amma watched the old Indian movies he rented for her, and then go back to work again the same night at the Holiday Inn. I was never entirely that surprised to hear of Appa holding yet another job, even when Anna told me that Appa had delivered *The Washington Post* in the morning. He spliced together fractions of income from a variety pack of bad jobs. I was glad my brother was paying attention, both while I wasn’t alive and while I wasn’t awake.

When we reached the junkyard in Laurel that day it was already sticky out, the Plymouth’s cheap vinyl seats burned my bare thighs and sweat made them slick against each other. Neither of us wanted to shadow Appa; hot metal blinding, dusty construction dirt kicking up with every step—better by far to sit in the hot shade where we could at least fight over the radio. While Appa searched for alternators and fuel pumps among the bleached wrecks, my brother and I sat on the Plymouth’s hood

pretending to tan as we had seen white people do, waiting for the freight trains to thunder by.

When Appa came back drenched in heat, we sprayed him with our complaints, thirsty and bored, and he took us into the junkyard front office to buy sodas. Appa would eventually learn that he could never pick the right brand of soda, but that day he decided which wide button to push. The machine spit out root beers to Anna's disgust. My father carried the cans to the counter, hands still smudged a greasy black.

"Excuse me sir," Appa said in a singsong voice. One mechanic to another. "Can you change the soda? My son is wanting Sprite soda."

Eyes still down, too busy to be bothered, the man shoved the brown cans from the counter so roughly that they broke the quiet with their crash to the floor, sepia-colored suds spilling out a little. I never saw his face, only the roof of his head which was sunburned magenta; out of his rudeness he never raised it.

"Hey," he called over his shoulder to another attendant. "Will you get *this guy* a fucking dollar?"

There was nothing to do but buy two more sodas.

### Chapter Three

“They’re here,” I announced. It had rained all morning and I was worried that because of it, they wouldn’t come and we wouldn’t go. Then I’d be reduced to the idiotic diversions I invented when bored—such as sprinkling broken toothpicks on the floor. That game escorted me to the emergency room when Appa failed to pry loose the shard that had, as Amma predicted, found its way into the bottom of my foot.

Despite the rain—a disproportionate percentage of my childhood seems to have occurred on overcast and gloomy days—my mother’s brother, whom we called Mama, and his family were plodding up our sidewalk for our weekly trip to the White Oak Indoor Pool. Though Anna and I would not learn to swim until college when we each took an introduction to swimming course, our two families spent Saturdays together in the shallow end.

Mama—a title designating a specific brand of uncle—was a proud but generous man. He instigated Appa’s migration to the US by first sponsoring him for a tourist visa and then arranging a working visa through the Embassy. He had both the balls and the brains for entrepreneurship, and though balding he was a vigorous man. Mama was also easily offended, especially by me. More often than not my mouth revealed the gaps in my poor training.

Once at a community gathering where we children were playing Monopoly, Mama good-naturedly squatted down with us to play a few rounds. He enjoyed the status of a benevolent bully, being at once popular and feared by both children and adults.

When his turn came, he rolled right onto Free Parking.

“I couldn’t get Free Parking all day.” I shouted my approval over the others’ cheering. “And this man gets it right away!”

When I looked across the mint green board to receive the rewards of my compliment I was met with a smack of rainbow money. The colorful bills twirled around, falling in and around my lap.

“I’m your *Mama*,” he growled. “Not some man.”

It was, of course, a misunderstanding, an idiomatic expression brandished in the wrong context. I never redeemed myself for that one—in fact, it was the kind of blunder I’d continue to make with other adult relatives, reiterating to everyone what an insolent brat I was.

“Get your stuff for the pool,” Anna ordered. He looked spry and mobile, having under his elbow just a towel rolled into a tube, his bathing suit tucked therein.

We girls had more to carry, such as an extra pair of underwear to replace the one we kept on beneath our bathing suits. At the pool we would each spend neurotic minutes tucking in the flowers from our thick cotton panties that, when wet, made us look as if we were wearing diapers.

As the oldest, Anna took unenthusiastic charge of our troop. Of our three cousins, only the four year old, Jesudas, was a boy. Jesu was old enough to feel the sting of being left out, however, and I was glad for it. Not only did he occupy a lower rung in our hierarchy, he was also the only one impelled to call me Akka, the title for older sister. Despite despising the obligation of attaching Akka my two older cousins’ names, I enjoyed the ring of Alice Akka.

At the pool, Anita-akka, Tina-akka and I changed clothes in the toilet stalls, embarrassed by the naked bodies of the women showering in the locker room. American women disrobed without any shame, breasts swinging, coarse beards between their legs. Curiosity drove us all to peek. Being ashamed was un-American and we knew ourselves to be interlopers, yet it was better than being bared in front of strangers. We'd raise our eyebrows and choke our giggles until we escaped from the locker room, sprinting to the water as the life guard—always some impolite teenager—whistled at us to walk.

I had been flunking floating on my back—the water folding over my face after a few seconds of buoyancy—when Anna motioned for me to get out.

“What?” I stood up in shoulder high water.

“Appa’s going to dive off the diving board,” Anna said.

I assumed my father could swim. After all, hadn’t he spent his youth on an island with tropical waterfalls, not to mention rivers and lakes and ponds? Wasn’t it Appa who had held me flush with the water that very day, encouraging me to relax as he imperceptibly withdrew his palms from my back? My chlorinated vision had distorted, making rings around the fluorescent lights as I experienced, however briefly, weightlessness.

Once above the water, Appa looked like a teenager on a dare. He was a flight of stairs over the water, on a wobbly perch that extended into the center of the deep end. He didn’t bounce on the diving board like other divers I had seen. Instead he took a step and was then mid-air, his eyes squeezed delightfully shut. He didn’t

tighten himself for the drop, he just fell. His body relaxed as he plummeted and he hit the water somewhat sideways, his right hip and shoulder entering the water first.

I couldn't wait for him to clamber over the edge of the deep end, throw himself up onto the cement where I would congratulate him on his nervy adventure.

He didn't come rushing up to the water's surface the way other divers usually did; instead he lingered at the bottom of the pool doing a kind of underwater doggy paddle. Anna and I peered over the rim. His movement was dreamily torpid, the way directors always envision flashback sequences in film. His progress was parallel to the floor, not vertical. Appa apparently intended to get to the pool's edge and crawl up the ladder.

Anna and I got antsy. As seconds crawled across the clock, I alternated between watching Appa and shooting eye lasers at the lifeguard. Anna could only see Appa. Neither of us, though we wondered if Appa were drowning, wanted to arouse attention by hollering for help.

Soon the freckled lifeguard descended from his roost. He stood beside us, tipping forward, equally mesmerized. He seemed to be trying to decide if it was time to rescue our father. Go on, I shouted at him in my head. Jump.

But he waited, forehead creased with concentration, as Appa reached the pool's wall and then its ladder.

“Appa,” Anna teased, “What were you doing?”

“Chah!” Whew! Appa said, wearing a gleefully terrified smile. “I didn't know it was that deep.” He looked happily dumbfounded. He looked off, shaking his head.

Amma and Athai my aunt viewed all of this from the wet spectator benches where they waited in their saris guarding wallets, keys and our towels. Athai occasionally took a dip, but Amma always watched.

Before these weekly trips had been inaugurated, we had regularly visited an outdoor pool in Langley Park, though what compelled us—considering we were all in danger of drowning—I don't know. This pool sat beside a sprawling jungle gym containing two-story high slides that seem treacherous now and was separated from University Boulevard by only a ditch. A chain link fence enclosed the perimeter of the pool. Since Amma never swam, there was no good reason to pay the two dollars to get her in just so she could sit in a chaise chair. Instead she sat in the grass beside the road, outside the fence that hemmed the pool.

Occasionally I ran over to where she was hunched, her fingers hooked in the loops, her face criss-crossed with metal mesh. Anyone surveying the scene would have assumed she was some lonesome homeless woman who had stopped to spy the merriment of strangers. Surely she had no family splashing inside the pool. What kind of family would treat a mother that way?

That unkindness didn't trouble her somehow. From my mother's vantage, the world was composed two layers. First, there was the surface truth, what people said to each other and what they claimed to want; beneath this something insidious operated. People, my mother knew, were mostly scheming calculators: a compliment about her *dosai* or the look of a new blouse was either malicious sarcasm or a ploy stemming from raw self-interest. The dawdling car in front of us was trying to provoke an

accident so they could sue us. That or they were deliberately trying to make us all late for church for the sake of pure meanness.

Deception and conspiracy were not limited to the unsure world outside either. Appa, for instance, worked so relentlessly, Amma decided, because he enjoyed the applause implied in the pity he accrued from those who knew him. She suspected that one job, any job, should be sufficient to support such a small family. After all, didn't all other Indian men hold just one job? She concluded, with what she considered a methodical application of reason, that money from secondary—or in my father's case tertiary—jobs was extraneous. Where was this extra money? Why was it being concealed from her?

Athai, my softhearted aunt, attracted whatever remained of Amma's schizophrenic scrutiny. Unlike the other Indian women in my life who always seemed to be sizing me up even as they said nice things, Athai was earnest whenever she spoke, as little as that was. She never gave out insults baked in compliments like the one auntie who mocked surprise at me, "*You* are Raj's daughter?" She put her palm to her mouth. "But you used to be so cute!"

Athai braided my hair as with as much attention as her own daughters; she offered me steaming ladles of food without pointing out I ate like a boy. Whether it was the sincerity itself that galled Amma, or the approval that Athai's kindness garnered, Amma filled my head with distrust by constantly conjecturing about Athai. Because Athai might, for example, root around in Amma's drawers if left alone in the bedroom I had to dawdle when Athai dressed there, swinging my arm beneath the bed in search of some book or toy. I became wary of her, contrary to the evidence of her

behavior, ready to believe what I was told even when it clashed with what I knew. I only needed a hint of plausibility to eliminate thinking from my doubting brain; the world had certainly proved to be peopled with malicious adults. Ms. Diamond and Ms. Brown to name two.

We usually visited their rambler in deference to the fact that their home was actually a freestanding house and not an apartment like ours, but occasionally they came to Northwest Park Apartments and spent a Sunday in Langley Park with us. During these visits, Amma was more high-strung than usual, hardwired to be hostess and also to suspect the hell out of everybody.

One Tuesday afternoon, their troop descended unexpectedly. They were in the area, they said, though of course Amma knew their spontaneity was sparked by reconnaissance. They staged this attack to catch her off guard, to freeze our home in their memory as it was in reality: lawless.

“It is something to see you,” said Amma elusively as she ushered them in.

Mama’s head cocked back in his neck from where it swiveled first to his left, then to his right. He surveyed the living room in open disgust.

“What is this?” he asked Amma. “Is this how you keep your house?”

Amma said nothing from the kitchen where she had vanished. I wondered what she would offer them considering there were no light snacks in the house or any clean dishes to serve them on. I was grateful for the din of the faucet though it indicted the kitchen as well. A surprise visit to their house would have resulted only in the clank of clean dishes being pulled from the cupboard.

I could see Athai vacillating between offering her services and taking an impartial seat where my cousins had moved aside magazines and empty cereal bowls to make room for themselves on the couch. I switched on the reliable T.V.

“Shyam engeh?” Where is Shyam, Athai asked, perhaps trying to distract Mama’s contempt.

“He’s coming actually,” I answered. From the window I could see Anna and his friends making their way up the walk, shoving and bumping each other, full of boisterous talk.

When Anna came in it was only to round up a few tumblers of ice water for his friends. He quickly ducked back out saying they had all left their bikes at Chinudu’s. Although Sally and Shannon were always permitted inside, my brother, following an afternoon of tackle football, had to bear the awkwardness of bringing drinks to his friends outside on the porch. While they chased their thirst outside, my friends and I would slap the screen door open and shut without a thought.

“What is this?” Amma called after him as if she had never seen Anna leave the apartment before. “Get your bike and come back.”

We girls chattered while the adults murmured over their mismatched cups of chai. Did Amma make excuses for the mess? Did Mama ever take a seat, or did he simply stand for the duration of their stay signaling his disapproval?

Before long there was a knock. A head as round as a balloon bobbed through the grayness of the screen. It was Adounsey.

He was the youngest of the three Nigerian brothers who were my brother’s best friends. Adounsey was a year younger than me and too innocent to recognize the

maliciousness of our house rules (though he was as bright as his brothers and would years later join them, first at the esteemed Deerfield Academy and then in the Ivy League).

“Where’s Alfred?” he asked. This came out, Alfurd, which was how my brother’s name was properly pronounced in the ghetto.

“He’s gone,” Amma answered curtly. After seeing him, she had turned her head, hoping to dismiss him without having to get up.

Adounsey did not take his cue.

“Where?”

“He went to get his bike.” Now Amma stood behind the door. It was a pretentious pose; she tucked her body behind the door as if she was naked and the little boy was a menacing intruder. She hid as if she couldn’t bear for him to even look at her, as if surely he—a black boy—wanted to be invited in.

“Can I have a drink of water?” he asked pleasantly. I realized that Adounsey must have been lagging behind the older boys and this had been their last announced stop: Alfred’s for a drink.

Though she had resisted her urge to chase him away, she was not about to greet this black child with too much civility—especially not the kind that entailed serving him and thus waiting for him to finish. The intrusion was enough. Already he had implied, by his very arrival, that he was a regular guest to our house.

“No.” Amma replied.

Then she slammed the door in his still merry face, leaving him to locate his brothers and mine in an ocean of identical faces, bikes and voices.

Langley Park throbbed with children. We covered the sidewalks with the muted pastel chalks we stole from school, the playgrounds echoed with our yelps—the sounds of childhood extinguishing itself in afternoons.

Anna made many friends, including even a group of Indian boys. Sutesh, Namesh, Akhan and Anna were all from disparate areas in India, but there was a general bond between them, if not through language, then with custom. We all ate with our hands instead of spoons and forks, our mothers each wore saris when it was time to dress up and we all sensed that we had much to learn before we could legitimately refer to ourselves as Americans as we wanted to.

Though Anna was special in many ways, he was a boy's boy as well. Athletic, amicable, and tough. He had survived several fist fights I heard about afterwards, but only one that I witnessed. Over some puerile taunting that centered around how Sutesh sounded like *jutee*, the Tamil word for underwear, the boys prepared to fight under what seemed to be at the time the ominous auspices of another ash-colored sky.

Pretending to be absorbed by the tedious act of draining drops from the honeysuckles that overgrew a nearby fence, I had overheard the teasing and grown progressively more nervous as it intensified. I pinched the green nub at the bottom of a flower and dragged the shoot out. Although I trusted Anna was a capable pugilist, I still stirred at the thought of anyone striking him. This shoot had no pinprick of honey on its tip, but I sucked on it anyway. Disappointed, I dropped it and crossed the length of the parking lot towards the ring of boys. As I passed a giant green dumpster, I snatched a broken car stereo antennae.

From behind, I tentatively smacked Namesh's back with the metal twig, then recoiled. I had enough sense to feel silly.

"Man," they all cried in disbelief, "Get your sister out of here."

"Alice," Anna said without force, "Stop that."

My interruption broke up the fight, which had been my intention, and I even earned a smile from Anna. The diaspora of boys reached towards their homes. The clouds indicated rain. From beyond where we could see him Sutesh, whose vanilla skin and green-gray eyes made him look more Spanish than Indian, called out to Anna.

"At least my mother knows how to clean our house!"

Laughter ricocheted through the gloomy dusk and neither of us had a quick reply. Unlike Chinedu and his brothers, these boys were welcomed into our apartment and bestowed with whatever Ritz crackers or Sunny Delight—a orange *drink*, not orange juice—we had. They all knew it was true. We skulked home, bested.

I'm not sure how Appa heard about the incident, the last insult particularly, but I was stunned by the vehemence of his reaction. The insult, directed at my mother, prompted a dramatic response, something partly Indian, but also trailer park. Appa, normally diffident and conciliatory, marched two blocks to Sutesh' house where he demanded they come outside. Anna and I, though commanded to stay home, followed and spied from a distance.

Your children should watch their mouths, Appa admonished. He stood in their acorn-splattered yard.

Go back to your house, their grandfather replied, waving Appa off. He turned his back to let Appa know what he thought him.

They should get a slap from me, Appa continued, enraged by the old man.

Shocked and silent, Sutesh and his mortified sister sat on the porch while their grandfather and Appa took turns haranguing each other. Though we faced each other from opposed and separate camps, we were connected by our mutual mortification. This was not how decent, self-respecting parents conducted themselves in public. This of course was not true; we had all seen adults holler at one another in check out lines and in parking lots. But that kind of inclusive indexing was beyond our social hunger. This was plain humiliating.

There was much head shaking and arm waving. Occasionally, an acorn dropped to the ground with a pop! The grandfather had no use for Appa, a dark-skinned nobody from the south. Sutesh's parents appeared as appalled as we children were; they were Brahmins that avoided village behavior. They would, like most educated South Asian immigrants, move out of Langley Park in less than two years. Twice Sutesh's father interrupted, trying to mollify Appa, though he could not outwardly discount the older man by shushing him.

"Please, Mr. Raj—" he started. His eyes searched for some understanding.

And though it appeared Appa was prepared to give it, the grandfather cut him off.

"Mr. Raj?" he sliced his head back to Sutesh's father. "*Mr. Raj?*"

Soon Sutesh's parents retreated inside the doorway to observe like the rest of us. Framed by their front entrance they looked like a life-sized family photo, except

for the lanky white-haired man who sat in front of them spewing abuse in accented but otherwise spotless English.

Several neighbors now stood on their porches, some still wiping pots with dishtowels, others only halfway outside, their bodies halved by screen doors. Eventually Appa, either satisfied or sapped, walked back home.

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It looked like a yard sale. From our front window I could see the Chinese woman from upstairs lugging a cinnamon-colored easy chair towards her apartment. She scooped it up and thrust it forward, foot by foot across the sidewalk. Once in the grass she dragged it from behind, hiking up clumps of sandy dirt and crab grass.

“Should we go?” Amma thought out loud. She had spotted the activity from her daily post at the window.

Though we were not poor enough in our eyes to consent to used clothing or dishware from thrift stores, we were not above purchasing other larger, less personal household items second hand. Our entire apartment was stocked with revamped chairs from Holiday Inn’s lobby and the cheaply framed landscapes management had discarded when remodeling. Anna’s bedside table had a clock radio built in and a white button that had once called room service to Room 103.

Amma watched the Chinese woman scurry back across the street to the island where crowds examined piles of clothing strewn on grass and various knickknacks that looked as if they had just been tossed. A few cardboard boxes had overturned and no one had bothered to organize or wipe the dirt off what had tumbled out.

Amma decided we should go, but first we had to become presentable. She went to shower.

“Hurry up!” I worried that other shoppers were pirating whatever precious goods we might want. Already the Chinese woman had scored an entire well-worn living room set. Now she was rummaging through the cardboard box spills, occasionally twisting a figurine in the light or whipping straight an article of clothing for inspection.

“Here,” Amma said, smoothing talcum powder on my greasy face. Now I was ready, too.

Across the street I again noticed how carelessly sale items had been placed on the island that separated opposing lanes of traffic. There were clothes still tucked in dresser drawers and other items lost from their companions—a single measuring spoon, one navy blue World Book Encyclopedia.

“How much is this?” I held out a plastic whale the size of a steak and cheese sub. When you wound the key its rear flipper batted raucously back and forth. I hoped it would float.

“I don’t know.” Amma looked around more carefully now. She hadn’t picked up anything and was eyeing a slender black man who orbited the island on his bike.

I’m not sure how she figured out that this was not what she had heard about, not a yard sale—but when she did she grabbed my hand and raced us home, smiling with shame. Though she told me to drop the whale, I tucked it under my jacket. I only vaguely understood what an eviction was, but I couldn’t imagine any harm in my taking the whale. Later, I would pitch it into the sewage drain, feeling too evil to

even test its buoyancy in the bath first. I thought of that poor ex-tenant on his ten-speed, circling the road island hidden beneath his belongings, helpless and looking like the rest of us, vultures.

Perhaps the eviction motivated Amma. When she called Animal Control on Punitha a short while later, it appeared to be without any provocation. She had loved the cat like the rest of us; fifteen years later she would adopt another neighborhood cat, though this one was not a stray, claiming just the thought of its complacent furry face soothed her troubled heart. When I brought my own kitten home when visiting from grad school, Amma slept on the couch to be near him and catered to him like a newborn. Even without this context Punitha's extradition was puzzling. The cat required nothing from us, though she agreed to the occasional tin of mushy food. She bore no grudge even when we distributed her kittens throughout the neighborhood as if they were ours. She had even acquired a pitiful limp, one could only guess was from being hit by a car.

That afternoon as Anna and I prepared to begin what we considered our true day—those hours of free time in the relative absence of adults—Amma revealed what she had done while we were at school, purportedly under the advice of some uncle whose son she babysat.

“She’s gone?” I couldn’t believe it. I had been adjusting the seat on my lavender Big Wheel so Sally’s little sister could ride it. I was getting too big for its loud, uncushioned ride.

“Yes.” Amma looked beleaguered. She wrapped her elbow around the pole on our porch like a teenager. “It was so sad, ma.”

Anna was putting air in his front bike tire. At the news, the heartbeat-like pumping stopped. He shook his head.

“Can we get her back?” I wondered if this was some reversible trick or punishment. Behind me, the pumping started back up. *Hiss, breath. Hiss, breath. Hiss, breath.*

“She hid behind my legs when they came.” Amma continued thickly, near tears. “She knew.”

“Why did you do that?” Anna asked finally, though rhetorically. He climbed on his bike and rode away.

Later that week, Appa drove us to the shelter to visit Punitha. We loaded into Appa’s sky blue Plymouth and bounced on its bucket seats. Unlike Amma who was fond of modern pop music Appa preferred country, especially the hygienic melodies of Jim Reeves and Patsy Cline. Though I usually protested until he allowed me to dial the radio, today I let it be. I hoped the lonely music would help me cry and thus add to the day’s drama. As it was, we seemed to be on a sunny daytrip. I knew this was my first death and it naturally brought up the next likely death—my grandfather, Thatha, whose presence in my life had only been intermittent and disruptive. Two or three years ago, he had arrived in America having sold his properties and businesses in Ceylon. He lived with Mama at first and would eventually live with us, bearing annoying witness and catalyst to our family troubles. The inevitability of his death led to Amma and Appa’s and then Anna’s and finally my own. I wished the probably order could be reversed. If we had to go, I wanted to be first.

En route to the animal home, I prepared myself for what I presumed would be a meteoric impact. I understood, as we all did, that Punitha would be put down within the week. And though it would have only taken a word from us to remedy her predicament, we went to see her as if to a wake.

Her compartment was stacked above my head, the highest of three. Recognizing us, she swirled around the tiny cage, ramming the top of her head against the cage door. Her fur pushed out between the metal bars. We pet her through the door for a while and then, when it was evident that this was the crowning culmination of our trip, we left her to the destiny Amma had orchestrated.

Though I wanted to cry, I did not. Punitha, too, was removed when we left. She had stopped her excited twirling. She did not mew. She simply watched us through the metal grid of her cage door fully aware and reconciled, it seemed, to the fact that she had no family. What kind of family would treat its pet this way?

## Chapter Four

1983-84 was pivotal. I would always catalogue years this way, not by the plunging apple in New York but by the school calendar. It would be our last official year in Langley Park though we would move only a few blocks away. It was the year Michael Jackson won a million Grammy's despite being seated next to the permanent innocence of Webster and a virginal Brooke Shields. It was the year my last cousin would be born.

"Look." I nudged Amma. Athai was arched over her stove inelegantly, her legs an immodest shoulder width apart. It was the first time I noticed a bulbous belly jutting from beneath her sari. "I think Athai might have a baby."

"*Che!*" Amma pinched me as if I had said a bad word. "I know."

Mama and Athai's fourth child did not simply slip into the fabric of our reality as any good news should. Rather, it invigorated Amma's nagging with new purpose. Disappointed by our stagnancy in Langley Park and instigated by her brother's burgeoning family, Amma bullied us into home ownership. According to Amma, what we needed above savings and tranquility was a bigger place to store our misery. Amma did not desire—nor did she even understand—the security home ownership would provide; she simply wanted some symbol to hold up to those she perceived as her conspiring competitors. Thirty years later, it would prove to be accidental genius; Anna and I as adults would pay off the mortgage to our inheritance before Appa turned seventy. I would later learn that a year after my birth, Amma had become pregnant again. Appa, at once constrained by manly duties and made callous by them,

decided should Amma to abort the baby. Whatever ghosts drove her, she got her house.

Not that Appa didn't relish the thought of property. He was propelled by the same urges that knighted him an immigrant—self-sufficiency, status, children armed with degrees and new Japanese cars. He simply did not, as a hotel night auditor, clerk-typist and newspaper delivery boy, make enough money to comfortably purchase a house.

That did not, however, prevent Amma from draping herself over Appa's world like a curtain, infecting every moment with torturous remarks and infuriatingly fictionalized criticism. After surveying a few homes, all in a one neighborhood just a mile or two away from Langley Park, Appa agreed to the yoke of a mortgage.

“Are we still in Montgomery County?” Anna asked hopefully. We were touring a tiny brick house painted gray and white. This house, which would soon become host to our family's second decade of distress, boasted a floor plan only slightly larger than our two-bedroom in Langley Park, though it did have a finished basement to which one could run. It would not alter our sleeping arrangements either. The third bedroom, a closet-sized nursery, would go to Thatha, my mother's father. He would crowd in with us shortly after our move, having—because what I can only imagine was a clash of similar personalities—angrily left Mama's house.

“Oh, yes, of course,” assured Paul absently. “This is still Montgomery County.” Paul was a pompous Indian from the north. He was the kind of fair-skinned Indian whose visits occasioned shortbread cookies, vacuuming and incense. He was

not to blame, needless to say, but neither did he show any reluctance in interacting with the obsequiousness my parents exhibited in his presence.

“There’s a park,” Paul mentioned as he shuffled papers into his briefcase. “And even a neighborhood pool.”

We trailed him closely out of the neighborhood—just a block—and there, beside a tiny wooden sign for the Adelphi Community Pool, was a wide expanse of green as large as four or five football fields, its shallow valley punctuated in the middle by an Orion’s Belt of three ponds. Each was encircled by cattails and thronged by gangs of ducks and geese. The ponds were ringed by hills, dips and clumps of deciduous trees. Snaking through the view was a continuous, twisted loop of paved walking path. Finally, in the center of it all, stood an odd white building with arched doorways and what appeared to be a steeple. It looked like a mosque.

We drove slowly down Riggs Road/Route 212, paralleling the view that was rouged and made impressive by the sinking pink sun.

“I bet in the winter,” I said merrily, “there’s skating on those ponds.”

If I had read the sign or noticed how bouquets of red, yellow and white dotted the park, I would have realized that our new home was located a block away from a giant cemetery and mausoleum. Skating was neither allowed nor appropriate. I would later notice that Langley Park was still visible, too. Behind the greenery, the companion pillars of Presidential Towers scowled from the horizon, giving us what I would later call, the double finger. A giant constant fuck you.

Paul was either wrong or deliberately deceptive about the whole county business. Anna would not know his mistake until he was enrolled at Buck Lodge

Middle, though he had been frantic about attending school with Chinedu where they would have likely continued to challenge each other, competing for grades and starting spots on the football team. Less important to Anna was the fact that this new county, Prince George's County was in swift decline—though once touted as a Mecca for upper-class blacks. P.G.'s public school system was sorer than Montgomery's, overpopulated with students who, against a seedier backdrop, had a propensity towards low achievement and violence.

For my birthday that year, my parents threw me a lavish party, which in our lexicon of experience meant McDonalds. I even brought my orange crown of construction paper home from school so I could adorn myself with it at the restaurant.

“I don't want the bun,” I said, dismantling my burger.

“I'll take those pickles,” said Shannon. He made an exaggerated show of enjoying them, grinning mouth full, hands making wide circles over his belly. He was honestly a sweet child.

There with Sally and Shannon and others including Sutesh's fifth grader sister—who wore both eyeliner and the disaffected look of boredom that undoubtedly marked her as a soon to be reckoned with force of popularity—I felt happy. American.

Afterwards, on our dining room table I sliced sheet cake to the flashes from Appa's camera flash. Appa usually made what must have been nearly unmanageable arrangements to document key moments in his children's childhood, taking off from work, for example, to attend our elementary school's Halloween parade and to trail his plastic Incredible Hulk and Strawberry Shortcake around the neighborhood. And

though he drove us all to McDonalds for Happy Meals on this birthday and made sure my cake had some requisite toy—this time a gender-neutral airplane—he was not able to stay for the duration of the party. This is the only reason that can explain Amma’s eased expression, the loving way she guides my hand through the spongy yellow dessert, Amma captured on film for once as what I partially recall her: a loving mother.

Anna’s birthday was just a month before and he, too, celebrated with a childhood icon: Chuck E. Cheese. Appa reserved a red booth with seats the color and texture of dodge balls, ordered several discs of Chuck’s notorious pizza and started the boys off with a few dollars worth of tokens.

“Why can’t I sit with them?” Appa had found an empty table on the other side of the dining area.

“He’s a boy,” Appa replied. “Let him go with boys.”

Though I was not permitted to encroach upon Anna’s boyish fun, I was content to cheat Chuck as much as possible. I pinched the edge of the last ticket in whatever series I had earned and painstakingly extracted more tickets. While playing Whack-a-Mole I discovered an easy strategy to cheat the game.

“Watch,” I instructed a sandy-haired boy in line behind me.

I placed my palms over the openings. The digital score raced upwards although I hadn’t lifted the sponge paddle. The two of us recruited a slew of equally wayward boys to cover all the holes. I scored loops of tickets under the pretense of buying Anna a birthday gift, but in reality I hoped to have enough purchasing power to treat myself to something, too.

Despite my petty scams, my fortune of tickets afforded me little from the glass counter that displayed playing cards, plastic jewelry and toy handcuffs, and nothing from the unapproachable shelves behind the counter. Those held tea sets and a metal football field with magnetic players. I chose a hollow plastic football for Anna and a hand-shaped back-scratcher I thought was sound use of my Chuck E Cheese capital (it would snap in two on the car ride home).

Before we left, Appa found the giant mouse and lured him into a photo with us.

“Say cheese,” said Appa.

“Chuck E. Cheese!” I said, astonished by my own cleverness.

In the snapshot we all stand in flaxen daylight, cheeks distended with jawbreakers: me, Anna, Sutesh, Namesh, and Akhan. My brother’s best friends, Chinedu and his brothers, had not been invited.

Three months later, Vasanthi was born in the middle of the night at Children’s Hospital. I didn’t understand why we kids were forced to sleep in the hospital’s lobby on crayola-colored and lopsided furnishings. We laid strewn about in the unlikely poses uncomfortable, sleepy children make, vaguely aware of adult anxiety. I felt us reaching some netherworld of lateness, when the world quietly turned itself off. It resembled the smoky reality that followed midnight “mass” on Christmas. That service felt epic, though it was no longer than a regular Sunday Eucharist. Regardless, bundling up for the winter outside, traffic lights winking at empty intersections, I felt soporifically suspended in some time warp. This was the same.

The only movement was the hush of nurses and well-oiled wheelchairs. Vasanthi's birth, like Christ's, was honored during the long, somnolent hours of night.

Finally they roused us, handing us our bulky coats. Someone explained in sober whispers that Vasanthi had been born with a cleft palate, a disability that would require numerous surgeries and therapy. I wanted to cry. Not so much because of the hardships my baby cousin would suffer (what did I understand of that?), but because of the coldness in my mother's countenance. Had I imagined it? Or was I transposing the smugness religion had taught me? It was postulated that we should be grateful for health and safekeeping because god had set those balls of good fortune in motion. Wasn't god then, as maestro to the symphony of luck, also accountable when disaster collided with hopeful expectations? It seemed offensive to give thanks, if you couldn't also blame god for when things went horribly wrong. I wasn't emotionally prepared, nor would I ever be, to permit god to have his cake and eat it, too. You deserve what you get, be it good or bad, religion seemed to say; prayer was your right to appeal.

I was already beginning to move away from god, a divinity who was moved by prayers as opposed to concrete need and justice. In church, at Indian gatherings, at the hospital the following day we were asked to pray for the troubles of others, a quantifying I could not stomach. "They could use your prayers," adults would say solemnly as if god only paid attention to those who had legions of friends to pray on their behalf. What if nobody prayed for you, I speculated. Was god relieved of his obligation to respond? What kind of miserliness was that?

Happily, Vasanthi was an otherwise cuddly and healthy baby, her condition amounting to a speech impediment and the prospect of cosmetic surgeries when she was older. We cooed and teased her as much as we did Jesudas; if we all pointed at her and said *awwwwww* in unison, she would adorably burst into tears. She was so fit that both Mama and Appa saw no reason to delay an elaborate trip planned for the summer: a car ride across the country, our destination southern California to visit distant relatives, Selvakumar Uncle and his family.

From the crystal vantage of hindsight, the plan seems ludicrously ambitious: load four adults, five children and one baby into a mid-size sedan and voyage over three thousand miles in three days, employing alternating shifts between only two drivers. Both men sat upfront while all five children rotated for the two remaining seats with a view. Amma and Athai were relegated to the back with the three children who impatiently waited for their turn up front, Athai always with the baby propped between her legs on a pile of pillows.

There are photographs of Mama's crammed Chrysler taken from different highways, Appa's hair blown by a particularly strong gust of wind, the lid of the trunk agape, exposing boxes of Smurf cereal and tins of sardines. I was initially disgusted by the cans stuffed with the whole bodies of tiny, salty fish.

"Just eat it?" I asked. "The whole thing?"

"Just like that," Mama replied, popping one into his mouth.

Despite superficial allusions to fairness, we female cousins spent most of the three days in the back, while Jesudas and Anna rode in relative luxury up front. We gals protested, but without any teeth to our grumbling. We understood. The boys were

meant to glean some manliness from riding beside their fathers, noting landmarks and conferring over the pale blueness of maps. They would languish in the back with their aunts and a diapered infant.

By the third day I had acquired a coating of mosquito bites, as was my habit on any trip. Sweet blood, everyone was fond of repeating. I raked my fingers until my skin caked beneath my fingernails and pink streaks striped my legs. Eventually, I got blood.

Those strands of beaded blood—like a string of miniature cherries—set me off. Cramped, itchy, and probably a bit febrile, I howled.

“Amma,” I cried. “It hurts!”

Amma began to thump my back, the way she did when I was sick or couldn’t sleep. I allowed my pitch to reach a childish whine, more self-indulgent than I had been in years. My squeals were punctuated by her patting, making me sound like a soprano motor.

No one, not even Mama, shut me up. The last one thousand miles unrolled before us, endless and formidable, and though we children had been well behaved, everyone felt strained. We stank. We hungered for warm rotis and basmati rice. Surely Mama and Appa had suffered, at some gas station or roadside rest area, a threatening surly glance. I threw a tantrum for us all.

The drive over went fast, by design. Mama and Appa took turns without pause; one sleeping slumped against the passenger side window while the other committed to the next eight hours. We ducked the prettier landscapes, the Rockies in Colorado, the Martian terrain of Utah, the lushly diverse sceneries of the West, all for

the sake of expedite motion. Years later, when I explored these remaining pockets of American wildness with the benefit of earthy drugs and the leisure of long college breaks, I would regret not viewing them with my family. Sure, Appa got to see Cape Cod—which is no prettier than any other beach on the east coast—and the Sears Tower, but he would never know the cathedrals of redwoods or the other worldliness of Moab or the immediacy of the Tetons.

During the last segment of our trip, we locate a sheet of music with the lyrics to *Oh, My Darling Clementine* in the trunk. We sing and sing. We must seem like an odd group of travelers, hurtling across the interstate stuffed with canned fish and portable dry goods, stung with bug bites and throbbing with crushed limbs, two families of displaced immigrants heading towards another century's manifest destiny, howling, "You are lost and gone forever, dreadful sorrow, Clementine!"

Of our actual two-week stay in Southern Cal, I remember only Universal Studios. Somehow, though we all swarmed in Selvakumar Uncle's tiny apartment, Amma managed to overlook how all my cousins and even her own son had dressed for the day. Perhaps she thought we were actually going to encounter famous people strolling around the way Lucy did when she, Ricky and the Mertzes moved to Hollywood that one season. I'm sure she assumed that my cousins would be sporting two neat braids—plaits— and be coordinated in matching blouses and skirts. Whatever the cause Amma, infinitely concerned with being shown up as a good Indian mother, trapped me in a dress for our visit to the theme park.

And though we did spot Ricky Schroeder directing a radio-operated toy car from a good hundred yards away, it did not account for my incongruous garb.

Everyone else was clad in maneuverable shorts and tee shirts, while I had to prissily pay attention to how much leg and underwear I revealed. Being overdressed was more than a mistake; it was an announcement of how, in our foreigner stupefaction—accurate in terms of my mother—we confused a theme park for a formal event.

“I’m sorry, ma,” Amma said, sucking her teeth at the blunder. We were crossing an expansive parking lot laced with palm trees. A haze glazed everything with a glimmering film. The lot was a furnace.

“I didn’t know.” She apologized again. Least of all did she want to me to be singled out.

Thankfully my cousins were sweet girls—Tina-akka, an excitable valentine-faced girl and Anita-akka, spectacled and already ruled by motherliness. They didn’t rub it in.

“Here.” Anita-akka handed me one of the lime colored visors Selvakumar Uncle had bought in order to prevent us kids from getting too tanned. “You won’t be so hot.”

True, but I looked even more foolish now, sporting a casual cap with my church frock. Fuming, I told Amma to hold it, making sure she felt the full brunt of my defiance—it would be her fault when I turned black from an unprotected day in the sun.

We, like all tourists I suppose, drowned ourselves in photos. There is one of Anna mightily hoisting a gutted van from *The A-Team*; several of me getting in and out of *Night Rider’s* KITT—its voice, most likely a hidden man with a distorting microphone, answering our questions about Haselhoff and the show. Strewn about the

park were large depictions of various movie characters with their faces eerily cut out. From behind you set your face in the empty oval to have your picture taken as Conan the Barbarian or his busty, thick-thighed partner.

One station, shaded by eucalyptus instead of palm trees, was a medieval holding device, the kind of contraption that gripped the pilloried about the head, wrists and feet, most likely in the middle of the town square so that the public could partake in the castigation. In this revised version, there were only three holes: one for your head and one for each hand. Underneath were two giant Flintstone feet that completed the illusion. We all stopped for this one, grinning like no real prisoner would have under such undignified incarceration. The effect was off however, not because of our cheerful expressions, but because the large non-descript feet were white. We look brindled. Still, I was thrilled to have a photo where my inappropriate outfit was concealed.

My outfit didn't prevent me from straddling a bicycle with E.T. in its basket, however. In the Polaroid, I am a profile in glee. A greenish moon encircles me and big-eyed alien as we soar into the air, the only thing missing is a rush of breeze to blow back my hair like a flag as we both escape for warmer, more welcoming worlds.

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“What about Rani and Brett?” I asked when I saw Amma's new turquoise smock. “Will you keep babysitting them?”

Shortly after our return, Amma fully vanquished her role as titular housewife by applying to be a cashier at Zayre's. She was set to start training the weekend that followed our big move to Adelphi.

Amma sighed. Then she straightened up.

"I don't want to tell her," she said, referring to Ms. Molina. "But I have to do it."

The only Indian women I knew who labored outside the home were educated women who worked either with Appa at the Embassy or for other esteemed employers like the IMF. I felt afraid for Amma. She didn't seem prepared to enter the American world without Anna, Appa or myself to guide her. I was equally troubled about her cutting off Ms. Molina. When Amma first told her, Ms. Molina was calm.

"I can pay you a little more," Ms. Molina offered. Her mouth clamped around her words. She stepped towards the door and then whirled around. "How much are they going to pay you?"

"It is too much for you," replied Amma. She was packing up Rani's things—leftover Little Debbie's snack cakes, a doll's brush. Ms. Molina studied Amma, drilling her gaze into the middle part of Amma's bent head, until Amma looked up. "I am sorry." Amma sighed.

Ms. Molina hugged everything in to her arms, including Rani.

"What do you expect me to do?"

Amma didn't answer.

When Ms. Molina stepped onto the porch she rattled with what she carried.

“I am sorry,” Amma repeated. She wore a smile, both because she was embarrassed to be yelled at and because she felt sheepish. She understood the position into which she was plunging Ms. Molina.

Ms. Molina glared at Amma for a moment, Rani propped on her hip.

“You can go to hell,” she said with finally. She reached for the flimsy doll Rani clutched. Its cloth body was too flimsy for its plastic head and limbs; whatever it had initially worn had long been lost. Now it only bore scuffmarks. Amma had given it to Rani as a birthday gift. After flinging the doll hard at Amma’s feet—*thwack*—Ms. Molina headed towards the waiting pick up. Like every other afternoon when she came to round up her kids, her jeans were paint-splattered and torn at the knees and her frizzy hair was drizzled with colored flecks.

I was too shocked to feel much, but when I glanced at Amma, her eyes billowed with tears. Still, she was smiling. Anna and I smile like that, too, even now as adults. When Chinedu told Anna that his grandmother had passed away, Anna slowly tumbled into giggles; in high school—when girls tearily fold because of all sorts of hormonal stimulus—my friends knew that whenever I laughed hysterically, I was probably prefacing a lavatory crying spell. Like our mother, my and Anna’s first reaction to any sad or troubling news is to uncontrollably grin as if something has been confirmed, as if we’d been expecting whatever it is all along.



## **Interlude One: On Inner Ring Suburbs, Langley Park, and “Ghetto” as an Ideological Construct**

The title “Ghetto Proclivities” refers to the disconnect I experienced from the largely white, middle class students who filled the English classes I taught at Ohio State, and the affiliation I felt with the somewhat opposite cohort with whom I had grown up in Langley Park: a group underrepresented at every public university I have ever attended or at which I ever taught. This cohort was working class, if not working poor, mostly black but eventually increasingly immigrant, and infused with an aesthetic and sensibility that was colored by a black masculinity (a conception that has for centuries powered much of America’s fearful and lusty imagination) and reductive, racialized conception of class identity. We called this particular system of construction with which we engaged—uniformly, sincerely, and at times with ironic humor—“ghetto.” What I hope to interrogate here is my usage of the first segment of the phrase ‘ghetto proclivities’ in order to explicate (and perhaps legitimate) my claim on the latter.

This will require a review of the often-competing historical, scholarly and colloquial definitions of ghetto and suburb since both terms are used to characterize Langley Park in varying contexts in disparate meaning systems. This can seem counterintuitive or at least paradoxical since ghettos and suburbs have traditionally been considered oppositionally. The tension attests to the ways in which urban historians, cultural activists and actual residents can overlap and diverge in their varying constructions of a single locality.

No one theory or historical rendering fully accounts for Langley Park and no significant detailed historical research has yet been done to trace its development from its inception as post-war second ring suburb to the ethnic enclave suffering from inner-ring suburb woes that it is now. This essay does not mean to undertake that task, but rather to point to some historical narratives and quantitative data that may illuminate the social and historical context of the place in which I grew up and within which my friends and I constructed our own sense of this place.

Like all ethnic neighborhoods, Langley Park has a unique heritage that coincides with other similarly populated places as often as it swerves from those counterparts. Split between Montgomery and Prince George's Counties and their distinct histories, considered an overflow for Northeast DC, containing complex and fluctuating populations not always reflected in census reporting, and possessing only minimal extensive research data that extends beyond the current, Langley Park is difficult to categorize.

In this essay I intend to provide some angles from which one can view the experience I self-ethnographically detail in my memoir but about which much is not specifically known. At times this narrative differs from and even contradicts scholarship and technical definitions about similarly located places. Some of the divergence may be attributed to the fact that my memoir draws from personal, "insider" accounts generated from everyday meaning systems on the ground (which can admittedly reify stereotype and misconception), whereas much of what is "known" about the meaning of ethnic neighborhoods is the product of assessments by

“social reformers, journalistic observers, policymakers and academics.”<sup>50</sup> While clearly indispensable, these constructions, as Sallie Marston points out, can also have their limitations.

Unfortunately, this meaning is the construction of outsiders who have observed the routines and practices of the residents of ethnic neighborhoods but who have rarely experienced the neighborhoods themselves.<sup>51</sup>

I do not mean to imply that scholarship and statistical data are not useful, but only to indicate that other sources, such as ethnography and self-ethnography, can be equally valuable in understanding any locality as long as they are employed critically, reflexively and in concert with other meaning-making methodologies.

The above attests to the messiness inbuilt to naming, labeling, and claiming nearly any place. Ghetto is a particularly loaded term, or as Amanda Seligman points out, “the word ghetto is not entirely unproblematic” and “often carries pejorative undertones.”<sup>52</sup> Ghetto as a global concept has a lengthy lineage, stretching from voluntary Jewish quarters in medieval Venice to the explosion of walled ghettos in later centuries and in occupied Europe during the Second World War. The standard definition stems from this oppressive history and generally refers to any segment of a city in which concentrations of minority groups reside as the result of social, legal, or economic pressure. Even more broadly defined it can designate any area of concentrated, homogenous urban poverty.

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<sup>50</sup> Sallie Marston, “Ethnic Neighborhood,” in *The Encyclopedia of Urban America: The Cities and Suburbs*, ed. Neil Shumsky (Oxford: ABC-Clio, 1998), 286.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Amanda Irene Seligman, “What is the Second Ghetto?” *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 29 No. 3 (March 2003): 273.

In the American lexicon, however, ghetto is racialized to signify concentrations of the *black* urban poverty that originated during the second wave of the Great Migration when substantial numbers of blacks moved north after the First World War. This relocation persisted during and after the Depression and after the conclusion of the Second World War. This influx marked the urbanization of much of Black America and overlapped with the second wave of suburbanization that followed the war. The introduction of federally subsidized loans that made home buying easier for whites, as well as the continual appeal of the “suburban ideal” sparked the exodus of white Americans and (some black Americans) from cities into the suburbs. In addition to favorable mortgage conditions for whites, the FHA enacted discriminatory policies that kept urban black populations concentrated or “ghettoized” until more open housing practices became slightly more common in the 1970s. This left behind an even more intensely concentrated urban black “underclass,” a term itself fraught with problematic connotations.<sup>53</sup>

The era of mushrooming suburban growth that marked the postwar period was inextricably linked with the increased the urbanization of many black Americans. In fact, many cities had centers that contained “entirely black housing.”<sup>54</sup>

The attraction of new suburbs, primarily only available to whites, and the pent up housing needs of African Americans combined to produce an era of unprecedented racial turnover of urban neighborhoods, sometimes triggered by blockbusting...Challenges to the racial status quo seemed to contribute to out-migration of whites from older urban areas. These episodes of

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<sup>53</sup> James Borchert, “Ghetto,” *The Encyclopedia of Urban America: The Cities and Suburbs*, ed. Neil Shumsky (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 1998), 324.

<sup>54</sup> David M. Culter, Edward L. Glaeser, Jacob Vigdor, “Rise and Decline of the American Ghetto.” *The Journal of Political Economy* vol. 107 no. 3 (June 1999): 455.

white flight greatly expanded areas of African American residence...<sup>55</sup>

Yet this burgeoning black population did not remain contained within urban limits; as more blacks followed north they demanded more and more room. Increasing pressure due to exploding population densities, when combined with the lack of livable housing, wedged black communities into the suburbs.

Arnold Hirsch's well-coined phrase, "the second ghetto," describes the impact of this spreading postwar influx on housing segregation in mid-century Chicago. Hirsch's study of the second ghetto, eponymously titled, received "wide and well-deserved praise"<sup>56</sup> for how it traced the demographic "spillover" from ghetto to inner ring suburbs. The overflow was augmented as cities displaced even more blacks by embarking on redevelopment programs and interstate highway construction that atomized black neighborhoods. These attempts to "revivify the central city... set the stage for the next round of ghetto-building..." and "helped trigger a scramble for survival among several outlying neighborhoods."<sup>57</sup> These white border neighborhoods resisted, often violently, but ultimately futilely; by the 1970s, blacks escaping inner city crowding had moved to previously all white suburbs.

Although one 1995 HUD program that had some success in Chicago would much later hopefully suggest that the poor might possibly "improve their prospects"

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<sup>55</sup> W. Edward Orser, "White Flight," in *The Encyclopedia of Urban American: The Cities and Suburbs*, ed. Neil Shumsky (Oxford: ABC-Clio, 1998), 877.

<sup>56</sup> Carl Abbott, review of *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* by Arnold Hirsch, *Public Historian*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (Winter 1986): 117.

<sup>57</sup> Arnold Hirsch. *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 133-4.

by simply moving out of city projects via suburban resettlement<sup>58</sup>, it was the inner ring suburb that was mostly transformed by the above relocations, not the relocators themselves. Here, and later when I refer specifically to Langley Park, I am employing a current usage of the term, “inner ring suburb,” that is distinct from the more technical geographic definition that limits its scope to the earliest developed suburbs (by this traditional definition, Langley Park would be a “second ring suburb”).

These suburbs had their popularly conceived image revamped when they lost their conventional makeup as its residents became more poor and more of color. “Conventional” refers to the way the suburbs have always occupied an imaginary space that was defined by more than just its literal translation of residential district outside the core city. Mary Corbin Sies describes this “suburban ideal” as “the belief that the best form of shelter is the single-family detached house with a garden and ample open space located in a homogenous, locally controlled community on the periphery of a city.”<sup>59</sup> This construction of the ideal was racialized as a “white upper-middle-class suburban ideal”<sup>60</sup> that had enormous currency then and still does today as is evidenced by the prevalence of the notion that “raising a family in a well-fitted home of one’s own in the suburbs remains at the center of the American Dream.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> “From Ghetto to Suburb,” *Economist* Vol. 37 October 7, 24.

<sup>59</sup> Mary Corbin Sies, “Suburban Ideal,” *The Encyclopedia of Urban America: The Cities and Suburbs*, ed. Neil Shumsky (Oxford: ABC-Clio, 1998), 754.

<sup>60</sup> Mary Corbin Sies, “Moving Beyond Scholarly Orthodoxies,” *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 27 No. 3 (March 2001): 359.

<sup>61</sup> Sies, “Suburban Ideal”: 755.

Of course all white suburbs were not identical, as Mary Corbin Sies articulates in “North American Suburbs, 1880-1950: Cultural and Social Reconsiderations,”<sup>62</sup> nor were suburbs all white, for that matter, as is demonstrated empirically by Andrew Wiese’s exhaustive text, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*<sup>63</sup>—a book that actually provides some specific contextualization for Langley Park and the surrounding areas. However complicated and illuminated by incongruity, this ideal was immensely pervasive and prescriptive. This is undeniable despite the fact that the exact impact of “the suburban ideal that has dominated mainstream thinking in the United States” is not completely understood.<sup>64</sup> Regardless, this ideal, as Mary Corbin Sies asserts, involves not only the material culture of buildings and landscape, but also the social tender of “ideas”<sup>65</sup> that was racialized, problematic and not limited to terrestrial setting.

In her study of “recently impoverished suburbs,” Alexandra K. Murphy concurs, writing that the “suburbs are more than a physical location outside of the metropolitan center. They have become the physical manifestation of American values and ideals.”<sup>66</sup> In inner-ring suburbs these qualities—imagined as oppositional to the city in terms of features such as home ownership or upward mobility—were gradually being unfastened from the conventional, geographic location of the suburbs,

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<sup>62</sup> Mary Corbin Sies, “North American Suburbs, 1880-1950: Cultural and Social Reconsiderations,” *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 27 (March 2001).

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>64</sup> Sies, “Moving Beyond...,” 359.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 754.

<sup>66</sup> Alexandra K. Murphy, “The Suburban Ghetto: the Legacy of Herbert Gans in Understanding the Experience of Poverty in Recently Impoverished American Suburbs.” *City and Community* Vol. 6 Issue 1 (March 2007): 22.

and replaced by yet another spatial designation that was being similarly detached from its original, physical location: the ghetto. Here I posit that, like the suburb that is popularly conceived in the public imagination as “part ideology, part physical environment,”<sup>67</sup> the term ghetto too has usage that is rooted in ideological constructions as well as geographic locality.

This transformation was replicated beyond Hirsch’s postwar Chicago. Although some my commentary on Langley Park focuses on the decades that precede Alexandra Murphy’s research on large suburbs during the 1990s, my final years in Adelphi don’t conclude until my high school graduation in 1995. Thus, it is anecdotally interesting that the face of some suburbs, however distinct from Langley Park in size, experienced an analogous revolution in the 1990s to what Hirsch describes before. The 2000 Census similarly testifies that there was a “dramatic transformation of poverty and inequality of the US in the 90’s.”<sup>68</sup> Poverty, while remaining disproportionately of color, “migrated from urban centers to inner ring burbs during this period.”<sup>69</sup> The poor remained who they were “only to be clustered elsewhere.”<sup>70</sup> The *Atlantic Monthly* pondered and contributed to naming this phenomenon by phrasing the title of their summary of as a question: “Suburban Ghetto?”<sup>71</sup>

The above stipulates that terms such as “ghetto” and “suburb” are value laden in such a way that they can operate independently from their conventional, physical

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<sup>67</sup>Sies, “Suburban Ideal,” 755.

<sup>68</sup> Murphy, 21.

<sup>69</sup> “The Suburban Ghetto?” *Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 292, Issue 2 (Sept 2003), 43.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

locations both in the imagination of their assumed inhabitants as well as in historical characteristics. For example, the new “suburban ghetto” suffered from the same frailties as the urban brand: crime, minority families in need of services, and high rates of dropouts to name a noticeable handful.<sup>72</sup> With social ills that rivaled those in inner cities, “...many argued that in the wake of suburban transformation the dichotomy between ‘urban’ and ‘suburban’ is no longer useful.”<sup>73</sup>

Some of this debate centers on critiques of the Chicago School’s classic ecology model of concentric zones and the interpretive lens that “ignored the diversity suburbs.”<sup>74</sup> For example, Todd Gardner’s research builds upon his critique of the influence Ernest Burgess’ *The City*, to “suggest that suburbanization was a more complex process than simply the migration of affluent central-city dwellers to the metropolitan periphery in the years prior to World War II.”<sup>75</sup> His study points to developmental differences between smaller metropolitan areas and the more commonly studied larger areas that indicate that suburbs were more complex, developing in relation to their urban counterparts differentially.

In the same issue of the *Journal of Urban History*, Richard Harris and Robert Lewis again question the utility of the Chicago School’s methodology en route to their reckoning with the city-suburb binary. They argue, “prewar suburbs were as socially diverse as the cities” to such a degree that “it is doubtful whether the city-

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<sup>72</sup> Murphy, 23.

<sup>73</sup> Murphy, 28.

<sup>74</sup> Todd Gardner, “The Slow Wave: The Changing Residential Status of Cities and Suburbs in the United States, 1850-1940,” *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 27 No. 3 (March 2001): 294.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 311.

suburban dichotomy was very significant.” In this particular context, they claim that the “blurring” of the line between city and suburb designated the difference “moot.”<sup>76</sup>

Other scholars question the border between the two, as well. Nancey Green Leigh and Sugie Lee make a similar point in their study of specific inner ring suburbs in Chicago, “The prevailing approach of examining a central city/suburbs dichotomy, along with aggregating data for analysis by “official” census definition of the central city and suburbs, is imply inadequate...”<sup>77</sup> Richard Harris and Robert Lewis address Burgess’ flawed model and how it contributed to finding “a contrast between industrial and residential suburbs and then to the singular myth of the middle class enclave.”<sup>78</sup> Greg Hise, drawing from his research on Los Angeles, doubts the “hierarchical and oppositional pairing of city and suburb,” pointing out that the boundaries have always been “more porous than the simple city/suburb dichotomy suggests.”<sup>79</sup>

I would argue that the distinction still has function, or at least calls for a new terminology, since both terms have utility conceptually beyond simplistic, reductive and misplaced monolithic descriptions of physical locality. Ghetto, in particular, has cultural significance that is rooted in historically black concentrations of poverty *in*

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Harris and Robert Lewis, “The Geography of North American Cities and Suburbs, 1900-1950: A New Synthesis,” *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 27 No. 3 (March 2001): 262.

<sup>77</sup> Nancey Green Leigh and Sugie Lee, “Philadelphia’s Space In Between: Inner Ring Suburb Evolution,” *Opolis: An International Journal of Suburban and Metropolitan Studies* Vol. 1 No. 1 (2005): 15.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Harris and Robert Lewis, “Constructing a Fault(y) Zone: Misrepresentations of American Cities and Suburbs 1900-1950,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol. 88 No. 4 (May 1998), abstract.

<sup>79</sup> Greg Hise, *Magnetic Los Angeles: Planning the Twentieth Century Metropolis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 4.

*cities*, yes, but it has morphed to incorporate characteristics of that grouping that exist outside where and what has been traditionally considered “black” or “ghetto.”

In describing his book, *In Place/ Out of Place*, Tim Cresswell, contends that “people, things and practices were often strongly linked to particular places and that when this link was broken—when people acted ‘out of place’—they were deemed to have committed a transgression.”<sup>80</sup>

These “transgressions,” such as graffiti on public walls in New York, were based on the “common sense link between place and the things that go on it.”<sup>81</sup> Ghetto, as a place, has similar “common sense” connections to what is constructed by its inhabitants (and outsiders) as appropriate to it. In this light “ghetto” is just as related to a literal, terrestrial categorization as it is to a collective, cultural identity marked by specific experiences that are believed to occur there. Murray Forman, in examining how place is used in hip hop music posits that, “methods of constructing place-based identities” are crafted by attention to “cultural boundaries” that are “continually open to negotiation and renegotiation.”<sup>82</sup> Place, as defined by its inhabitants, moves, both literally and figuratively.

In fact, the very language of urban blackness that infiltrated and altered inner ring suburbs “emphasizes territoriality” that is not literal. For example, in Chapter Nine of my memoir, Marcus dismisses the kids who ride buses to rival neighborhoods by shouting, “Two one two, homies,” despite the fact that he is a middle-schooler with no legitimate ties to the 212 gang other than the fact that he lives off of Route

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<sup>80</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place, A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 27.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Murray Forman, “‘Represent’: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music.” *Popular Music* Vol. 19, No. 1 (Jan 2000): 67.

212.<sup>83</sup> Some classmates who did not even reside near Riggs Road/ Powder Mill Road, still loudly claimed 212 (“two one two”). Gangs ruthlessly guard streets of which they have no ownership, and even the general black colloquialism, “homie” or “homeboy,” which refers to home discursively as a site of shared experience and kinship, is not necessarily coupled with unambiguous avenues and districts.<sup>84</sup>

Geographic identity is not immutable, nor is it bound to the ground. A social construction, “ghetto” is neither cemented to urban centers nor does this mean it can be totally divorced from the schematics of color. Ghetto, as a racialized term, applied to specifically black localizations of poverty in urban areas. When these poor black moved, the term ghetto tagged along since the point of emphasis in the word was more race and class, and less locale. In fact, it is an example of how “...no geography is complete, no understanding of place or landscape comprehensive, without recognizing that American geography, both as a discipline and the spatial expression of American life, is racialized.”<sup>85</sup>

This is evidenced by the history of Langley Park where I grew up, a census-designated place (Class UI which designates communities not associated with facilities) in suburban Prince George’s County that in some ways follows the trajectory of the inner ring suburb delineated above despite technically being a second ring suburb, while diverging from that narrative, as well. Langley Park’s development does not fully align with Hirsch’s second ghetto, for example, since much of what

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<sup>83</sup> A. Sandosharaj, “Ghetto Proclivities” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2008), 162.

<sup>84</sup> Forman, 73.

<sup>85</sup> Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake, “Racism out of Place: Thoughts on Whiteness and an Antiracist Geography in the New Millennium.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol. 90. No. 2 (June 2000): 392.

distinguishes the second ghetto from the first was involvement of official authorities via what Hirsch calls, “deep government involvement.”<sup>86</sup>

Such was not the case for Langley Park, nor were any migrants to Langley Park, black or Latino, subject to any documented violent resistance, a second distinguishing trait of the second ghetto. Yet, though it may not qualify for Hirsch’s definition of a second ghetto, or technically as a inner ring suburb since the “majority of its houses were built after 1958,”<sup>87</sup> I argue that Langley Park can be and is defined by many of its inhabitants as a kind of “ghetto,” that is verified by conceptualizations of the ghetto that extend beyond geography (however ugly and unfortunate these perceptions may seem to academic perspectives that cringe at such stereotypical renderings); moreover, Langley Park in some ways overlaps with the patterns of development and decline that mark inner ring suburbs, patterns that, not incidentally, are beginning to mirror characteristics of the inner-city and/or “ghetto.”

The less than one and a half square mile expanse of Langley Park was developed initially as a white enclave for soldiers returning in postwar droves, but eventually the community underwent two significant demographic shifts in the last quarter of the century: first, black residents replaced white families by the 1970s; next, a huge influx of Latino immigrants followed, due in part at least to the numerous civil wars that ravaged central America during the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hirsch, *Remaking...*, ix.

<sup>87</sup> *IDcide*- Local Information Date Server, City Profiles- Takoma Park, [www.idcide.com/realestate/md/langley-park.htm](http://www.idcide.com/realestate/md/langley-park.htm) (August 76, 2008).

<sup>88</sup> William Hanna, “Mobility and the Children of Langley Park Families.” *The Journal of Negro Education* Vol. 72, No. 1 (Winter 2003): 64.

This transition occurred in the decade of my early adolescence, when the majority black population was increasingly replaced by the Hispanic immigrants who now make up nearly three fourths of the estimated 16,000 inhabitants counted by the 2000 Census.<sup>89</sup> This figure theoretically indicates that the overall population in Langley Park declined from the 1990 tally of 17,500, despite it being “the second most densely populated areas in the state of Maryland.”<sup>90</sup> There is, however, much to point to undercounting especially in Hispanic communities where fear of INS is prominent, and local scholars estimate the figure to be several thousand higher.

From 1990 to 2000, the Hispanic population increased by 53%, while the Asian population decreased significantly.<sup>91</sup> In actual numbers, the 1990 Census indicates that the black population was larger than the Hispanic at the time, 7594 to 6456, respectively.<sup>92</sup> This is dramatically inverted a decade later when the Hispanic population nearly doubled to 10,294 and the black population dwindled to 4290. This data is complicated by racial markers that do not necessarily coincide with typical constructions of racial and ethnic identity. Specifically, Hispanic residents can racially identify as either black or white. By 2000, Langley Park’s overall population was nearly 73% Hispanic including those Hispanics who identified as white. The

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<sup>89</sup> William Hanna argues that this figure is considerably higher, around 20,000, due to underreporting by residents who fear deportation. William Hanna, “Creating Public Space for A Better Community Langley Park, Maryland,” Langley Park Project (2002): [http://www.mncppc.org/Takoma\\_langley\\_Crossroads/Reports/Public\\_space\\_Langley\\_Park\\_umd\\_study\\_plan\\_2000.pdf](http://www.mncppc.org/Takoma_langley_Crossroads/Reports/Public_space_Langley_Park_umd_study_plan_2000.pdf)

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> US Bureau of Census, “Summary Tape File 1 for Langley Park, MD (CDP),” *1990 Census of Population and Housing* (1990).

non-Hispanic white population, what is typically considered “white,” was 5%, about 881 persons, a decline from the 1990 figure of 1850 for the same group.<sup>93</sup>

1990 data on the Asian population is less conclusive since specific fact sheets on Indian Asians are not available because less than fifty unweighted sample cases exists for Indian Asians in Langley Park. The overall Asian population (this includes both East, Southeast, and South Asians) in 1990 was 1562, however.<sup>94</sup> This, like the black population, declined substantially by the 2000 Census to just 550 or 3.5% of total populations. Specific data for Asian Indians does exist in 2000 Census: they make up 1.3% of the total population in Langley Park,<sup>95</sup> a figure that would appear to be proportionate to the national population percentage. It is not proportionate in the light of Langley Park’s specific make up of overwhelmingly immigrant and/or of color residents.

The dramatic ethnic and racial reallocation that occurred in the decade between the Census’ reports is illustrated by a quick survey of High Point’s yearbooks. My brother’s set of four begins with the 1986-87 school year and is the last completely black and white yearbook. Thereafter, the opening pages and the senior section are in color. Flipping through the pages of each succeeding record, the change in racial make up is obvious. What starts as a somewhat mixed school, rapidly becomes a predominantly black school by my brother’s graduation in 1990. My set of five yearbooks (I spent my eighth grade year at High Point as well) traces the ensuing

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<sup>93</sup> 2000 Census.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> US Bureau of Census, “Table DP.1 Profile of General Demographic Characteristics for Langley Park, Maryland (CDP),” *2000 Census* (2000).

trend. By my senior year in 1995, the school has a significant Latino population. When I scan the yearbooks of a friend's younger sibling, the transformation is complete; High Point's ethnic majority appears to be Latino. Understandably then, much of the contemporary scholarship on Langley Park such as Judith Freidenberg's seminal research<sup>96</sup>, focuses on the Hispanic population that makes up the majority of the residents, a departure from my concentration.

This is not to say that Langley Park is or was ever culturally monolithic. In addition to its black and Latino populace, the community boasts of an extreme "ethnic variety"<sup>97</sup> that led Judith Freidenberg to remark in her own work as well as in a *Washington Post* article that the area may "deserve a museum."<sup>98</sup> This extraordinary diversity is especially vivid along its "International Corridor" which is marked by "...a large concentration or clustering of international restaurants, grocery stores, night clubs, retail stores, and micro-enterprises, all of which define the unique character of the neighborhood."<sup>99</sup> This racial and ethnic mixture distinguishes Langley Park from much of the rest of the nation where, as Sheryll Cashin points out, most Americans "do not share life space with other races or classes."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Judith Freidenberg, "Research Initiatives on Latino Immigrants in a Low-Income Enclave Close to a Major University Campus," *Journal of Latino-Latin Studies* Vol. 2 No. 2 (Fall-Winter 2006); Ibid, "Latino Community Identity and Development: The Case of a Community Museum in Langley Park, Maryland," *Journal of Latino-Latin Studies* Vol. 2 No. 2 (Fall-Winter 2006); Ibid, "Elderly Latinos of Langley Park: Understanding Retirement Issues," *Journal of Latino-Latin Studies* Vol. 2 No. 2 (Fall-Winter 2006).

<sup>97</sup> Carolyn Feola, "Langley Park: Maryland's International Corridor," *The Washington Post*, July 6, 2002, p.H1.

<sup>98</sup> Dan Morse, "Langley Park: The Museum? Cultural Exhibits Envisioned," *Washington Post* March 13, 2006.

<sup>99</sup> William Hanna, "Langley Park: Youth and the Neighborhood," Langley Park Project Research Team (1998): <http://lasc.umd.edu/Projects/LangleyPark/youth.htm>. (4/24/07)

<sup>100</sup> Sheryll Cashin, *The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class Are Undermining the American Dream* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

In Chapter One, I describe the diversity of commercial activity that lined New Hampshire and University Boulevard, culminating with the “Nicaraguan lady who sold papusas from a hand cart.”<sup>101</sup> I recall eagerly awaiting the erection of the International Mall on University Boulevard and being surprised that it was unlike what I considered a “real” mall, in that there were no franchises whatsoever and much of the signage was in a language other than English. I knew then, although I did not have the emblematic language or intellectual urge to name it, that I did not live in an average suburb populated by average suburbanites. This perception of mine was based, erroneously, in the “suburban ideal” described above, a generalization that runs counter to empirical evidence that points towards a much more diverse reality for suburbs both historically and in contemporary renderings.

Although Langley Park does not truly qualify as a second ghetto by Hirsch’s rubric, its evolution does share some attributes. Peter O. Muller delineates how the “spillover” process operated in Glenarden, an area nearby Langley Park, when the most destitute blacks moved from inner ghettos to outer ghettos while inner ring suburban areas attracted more middle-class black families. “Glenarden, Maryland, just beyond the northeastern city line of Washington, DC, is typical of black communities in the inner suburban spillover zone.”<sup>102</sup> In this way, Langley Park can be viewed as an inner ring suburb, part of what Andrew Wiese describes as

the inner ring suburbanization that was especially pronounced in metropolitan areas with geographically small central cities and large black populations, places like Newark, St. Louis and Washington, DC, where expanding African

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<sup>101</sup> A. Sandosharaj (diss), 42.

<sup>102</sup> Muller, 89.

American neighborhoods reached city limits sooner than elsewhere.<sup>103</sup>

Langley Park is related to the singular history of Prince George's County, the oft cited "Mecca" of middle class black families. Wiese details the spillover shift from northeastern DC to many neighborhoods in Maryland including those that are often synonymous with and or contiguous to Langley Park including Glenarden, Takoma Park, Chillum and Brentwood.<sup>104</sup> The large scale migrations were met with white flight, or as Wiese puts it plainly, "As black families moved in, whites moved out."<sup>105</sup> This is a simplified distillation of the phenomena of white flight that is more thoroughly defined by Orser in the *Encyclopedia of Urban America: The Cities and Suburbs* cited above.

When Langley Park gradually became a majority of-color sector it, much like Hirsh's suburbs in Chicago and other inner suburbs, took on the accoutrements of what is conventionally attributed to the ghetto: high drop out rates, low education by adults, fear of police, crowded schools, lack of public recreation space and a general desire, however variably realized, to leave.<sup>106</sup> According to Jonathan D. Miller and Myron Orfield, this "plight of maturing suburbs" can be also be called "the second urban crisis."<sup>107</sup> This might seem like a reductive characterization that mirrors too closely the first pathologized accounts of the "ghetto" by white sociologists, but it describes "on the pavement" cultural constructions by many of the people who

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<sup>103</sup> Wiese, 244.

<sup>104</sup> Wiese, 272.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 272.

<sup>106</sup> Hanna, "Langley Park: Youth..." 66.

<sup>107</sup> Jonathan D. Miller and Myron Orfield, "Suburbs in Flux," *Urban Land* (March 1998), 44.

inhabited Langley Park when I lived there. This can of course result in negative constructions that too closely echo essentialist and ill-formed accounts excoriated by Robin Kelley in *Yo Mama's Disfunktional*, but they remain valid as insider constructions and are perhaps compelling because of the uncomfortable overlap.<sup>108</sup>

Nancey Green Leigh and Sugie Lee, in their case study of Philadelphia reiterate the point that inner ring suburbs “are increasingly vulnerable to socio-economic decline and exhibits symptoms of decline similar to those found in inner cities (white flight, population loss and increased poverty).”<sup>109</sup> Census data confirms that Langley Park fits, the number of families earning below the poverty line increasing between 1990 and 2000 from 10.7% to 11.3%.<sup>110</sup> This is not a significant increase, but Langley Park’s communities are poor; the medium income for families in 2000 was under \$40,000. The Langley Park of my memoir reflects the same, as well, as I describe in Chapter One, “numbers of drug dealers and hoodlums, and the standard amounts of trash associated with the ghetto...”<sup>111</sup> Even when a body is found on the playground at Broad Acres in the following section, neither teacher nor students are alarmed.<sup>112</sup> As William Hanna concurs in his description of Langley Park, “The word ‘ghetto’ comes to mind.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> I discuss this tension and Robin Kelley’s specific points more extensively in the last interlude that follows the end of the memoir.

<sup>109</sup> Nancey Green Leigh and Sugie Lee, “Philadelphia’s Space In Between: Inner Ring Suburb Evolution,” *Opolis: An International Journal of Suburban and Metropolitan Studies* Vol. 1 No. 1 (2005): 13.

<sup>110</sup> Census, *ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 42.

<sup>112</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 43.

<sup>113</sup> Hanna, “Langley Park: Youth and the...,” 2.

I do not mean here to imply that the only things meaningful occurring in my old neighborhood were these somewhat cliché details of crime and social dereliction, but rather to point to the significance of these events, not as definitional nor as singular, but as influential. Violent crime exploded in the DC Metropolitan area during my adolescence, the Murder Capital's homicide causally linked to the appearance of crack cocaine. Wiese delineates how this manifested in neighborhoods like Lanham, another Black neighborhood not far from Langley Park,

During the eighties and nineties, inner Beltway suburbs like Capitol Heights, Lanham, Landover and Glenarden became corridors for drug trafficking and violence that included execution style murders, drive by shootings, serial rapes and other crimes.<sup>114</sup>

How can the crime rate in Langley Park<sup>115</sup>, when combined with racialized images of violence and crime in popular media, not impact the social worlds and self-perceptions of its inhabitants? Although I address this more thoroughly in the last interlude, a specific example here might serve my point.

In Chapter Ten, I detail how a neighborhood friend, Marcus, clips a pager “prominently to the front of his jeans.” This was something most of my friends did despite pagers, or “beepers” as they were known then, being banned at school. We continued to carry pagers to school, despite the fact that very often they were unfunctional (either unactivated or broken) not to demonstrate independence or wealth, but to imply that we were involved in the drug trade. This was one of the main reasons administrators espoused when explaining the ban. “Hustling” or being a

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<sup>114</sup> Wiese, 281.

<sup>115</sup> For example, according to *Sperling's Best Places to Live*, on a scale of 1-10, Langley Park scored a 6 for violent crime and a 7 for property crime; the national averages for both are 3.  
<http://sperlingsbestplaces.net/crime>

“hustler” of drugs was so (racistly) integral to how we perceived “ghetto” and our connection to it that we *pretended* to sell drugs. At local convenience stores, you could even buy plastic toy pagers filled with sticks of gum. Was everyone in Langley Park involved in the commerce of drugs? Of course not. Was everyone in Langley Park affected by the presence of the drug trade? I would argue yes. Were young people particularly and uniquely susceptible to the effects of real proximity on the block and in hallways, and presumed proximity presented by media constructions? Surely.

Not only did my experience and value system coincide with these essentialized, racialized constructions of ghetto identity they also echoed the trials of my Latino neighbors. My father, like many immigrants, was panicky about acquiring green cards and work permits (“papers”), his primary and perpetual worry devoted to what Hanna describes as a constant “struggling to stay in the country.”<sup>116</sup> In Chapter One my father panics at the thought of my mother tossing “some correspondence about the status of the elusive green card,”<sup>117</sup> which continued for years to be what I call “Appa’s White Whale.”<sup>118</sup>

In this way, our story diverged from the conventional trajectory of most South Asian immigrants. Neither of my parents directly benefited from the “special skills provision” in the 1965 Immigration Act that opened the doors for highly educated South Asians. In Chapter Ten I detail how Appa managed to turn a tourist visa into a work permit. Although this designation permitted him to remain in the US legally, it

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<sup>116</sup> Hanna, “Mobility and the Children of...,” 69.

<sup>117</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 26.

<sup>118</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 178.

“slid his green card application to the end of an intestinally long line.”<sup>119</sup> Worse, it forced him to miss a crucial opportunity later when in 1986 the Immigration Reform and Control Act offered amnesty to those illegal aliens who could establish that they had been decent, hard working citizens since 1982 despite entering the US illicitly. This was a hard blow for my father who felt it was cruel luck that he would be punished for establishing himself legally. Thus, he, my mother and brother held more in common with Hispanic immigrants who worried incessantly about green cards and citizenship than with their own ethnic peers.

Our family also aligned with our Hispanic cohort in the arena of public schooling. I attended Langley Park’s school cluster—one of a few elementary schools, Cherokee Lane Elementary, and then to the only middle and high schools Langley Park students attend, Bucklodge Middle and High Point High, respectively. Despite their sincere desire that my brother and I do well in school and their conviction that school was the essential route to material and existential success, both my parents avoided interacting with my teachers out of deference and unfamiliarity that created a “rigid boundary between home and school.”<sup>120</sup>

At the end of Chapter Two I long for a father who could be like a friend’s mom, a parent who “came to teacher conferences with questions, ready for eye contact.”<sup>121</sup> This desire is repeated when I convince my father to speak with the teacher who has banned me from the sixth grade class trip, I am disappointed to find that she did not capitulate. I speculate that if Sarah Brockman’s white mother had

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<sup>119</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 187.

<sup>120</sup> Hanna, 69.

<sup>121</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 65.

been in Appa's position, the end result would have been more favorable. It is notable that I do not pose Michael or Frederick's black parents in my analogy. In my imagination, it is whiteness that oils the way.

It is not only my parents who ease away from what they perceive as the bureaucratic officiality of school, but the schools themselves who brazenly ignore my parents even when legality, if not morality, would impel them to invite them in. Whether I was being yanked from challenging reading groups in the first grade in Chapter Three or suffering from a Mr. Bouma's sexualized misconduct in Chapter Nine, school administrators did not seem to worry my parents would pry or be incensed that they were not informed about these fairly meaningful events. In this way, my family's story overlapped with those with whom we did not share ethnicity or race, but only class.

This illustrates how my connection to Langley Park is defined by a racialized class identity that overlaps and departs from my literal ethnic identity. Daniel Arreola asserts that ethnic identity is complex. "Ethnic group perception as a concept is socially constructed through historical experience, therefore every ethnic stereotype has a historical geography."<sup>122</sup> Though the collective structural narrative of South Asian immigrants as model minorities directed some of my life choices, perhaps in how I was tracked as a third grader or how I was treated once I entered high school, my individual story deviates from the common historical arc both for South Asians in general, but also for those *desis* who lived briefly in Langley Park upon their initial

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<sup>122</sup> Daniel D. Arreola, "The Picture Postcard Mexican Housescape: The Visual Culture and Domestic Identity," in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, ed. Richard H. Schein. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 127.

entry into the US. While many of my Indian neighbors and friends exited Langley Park as soon as their parents were able to wield their native educations as avenues to second ring suburbs like Gaithersburg and Silver Spring, my parents remained in Langley Park and Adelphi, bound by the unusual circumstances of a peculiar visa situation, lack of education and mental illness.

Despite its primarily immigrant constitution, Asians are a marked minority amongst Langley Park's Latinos, Caribbean islanders and Africans, and South Asians even more so.<sup>123</sup> Nonetheless, much of my extended family and Indian community members were part of the diminishing minority of Indians who spent their initial years in the US in Langley Park's numerous apartment complexes. This was the result of the original families entering the US via jobs located in nearby Washington, D.C. with either the World Bank or the Indian Embassy. Once these first families established informal churches, subsequent families spent their first years adjusting to the US amongst a network of families that knew how to navigate the public bus system and where to find local Indian stores.<sup>124</sup> They never remained for long, however. Being able to separate from economically undesirable neighborhoods and people is a crucial aspect of the upward mobility.<sup>125</sup> This culminating distinction between my family and the Indianness I envisioned around me surely played a role in

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<sup>123</sup> US Bureau of Census, 2000 Census.

<sup>124</sup> Daphne Charles, "Quick Survey," email to author, October 28, 2007.  
Anita Abraham, "Quick Survey," email to author, October 28, 2007.  
Shereen Samuel, "Quick Survey," email to author, October 28, 2007.  
Julia Pulidindi, "Quick Survey," email to author, October 28, 2007.  
Sundeev Moses, "Quick Survey," email to author, October 30, 2007.  
Ravi D'Souza, "Quick Survey," email to author, October 28, 2007.  
Jocelyn Joseph, "Quick Survey," email to author, October 28, 2007.  
Rajesh Khandagle, "Quick Survey," email to author, November 1, 2007.  
Sindy Edward, "Quick Survey," email to author, October 30, 2007.

<sup>125</sup> Cashin, *ibid.*

my disconnecting from my ethnic identity and searching for cultural affiliations with those whom I had more in common with on a daily basis. Unlike my ethnic peers, our residence in Langley Park was temporary only in the sense that we did not own property; my family was not on the fast track out of Langley Park.

My parents were more like their black and Latino neighbors in Langley Park than they were like those who had arrived alongside them from the subcontinent during the years that followed the implementation of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, even those few who opened their American stories in Langley Park. The legislation, which primarily reunited eastern European families, also invited skilled labor from all over the globe to provide the US with more technical teeth for the Cold War.<sup>126</sup> “The 1965 Immigration act, for the first time since 1924, allowed for a relatively large number of Asians to enter the US.”<sup>127</sup> The South Asians of this legion were particularly well-educated on the whole.

Between 1966 and 1977, of the Indian Americans who migrated to the United States, 83 percent entered the occupation category of the professional and technical workers (roughly 20,000 scientists with Ph.D.’s, 40,000 engineers, and 25,000 doctors. These early migrations of technical workers came mainly from India.<sup>128</sup>

This legislation was “tightened” in 1976 via a series of amendments that required immigrants to have “firm job offers,”<sup>129</sup> but Appa managed to enter the US in 1973 in an uncommon way: via a tourist visa whose expiration he had not intention

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<sup>126</sup> Bill Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian American through Immigration Policy, 1850-1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 102.

<sup>127</sup> Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 2001), 114.

<sup>128</sup> Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 75.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 77-8.

of abiding. Moreover, unlike most of the South Asian “techno-professional workers”<sup>130</sup> who entered the US during the post-Sputnik panic that impelled the above laws, neither Appa nor Amma had gone further than high school. As relatives and associates took turns with exodus, we remained behind in the ghettos of Langley Park and Adelphi.

Patrick Moynihan did much to label the process of ghettoization in his famed report for Lyndon Johnson.<sup>131</sup> In addition to exerting “the potential to categorize and circumscribe black identity”<sup>132</sup> in troubling ways, the now notorious Moynihan Report was inextricably defined by his perception that poor, urban black communities were suffering from ghettoization. In “assigning a particular identity to ghetto blacks”<sup>133</sup> he aided in racializing the ghetto and coding what he perceived as urban “pathology” as black, yes, but also in establishing the ghetto as a mental construction and *cultural* reference related to, but not limited by, location. Stephen Nathan Haynes, in his review of Tim Cresswell’s book, *In Place/Out of Place* that I also cite, reiterates that place is not simply a terrestrial locale. “Place plays a substantial role in constituting ideology; it is central to the process of defining assumptions about what are good, just and appropriate behaviors in and between different geographic contexts.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>131</sup> David Sears and John B. McConahay, *The Politics of Violence: The New Urban Blacks and the Watts Riot* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 25.

<sup>132</sup> Philip Hanson, “The Politics of the Inner City Identity in ‘Do the Right Thing.’” *South Central Review* Vol. 20 No. 2/4 (Summer-Winter, 2003): 52.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>134</sup> Stephen Nathan Haynes, review of “In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression,” by Tim Cresswell, *Journal of Architectural Education* vol. 51 no. 2 (Nov 1997): 139.

My connection to the “place” of Langley Park was colored by its inhabitants’ cultural definition of it as a “ghetto,” a place-based identity that I took as my own, despite how it was complicated by other cultural, structural, and factors. Although usage of the term “ghetto,” by both myself and my peers is technically problematic, it is meaningful that we utilized such language in constructing our cross-pollinated, polycultural identities. I explore the complexities and inherent thorniness of this identification throughout my memoir and expressly in the last interlude.

This identification does raises two particularly thick questions I would like to examine here. First, what caused me to disengage from my South Asian ethnic identity? This isn’t to say I revoked membership in that cultural world, but that I progressively deemphasized its role. As a child, my first language was Tamil and my parents, however desirous of certain kinds of American acceptance, instilled in me first and foremost an ethnically Indian identity. This was evidenced by the usage of Tamil pronouns of respect instead of proper names, for example. I never called my older brother or my older cousins by name without attaching the appropriate suffixes of respect. My uncles and aunts were designated by their specific relational title. “Mama” for example was reserved only for my mother’s brother. The barathanatym solo I describe in the Prologue was not limited to my childhood. I took classical dance lessons until I was old enough to declare myself too busy with school, performing in full regalia half a dozen times at various community functions. I watched endless Bollywood films with my mother, films Appa rented from the Indian Emporium where the prickly scent of fennel permeated even the surrounding stores. I ate so regularly with my hands that utensils always remained foreign and my nail beds were

always tinged with a sunny yellow from cumin (and ridged from vitamin deficiencies, for that matter). In Chapter Five, I describe the “airport of shoes” that lined our front door. Like most Asian families, we did not wear shoes indoors.

Despite these personal, daily links to South Asian culture, I believe the larger social disconnect I felt in my parent’s socio-economic difference, as well as the general strangeness that originated from my mother’s mental illness, led me to inch away from my South Asian background. In addition to our family remaining in Langley Park while our relatives and community members moved away, I was continually reminded of how our family, and I in particular, failed to meet Indian standards of comportment and membership.

By Chapter Two, I had already begun to feel “American, unbrown,” although I also understood that “jokes about dot heads” referred to me as well.<sup>135</sup> Adult members of our community routinely indicated that I had missed some essential element of proper training as when Mama scolded me for calling him, “this man” in Chapter Three. He was only rerunning an old complaint. I was often chastised for failing to use the correct title of respect. Later in the same chapter, when Anna’s Indian friends Sutesh and Namesh tease us about the war zone disarray of our house, the insult was no general censure but an attack that targeted our Indian failure. This is substantiated by Appa’s reaction; he would never have engaged in a public clash with our anonymous American friend’s families. Theirs was an insult to our Indianness. It was not only me, but our family that falls short. In our home, it was Appa who devised delicious meals in the kitchen, a shamefulness he hid for years. My mother

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<sup>135</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 64.

discovered the subterfuge “at some function, smiling stiffly as some uncle praised her for dishes so robust she knew she had never cooked them.”<sup>136</sup>

Amma was the most detectable miss. Indian mothers were supposed to be excellent cooks, maintain immaculate kitchens and defer, at least in public, to their husbands. My mother’s Indian shortcomings did not seem to know any limit. What a nuisance I was to my dance teacher Rani Auntie on those dance performance days! While other Indian aunties carefully prepared their daughters for the stage, Rani Auntie had to waste precious minutes applying my make up and rigging my costume and hair because my mother was too inept to do so. “I remember thinking, as Rani Auntie badmouthed Amma to my face, ‘Wow, Amma doesn’t even know how to use bobby pins. I had no idea, though they were always scattered in my hair, how securely they could be fastened to your head.’”<sup>137</sup>

As much as I despised Amma for her ineptitude at basic Indian instruction (to this day I am unable to wind a sari elegantly around me), and agreed with the adult Indian censure that trailed her, I felt equally indicted by their criticisms of her. As I grew, I willfully banished Indian adults whenever possible. I quit barathanatym class as soon as possible. I even made many of them “nameless.” “Other than Mama and Athai—both of whom had singular titles—the rest formed an amorphous cloud of judging witnessing eyes from whom I preferred to keep a buffer.”<sup>138</sup>

This distancing resulted in an unusually intensified desire for an American identity. This is not to imply that the desire for an American identity was unique to

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<sup>136</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 28.

<sup>137</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 77.

<sup>138</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 113.

me, but rather to assert that the peculiar structural and personal circumstances of my childhood led me to enter the process earlier and more vigorously than my Indian relatives and friends. My cousins and friends like Shereen each remained deeply connected to Indian communities and social norms—dating for example Indian partners— while I did not. This extreme desire for an American identity manifested racially, as my sense of what constituted Americanness evolved within the context of social phenomena such as the white flight of all my neighbors on Lynmont, the concentrated violence of the Murder Capital Years that appeared in home in the form of a illegal handgun, and the explosive popularity of black cultural forms such as hip hop that instructed me and everyone I knew on how to “conversate,” look fly and go hard.

Which brings me to the second thick question raised by my usage of the term ghetto: Why would I identify with an identity that is routinely disparaged and popularly translated as pathological? And moreover, how? After all, “North American Blackness is governed by how it is negatively located in a race-conscious society.”<sup>139</sup>I would qualify this assertion by pointing out a paradoxical claim that American Blackness is equally valorized and romanticized as well as vilified. In fact, I believe stances not only co-exist but fuel each other. Scholar Awad El Karim M. Ibrahim, in attempting to get at viable teaching methods for his raced students in Ontario, volleys a question that echoes through several phases of my memoir and that I hope to explore in the essay that follows the next section: “...what symbolic, cultural,

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<sup>139</sup> Awad El Karim M. Ibrahim, “Becoming Black: Rap and Hip Hop, Race, Gender, Identity and the Politics of ESL Learning.” *TESOL Quarterly* Vol. 33, No. 3 (Autumn 1999): 349.

pedagogical, and identity investments would learners have in locating themselves politically and racially at the margin of representation?”<sup>140</sup> My investment in such an identity, while fundamentally correlated to forces outside of my reign, was in part an active choice. How I developed this identity as a young adult, what I gained, how I synthesized it with other components of my identity and how this might complicate, confirm or contribute to existing conversations on American identities, are the topics that will be addressed in the subsequent pages of the memoir and in the two interludes therein.

## **Chapter Five**

I got fat. From inactivity, mostly. Perhaps my afternoons would have been more eventful if I lived near my new best friend, a bored Chinese girl who was either left alone under the distant supervision of her much older brothers or fettered behind Plexiglas at her parents’ carry out in southeast DC, The Wonderful Carry-Out. As soon as I had arrived at Cherokee Lane Elementary, tittering classmates informed me that there was already another Alice in the second grade. This was relayed in whispers steeped in anticipation. How would two girls with the same name act?

When I saw her in the hallway—we had different teachers—we exchanged rickety waves. Alice was the prettiest girl, even then fulfilling an Asian stereotype by wearing stylish clothes. A baggy sweater from Benetton, a keychain wallet from Louis Vuitton. We would all become attentive to brands—the American consumer evolution continued—but through the guardianship of her brothers, Alice was the

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 350.

first. When we finally conferred during recess, we were both charmed by our connection. Only we understood the mendacity of our names; Alice was meant for old ladies and Shirley Temple types in Wonderland.

“Your name is Alice,” I started. I had found her doing flips on the rings, dangerous play careless teachers never reprimanded.

“Do you want,” she paused for a fancy dismount, “to be best friends?”

Though I had already sworn faithfulness to a cloying Cathy Waife, a black girl with venomous breath who was allowed to sport sunglasses because of healing pink eye, I was immediately swayed by Alice’s good looks.

“Sure,” I answered. It was official.

Despite our allegiance, we spent little time together. Alice rode a bus and I walked home. She called everyday to ask, Alice, can you talk? Then we would chat for whole afternoons, sometimes playing different games simultaneously—Alice running a record store, me conducting experiments in a vaguely titled “science” lab.

We also mailed letters packed with trinkets—coins from our countries, bars of fancy hand soap.

Not that I didn’t have friends who lived on my street. Blond-headed Lauren—*strawberry* blond her mother always corrected—and her tantrum prone baby sister Robin had two backyard swing sets, dollhouses and a basement playroom stocked with numerous naked Barbies and Kens, their wardrobes piled into a vinyl pink carrying case.

After school they walked to their babysitter’s, Mrs. Velee, whose grandmotherly affections I desired enough to tolerate humiliation. Mrs. Velee was an

introduction to both the borders white people could draw around their personal territory and, more importantly, my willingness to broach those frontiers.

“Get your bike,” instructed Lauren that first afternoon, “and come over to Ms. Velee’s.” She nodded up the Velee’s steep driveway. Parked there were full-sized SUV and motorboat, toys for Velee’s retirement. Unlike Amma, who had babysat because Appa told her to, the Velees babysat because they were hospitable neighbors.

“What about Robin?” I disliked Lauren’s baby sister. She was permitted to explode for any fraction of ridicule; moreover, Lauren—unlike the older siblings I knew—did not have license to smack sense into her.

Lauren rolled her eyes. “Maybe she won’t want to come.”

I doubted that, but headed to my emptied house a few lawns away. Initially, Anna was supposed to stay with me after school, but soon, as his popularity at Buck Lodge Middle ballooned, he was impatient to roam the afternoon wilderness, often back to Langley Park to meet up with Chin.

“You can’t just stay here?” His expression had fused pleading with disbelief. How could anyone be *that* afraid of staying alone? He had wedged himself into the triangular space made by the half open front door. Outside in our crumbling driveway, was Anna’s Huff; in the street his friends circled on their bikes like birds.

“It’s day time,” he pointed out.

Though Anna didn’t know it, Alice Ip stayed home alone after nearly every school day, sometimes deep into eleven o’clock. This fact embarrassed me. I wondered how to prevent Anna from discovering from it. Maybe he already knew it, and was preparing to judge me with it now.

“Even Anton’s little brother stays home alone,” said Anna, halting for effect. “He’s a *kindergartner*.”

In keeping with my childish failings, a reference to someone younger, significantly younger to my second grade mind, could induce me to tackle my fears. Moreover, if I agreed Anna would owe me. We would be in cahoots.

“Will you be home soon?” I asked.

“Really soon,” he answered. From the driveway, he granted me a nod as he joined his comrades. Then their backs were carousel horses pumping up and down as they pedaled up Lynmont and away.

Thereafter, I reveled in my new status. Whenever the evening news devoted a segment to latch key kids left alone to navigate gas stoves and younger siblings, I felt belonging. I was one of those. I suffered a unique set of after school risks. I wore a key around my neck. I was part of a phenomenon.

Today I hardly entered the house, opening the door only enough to slide my book bag beside an airport of shoes; like most traditional Indian families, we did not wear shoes indoors though we never gave the rule any verbal tonnage. It was a natural adjustment in India where the streets were lined with sewage. Here it seemed provincial. Whenever I invited my friends over, I was too shy to order their sneakers off, too afraid I’d embarrass them by forcing them to reveal dingy socks or worse; maybe they’d find the practice primitive. Bare feet, after all, were reserved for pools, beaches and hippies.

Once the door was locked, I boarded my pink racer, a bike that up until the move was pretty spectacular. It had the deeply scooped handle bars of a Harley, a

long banana seat and plastic streamers. It ranked low, however, beside the grown up ten speeds Lauren and Robin steered around. I tossed it on the sidewalk in front of Mrs. Velee's and knocked the side door.

Inside I heard the cacophony of after school cartoons. Beneath that, a muffled Lauren, Robin and then Mrs. Velee.

I knocked again.

When Ms. Velee finally swung open the door, she revealed a navy carpeted family room and herself, as plump as grandmothers should be. She wore a purple pantsuit, brandless white sneakers and her hair fanned out in short feathered waves like Ethel Mertz'. She looked liked all the women I saw at church yard sales, the kind of women who stitched their shrubbery with Christmas lights and sculpted numerous Jack O'Lanterns.

"Is Lauren here?" Somehow, though I bore no Girl Scout Cookies or fundraiser pamphlets, I felt as intrusive as a salesman. I stepped back.

She cracked the porch door to hear me. Air-conditioning streamed around her onto my bare knees and arms. I grew goose bumps.

"Is Lauren here?" I repeated.

"Yes." She looked over her shoulder to check on her. "She's finishing her snack."

So engrained was my expectation to be asked in that I didn't wait for it. Indian adults always offered children crackers or juice, especially if other children were already eating. My mother had once donated my favorite *Frog and Toad* book to a

child she babysat just because the child was company. Experience dictated that I was, whatever else, a guest.

Luckily, I wouldn't embarrass myself—or them—because Mrs. Velee had already closed the door before I could reach for the screen door handle. A tiny slit kept the door from clicking completely shut. I was being told to wait. Outside.

Sitting on the porch wouldn't have been remarkable if it were how Mrs. Velee asked all the neighborhood kids to wait. I could have catalogued it as new data on how some Americans behaved if I hadn't already heard from the other kids that Ms. Velee was the coolest. She rotated batches of fresh cookies from oven to little mouths; she even strung up a special disc swing in her backyard though her grandchildren were far too young to ride to delirium on it. Hers was a gingerbread house of stickers and brownies. I had heard all about it.

In my imagination—scaffolded by these tales—Mrs. Velee had become the caretaker Mrs. Garrett from the television *Facts of Life*. As beneficent matron, Mrs. Velee would distribute sensible advice about boys—what obsessed me even then—and righteously step in whenever Amma or Appa trembled on a parenting mistake. Like a lot of latch key kids, I spent hours staring at pixilated television screens. I trusted images of external salvation for the lost—the Yoda-like Mr. Miyagi from *The Karate Kid*, the maternal flake from *Pretty in Pink*, the bosomy Nell Carter on *Gimmie a Break*. Eventually, some adult was going to single me out, I felt sure, for the pitying kindness I deserved.

Ms. Emigg arrived the first day of fourth grade and was unlike the rest of the staff at Cherokee Lane. She never wore the high-waisted polyester pants the other

ladies wore, the kind that exposed paunches regardless of how slim they were. Ms. Emigg looked professional. Her legs became scissors when she walked, her bobbed hair bouncing as she took long strides with unbent knees. Her suits, unlike the other women's, flattered her with *unseen* shoulder pads. Mrs. Tino the office secretary, on the other hand, looked as if she belonged in a lineman drill.

Every child was to be interviewed by the new guidance counselor in order to establish a cursory assessment of mental health. The concrete walls of Ms. Emigg's office were painted daffodil yellow and she had two matching rocking chairs, one adult sized and the other built for a child. They were handmade from heavily lacquered birch branches. I had never seen anything like them.

"Where did you get these?" I asked. By nine I had already learned a dependable way to remedy the awkwardness of introductory meetings: mindless curiosity. People no matter what their age enjoyed responding to unobtrusive questions, especially about their stuff. It allowed people to at once feel the pleasure of being of interest while gauging for themselves how much to will reveal. It was a reliable trick.

"Aren't they special?" She dragged her palm over her bumpy armrest. "I found them in Arkansas."

"I've always wanted a rocking chair." This was true. I wanted a rocking chair like I wanted a vanity dressing table, a Walkman and above all, my own room.

"Who do you share a room with?" asked Ms. Emigg.

I told her.

“Why?” When she leaned forward I noticed silver strands in her nutmeg waves. “Why don’t your mother and father sleep in the same room?”

I tried to explain. As her pencil sambaed across the legal pad, I backtracked to when they had slept in the same room in Langley Park.

“Were there two beds,” she asked pointedly, “or one?”

I answered one, and pushed on, anxious—once invited—to open up for professional scrutiny. I knew we were all messed up. Though Amma no longer accused me of touching myself—and if she hadn’t I certainly would have been too ashamed to mention it aloud—Amma continued grubbing for plots, convinced that Appa was siphoning money to relatives jungles away. My ultimate fear was not divorce, I tried to make clear; I wanted divorce. It was the American prescription for bad families. In fact, division seemed like the only solution, though it was an incomplete answer. Where, after the split, could Amma go?

What did I tell Ms. Emigg, I can only guess now. Did I mention that Amma harassed me daily for the nickel I was to have left over from the dollar she gave me to buy lunch? Did I try to explain the cataclysmic severity of her not serving Appa’s friends when they stopped by? Or that she muttered dirty words like *chucklia coothie*—fucking cunt—to them when they left? Did I mention her cruelty, never mind outrageousness, in buying a four hundred dollar bracelet when Appa could hardly dig up cash for weekly groceries?

Though I can’t recall the content of my litany, I know that a line of second graders interrupted it. I had steadily undressed in my seat, no longer waiting for Ms. Emigg’s questions. Chin to chest, I’d just been straight spewing my guts.

“I wish I could tell you everything,” I remember saying into my lap, “but there’s so much.” Then I raised my head and caught how Ms. Emigg was looking at me. Her expression unraveled whatever intimacy I thought she had invited. She had stopped scribbling and was pushed flat against her rocker. She didn’t want to hear more.

Like Ms. Emigg I thought I should have my own room, too. I coveted my grandfather’s room, but was still afraid of the dark. Had I been granted his room, I likely would have crept back into Amma’s room to sleep on the floor. I watched *Omen* and *Halloween* bravely, but only because I was never alone long at night. I generally waited for Amma to come to bed petrified of being possessed by demons or hauled off by supernatural killers. Christianity only bolstered my fear—if there were angels flitting about as couriers of good, then there was logical footing for their counterparts.

I was most afraid when I was alone after school. I darted to the bathroom though it was only ten yards from the living room—as was every other room in the house actually—nervous about being far from the exit. I switched on *Sesame Street* and spent whole afternoons with the open front door welcoming intruders, comforted by the chattering of Muppets while listening for interior spooks. I ignored the latest bodily development, fleshy life preservers around my mid-section made. I

“Why don’t you just listen to me,” Anna once asked in a moment of friendliness. “And run?”

Though his teasing was ruthless, it was obligatory. It was what big brothers had to do. He did not want me to be fat, however it supplied him with ammunition for

teasing. At this point we were already drifting from ferocious arguing towards something more paternal. Anna was already deputized for my care and now even Amma began to defer to him. Nobody really told my brother what to do—they didn't have to; more and more Anna received the respect due an adult.

“Run around the trees,” Anna instructed, “not between them.”

I nodded.

“If you get a cramp, jog it off.”

This, I knew, was expertise gleaned from JV football practice.

“Don't just stop either. Walk a few laps first.”

I ran around the house fifteen times. I was slow and hoped that if the neighbors glimpsed me from their window they would assume I was running to get something in the yard, not doing laps. I never got into any sort of habit with this exercise, I only ran when I felt particularly ugly next to my skinny friends.

During recess, Alice led a group that performed tricks on the rings. They slid their legs through the hoops so that they sat upright five feet off the sand. Then, after gaining momentum, they twirled and struck poses while swinging back and forth, an audience gathered in front of them. I sat up in the rings, too, but only after Cathy heaved my ass up into them. Then—thighs throbbing from the snug fit—I acted as emcee since I was too chubby to pull myself up and around. I'd announce the names of their stunts with gusto and grins all while I squelched my envy.

Alice and I had the same teachers for a few years and to save confusion I was at first distinguished as Alice S and she by her whole name, Alice Ip. Once, after receiving her B on an assignment in the fourth grade, I adjusted my name to Alis and

was astonished to learn that I controlled my identity to some extent; adults and children alike absorbed the change without an undulation. I was stunned at the ownership and how easily it stuck. As quickly and permanently as I had become Alis, I became possessive of my identity, conscious of who I was trying to desperately to be, who I wasn't, who I didn't look like or know how to be: thin, popular and on the way out of Dodge, legit.

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I began to clash with Amma more often than Appa though we quarreled about their same subjects; I fought on his behalf. My uncle Mama had survived quadruple bypass, Tha-tha had an average heart attack and Appa was tagged with relatively governable diabetes and high blood pressure. Appa's doctor drilled him about the importance of a low stress life. Don't get too worked up, he told Appa. Relax. It was laughable advice for a man who juggled debt by swiveling Visa and MasterCard, all while his wife mumbled he was a millionaire. I saw him teeter towards the bathroom every morning and every night, weaving like a drunk. Waking up was stress.

Armed with this, I was always on Amma's back. I hated the shoes she deposited all over the house, the kitchen littered with crumbs and peels, her mushroom-colored underwear on the floor of the bathroom, the pandemonium that bubbled over her dresser drawers. My dresser drawers. More than anything, I despised the endless grousing about Appa and disappearing money. I believed that if I just explained it right, I could reason with her. If I mapped out columns of keep and take away, she would understand. It was, after all, simple math.

“If Appa makes only a thousand dollars—”

“Where is that money?” Amma would ask, pausing from whatever shuffling she was conducting on the counters. She rarely cleaned, choosing instead to move things around. She would start housework with the “fun” stuff. While the kitchen rotted and the bathroom stank like piss and maxi pads, she would flit around the living room dusting the television screen and spraying Pledge.

“The mortgage,” I replied. “That’s nine hundred right there.”

“Credit cards, then?” she accused. “Thousand dollars here, thousand there.”

“What?” She didn’t understand credit or money or anything, but that wouldn’t crush my optimism for years. “We have to pay that money back, Ma.”

Eventually she’d return to pouring sugar from one container to a larger one or taping labels on jars with obvious contents while I lectured.

“You have to add groceries, gas, electric, insurance,” I’d continue. “And even more.”

“The water bill doesn’t come every month,” she’d point out.

I’d sigh. How could that possibly matter? Finally, after adding and subtracting and listing off the obvious, I’d end up yelling, all worked up. The ache for understanding was physical, it grinded in my chest.

I glowered at her. “You don’t make any sense.”

She stared back.

“You must be a test.” I fished for magnitude. “You’re a test from the devil.”

She turned her back on me now and reached for the kettle. Like any decent Anglophile, tea for her was a soothing favorite drink.

“I’m not finished!” I was never done. Once wound, I could go on for generations, lapsing into patronizing and then back to rationalizing, only to erupt again. The sheer irrationality of her obstinacy in the face of elementary math, made me relentless. It was math, for god’s sake. I refused to stop explaining.

“What is this?” said Amma, fed up. “I don’t have to listen.”

Usually I hurled a dish or saltshaker, anything shatterable and cheap. Sometimes I even tossed eggs, though their smash—anticlimactic—never assuaged the guilt I felt as Amma wiped up the oily puddles. Once I even ruined a boom box.

“Why did you do that?” Anna had asked when he saw the fractured black plastic.

“She’s crazy.” I pointed out the repeated obvious.

“Next time,” He faced me angrily. “Break your own stuff.”

“I hate her,” I insisted.

“Who cares? This isn’t your stuff.” When he lifted the broken stereo, it rattled. “Bust your own things, if you’re so mad.”

Then he went to his room. Anna didn’t believe in reacting to Amma. Our house was odd and tumultuous. So what? We had a duty to Appa or to decency or to ourselves, that required us to act right. Couldn’t I see that? Didn’t I know better?

Fine. I removed a carton of Grade A Large from the fridge. I stood on the porch and winged eggs onto Lynmont until Anna reminded me I didn’t own the street or the eggs either.

After that fight—like all the others—and right when Appa departed for the Holiday Inn, I began to scour the kitchen. The kitchen was cramped and poorly

designed; you couldn't open the fridge and be at the sink at the same time it was so narrow. It only took forty minutes to hand wash the dishes, spray down the counters and sweep the crunchy floor. Applying the problem solving I learned in fifth grade TAG, I battled the grime that bugged me by arranging for Amma to pay me a dollar every time I cleaned. It totaled big money, five bucks a week.

Amma usually, despite her sloth, was meticulous when it came time for inspection. The grease that had gelled into glue around the stove, why hadn't I peeled it off? What about the handle to the stove? It hadn't been wiped. And what, couldn't I shake the toaster before I swabbed the counters? There were crumbs in there, too.

This day, Amma ignored me when I finished. Wet around the middle from leaning over the sink, I changed into different bedclothes. I dug around my book bag rearranging battered textbooks bandaged in brown paper bags and scotch tape. I cleaned the kitchen splatters from my glasses. I read a chapter from a Dean Koontz thriller. I called the hotel to remind Appa about the snack size Dorritos I needed; next week, our class was field-tripping to Mount Vernon and I needed an appropriate lunch.

Finally, I asked Amma when she was coming to bed.

"I will come." On the TV were Indian women with large, heavily lined eyes. They lip-synched from behind the trunk of a tree or seated on an indoor swing while in the visible distance a beau spied.

Feeling some pride, I headed to our room, which was nestled between Anna and Tha-tha's bedrooms. Both their doors were shut. I snapped the hall light on behind me.

At the library I had hunted for books about children afraid of the dark. I didn't know to look for parenting books; since my problem was for children much younger than me, I assumed storybooks would cover the territory. I even asked the librarian under the guise of being a cranky older sibling. I found nothing. A chapter from *Ramona Quimby Age Eight* detailed her first night in her new room, but it did not provide specific counsel. Like all American characters, Ramona just magically got over it.

A blast of static let me know that Amma's movie was over. She clicked off a living room lamp. I heard the rush of the tap and her gulping water. Whenever she drank water Amma poured it into her mouth so her lips didn't touch the tumbler; the result was a thick hollow sound, like dropping quarters. This way, the cup didn't need to be washed. When the floorboards didn't creak in my direction, I called out.

"Amma!"

She didn't answer.

"Ma!"

"What?" She shushed me from the hallway. "You're so big, you can sleep by yourself."

At that point, I didn't beg. "Fine," I said from under the covers. I could wait.

Within the hour however, I panicked. When I shut my lids, fear pried them open so I could check on the room's shadows. Seconds later, my burning eyelids would meet only for me to yank them open to view the same scene. I peered into the closet and dresser mirror—treacherous portholes into demonic worlds. Beneath my

eyes, I felt the bulges that would morph into dark circles by morning. Perhaps Amma had punished me enough.

“Ma?” She was reading under a disc of yellow lamplight. Without my glasses—by junior high school I would be almost legally blind—I couldn’t tell if she had noticed me.

“Ma, will you come to bed?” I asked, equal parts whine and demand. When she didn’t answer, I griped. “I have to go to school tomorrow.”

After she shooed me away, I tried to sneak into Anna’s room but his door was a siren. It screeched as soon as I touched it.

“What are you doing?” Like all teenagers he was a grouch about his sleep.

“Amma won’t come to bed,” I answered. “I’m scared.”

“Man.” He turned over. I was the worst thing: pathetic. Where was my sensible, adult distance? “Go sleep in your room.”

I dragged my comforter into the hallway, but worried that Tha-tha would trip over me en route to the bathroom. I imagined him thudding to the floor, breaking an ankle, unable to ride the bus to the Holiday Inn where Appa had found him a job cleaning rooms. Besides, what if one of the roaches that spiraled towards bathroom and kitchen cracks whenever the light came on scurried into my ear? It was an irrational nighttime fear; I had squished baby roaches with my finger all my life and barely cringed when the larger ones expired with a wet crunch.

Surely Amma would have mercy on me now, I thought. The alarm clock read 2am in hot pink. I steadied myself for another plea. Enough was enough.

Amma met me in the hallway. She had unraveled her hair from its braid so that it now framed her head in a corona of frizzy flares. She must have run her hands through it the way you might shimmy a towel over wet hair. On her face was moistened flour, clumps of it sticking to her cheeks and hair. She had made herself into a ghost.

She came at me then, making guttural noises, maybe to show me how childishly I was behaving or perhaps she really meant to frighten me. It was Appa she brought to mind, however. I thought of the politeness he had to offer to late night rings for room service. He dispensed toothbrushes and extra pillows at all hours only to come home to this ridiculous woman battered in flour in the middle of the night—for Anna and me. I vowed to never have any babies. I never wanted to love that much. Love, as my mother blubbered in front of me with flour congealing on her head, seemed obscene.

## Chapter Six

I liked this woman's chairs more than Ms. Emigg's. There were two, just like in Ms. Emigg's office, but this pair was identical. Billows of black leather were pulled tight and cool by invisible stitches, like bucket seats in a sports car.

"These chairs are comfortable," I said.

Ms. Gupta shut the door to her home office and sat opposite me before responding.

"You're not shy, are you?"

Was that a reprimand? I smiled, unsure.

Ms. Emigg had demanded that I see a therapist, sending home the name of an Indian doctor she thought would be able to view my problems through the proper cultural lens. Ms. Gupta turned out to be an owl. Sagging dark circles rimmed her prominent eyes and she spoke with an elegant British accent.

The session went predictably. Each question probed innocently and imperceptibly further than the previous one until Ms. Gupta had punctured the skin of our misery. After an hour, she called in Appa. The sun shot lasers through the blinds of her Bethesda office. Since there was nowhere to sit, Appa stood.

"She worries a lot about you," Ms. Gupta said. "Do you know that, Mr. Raj?"

"Oh, really," Appa said. He looked wholly embarrassed.

"Next time, I want to see you and your wife."

Appa cupped his good ear forward.

"My wife?" Appa glanced at me. "That I don't know."

“It will be good for the whole family, Mr. Raj.” Ms. Gupta stood up to face Appa. She was as tall as he was. “Please.”

Appa put his hand nervously to the back of his neck, cornered. After a moment he jiggled his head from left to right in the universal Indian gesture for very well then.

Despite Appa’s mortification, I was elated. I trusted American remedies. The scandal of my childhood was over. We had arrived at an American conclusion: cure by leather couch confession. All that prevented us from being a happy family, would evaporate under Ms. Gupta’s objective psychiatry. I ran all sorts of repercussions in rapid film projector sequence: apologies and understanding and sleepovers at Alice’s and eventually even dating boys. I raced into my American future. As we rode home on Wisconsin Avenue’s tree-lined shade, I could see myself thin, a cheerleader dwarfed by the jacket I wore: my blond boyfriend’s Letterman.

From the street I could see diplomat mansions and their circle driveways through iron gates.

“Look.” I pointed. “Look at all those windows!”

“Study hard,” said Appa, “and easily you can come up.”

That was Appa’s phrase, coming up. That was what he had expected to do in America, that was what most Indians did. They crammed in some tiny, funky-smelling apartment in Langley Park, and in a few years they moved out and came up. One uncle who fried chicken with Appa at Gino’s eventually obtained several of his own Popeye’s.

Riding away from Ms. Gupta’s office, our coming up felt possible.

“See that one?” Appa braked so hard the car behind us burped his horn. He continued to point as we crawled past a white-pillared house. “One officer lived there. He was very kind me to me.” Appa smiled. “I think one time you met him.”

I never remembered. Indian adults, including my relatives, were nameless to me. Other than my Mama and Athai—both of whom had singular titles—the rest formed an amorphous cloud of judging, witnessing eyes from whom I preferred to keep a buffer. But I craned my neck to admire the house and Appa’s association with it. We were headed for big things, too.

A week later, Appa showed me Ms. Gupta’s bill. It was printed on one of those old school printers, the kind that shrieked as it churned out pale gray figures so faint that an eight could look like a six or a nine. The bill read: one hundred and ninety nine dollars per hourly session. I couldn’t believe how little it took to fool me. How, with the weight of prior evidence, had I not seen *this* coming?

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When I wasn’t reading, I talked to myself. I grew to enjoy being alone in the house. Though I did not dare the basement—even if Appa stood on the top step when he asked me to get an onion I dashed downstairs and raced back up, sometimes even forgetting to shut off the lights in my panic—I gradually became less afraid of the first floor. When no one was home I had romantic banter with the table lamps, kneeling beside the table to hug a lamp’s “neck.” I conducted interviews about being a top dog secret agent who directed a school for geniuses. These interviews were my favorite. I mimicked all the professors and archeologists I saw on PBS, their

reflective pauses, how they shifted in their seats, their mulling and meandering for an answer.

When our Indian neighbor's husband began beating her, she and her two daughters moved in with us briefly. Since Amma's lack of generosity put her in the ironic position of having to conceal it, she was prone to random, excessive munificence. Griping as if it were someone else's idea, she had the woman and her two teenage daughters take our master bedroom while she and I slept on Anna's floor. Appa as always—though now with public humiliation—took the couch. The arrangement was uncomfortable both because our house was small but also because, despite the neighbors' spousal abuse, it became instantly clear to this auntie that the marriage next door was worse than her own. After a week or two—a week or two ahead of schedule—she made her plans to leave. Before she returned next door for a divorce, the auntie mentioned this to my mother.

“She just plays by herself,” she said referring to me. “Doesn't she?”

I caught myself murmuring over the poster board I had spread over the dining table. I had been giving an interview over my work: copying a cross section blueprint of the Titanic from a book.

“It's not good,” said the neighbor to Amma's nodding chagrin.

“For her age? Yes, it is no good,” agreed Amma and folded her arms over her chest.

They both sucked their teeth.

I noisily reordered my colored pencils, pretending I hadn't overheard them so I wouldn't have to show my shame. I began to hum thinking maybe I could convince

them I had just been singing under my breath. After that I made sure to play my games in privacy, though there was one place I could not resist: Zayres.

That August Amma brought me with her to work when I had at last bored of television. Anna and I opened summer by waking around noon to study the gray and white blocks on the TV Guide. Either an Abbott and Costello or Martin and Lewis marathon ran every week.

Anna stayed with me for those two hours and then he vanished into whatever summer vacation exploits he and his friends devised. Alice Ip spent her summers taking orders at The Wonderful Carry-Out where black boys told her how cute she was and offered her their old pagers. Lauren occasionally invited me to the pool by the cemetery, but there was a limit to how many times a member could escort a guest. After those days I cooked so dark from unprotected hours in the sun that I ended up buttering myself in Amma's fairness cream, scolding myself for not knowing better. Then Lauren went to camp.

Zayres provided its employees with a windowless low-ceiling room for a lounge. I watched *The Price is Right* there until someone put on *The Young and the Restless* or some other soap opera where big-haired people suffered endless calamities—rape, false imprisonment, fratricide, amnesia, plane crashes, diabolical siblings, even witchcraft. And though these shows dealt in the business of human troubles, they at the same time were so insanely myopic about the world that even as child I couldn't watch them. The stories seemed to happen in no place at no time. Watch any soap opera; what year is it? What other than hairstyles and hemlines indicate what decade the characters live in?

Whenever someone put on a soap opera I wandered back out into the store. I avoided the toy section since all the good toys—Legos, Connect Four, Lite-Bright—were sealed in plastic and cardboard. Other than balls, bats and the Etch and Sketch, there was nothing to play with. The pockmarked man who ran electronics made sure I didn't fiddle with any buttons or twirl any dials in his section. I couldn't pick up a floor model touch-tone phone without him nailing me with an evil eye. I had no money for the café and zero interest in apparel except for the lingerie section; I had needed a bra for years, since third grade. During recess I once asked DeAndrea Dennis, a matronly black girl, how she got her mother to buy one. DeAndrea didn't understand why I'd needed a strategy.

“Can't you tell your mom you need one?” she had asked, at which point I ran off.

After circling the building I always landed in the costume jewelry section. I would return items to their proper racks, grouping large plastic bracelets, dangly earrings and cheap beaded necklaces of every assortment. These I loved the most. In relative seclusion, I ran my hands through their gaudiness to hear their sounds of rain. I never tried on any of the necklaces because I knew they were tacky, the kind of multi-colored junk schoolteachers wore. I just liked that there were so many of them.

I had seen Amelda Marcos, the profligate wife of the Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos, boast of a thousand pairs of shoes. In the news clip, she slowly paraded through a room of shoe racks, overflowing with mostly pumps and loafers. I pretended to be her as I presided over the jewelry. I perused them casually. What to

wear today? Which to choose? I stopped my play only when I heard someone approaching.

Eventually, I headed to Amma's register. I was not supposed to bother her. They'll think I'm stealing money and giving it to you, Amma warned. They will accuse me. I went over there anyway since she never got mad. I would stand beside her station until a customer or nearby cashier admiringly asked (as they were obligated to do), is this your little girl?

"Yes," Amma would then reply, glancing at me with undisguised pride. Her eyes seized up in a squint when she smiled and there she'd be grinning and squinting into the bills in her register. I was never surprised; despite my whole fury for her, her moods with me were circumstantial, her disappointment occasional. Like any mother, she was proud of me overall, whatever my failings.

"This is Alis," she would say smiling as if someone had given her a compliment. "My daughter."

That was the last summer I would spend with Amma at work. The fall arrived fraught with change. Anna's grades had taken a predictable plummet after the move. Bucklodge Middle was a substandard operation housed in a dingy building—I would attend it only for a year before it was sacked for remodeling. For Anna, however, it was more than the lack of a real gymnasium, more than the plastic windows that dyed sunlight gray, more than the fact that here in Prince George's County our income did not qualify us for free lunch. Everybody was poor. More than this dip in quality, however, accounted for Anna's shift at school. Anna, for all his jocularly and manly

integrity, was a lonesome boy. One who had by the luck of Langley Park found a band of friends within which to dissolve that solitude.

With their loss, Anna recovered only through another caress of fate: consecration by popularity. His new friends were loyal and smart, too; they knew better than to put stock in their vocational tracking for example. Many of them had been ruled out of Talented and Gifted before they reached the third grade, while they were still fuddling with paste and rounded scissors. All of them would have been allowed to transfer into Honors if their parents had fussed. I wonder how many their parents would have pestered on their behalf, had they been informed of their options. Would they have bartered with the boss to ride the Metro home early so they could be seated at their child's undersized desk just to ask—not demand—that their child not be condemned to English classes that drilled grammar all day without ever touching Beverly Cleary or *A Wrinkle in Time*. At minimum, I would guess they have requested this damnation be postponed until the child was older, when he could appreciate the stakes.

Tracking, the process by which students are set on different educational paths, honors versus vocational to name two, hadn't changed much since its ancient inception. Like most institutional throwbacks, it was racist and classist and slightly less often, sexist too. Generally, children were selected on the basis of one elementary teacher's opinion—a single teacher who, despite time served in the classroom, was seldom trained or able to make such enduring judgments. More often than not, teachers succumbed to all sorts of biases for attractiveness, cleanliness, color and comportment. Francisco, a mouthy Nicaraguan in grubby too big t-shirts was a bad

student with behavior problems, whereas Victor, Korean boy who never wore jeans or sneakers, was a smart ass only because he was bored by work that didn't challenge him.

And though the diagnosis was easy enough to reverse—there was no legal way for a school to keep any child out of any class if a parent was adamant enough—most parents had no idea or no excess of time with which to make the pitch. Thus, Shon Paul and Chubbs and eventually Anna were shoved down vocational tracks without a ripple of dissent. They graphed sentences and took an excess of shop, grew to understand that school was not their entitlement—after all it was the “smart” kids who were taken on trips to the Supreme Court, given permission to use the air-conditioned computer lab and asked repeatedly, where are you going to college? Who do you plan to *be*, not what are you going to *do*?

Back in Langley Park on the other hand, Chinedu was campaigning for his future. Only a county line away he prepared for the Secondary School Admissions Test, a standardized exam used by preparatory schools. Anna toyed with the prospect, dog-earing pages of the booklet Chin sent him until the next round of tissue thin report cards were issued. In alternating blue and white stripes it detailed his failings: doesn't complete assignments, has poor work habits, takes little pride in work—conspicuous contrast to his near straight-A performance at Broad Acres. Then the booklet disappeared, with it listings of test dates and pages glossed with blue-blazered boys on lacrosse fields all bound for plush knolls, Roman columns and yuppie adulthood.

“We couldn't have afforded it anyway,” said Anna.

Anna was dead set on one thing: the varsity football team. When my brother had first arrived in America with Amma it was January, a new planet of cold. When Appa had presented him with a new coat in the airport, Anna silently ducked him at first. Not out of bashfulness but because it had been nearly two years. Half a lifetime.

Appa shook out the coat so Anna got the full view. It was a varsity style coat with fake leather sleeves in gold and the Washington Redskin's logo on its breast: the profile of a Native American warrior. According to Anna, it is the first thing he remembers about America and Appa. He grew into the coat and then quickly out of it, baptized a lifelong football fan.

Our grandfather Tha-tha had a tattoo of a Native American on his deltoid eerily similar to the Redskins' logo though his "Indian" wore a full headdress. It was the standard old man tattoo—the ink had faded to sea foam green, long threads of hair poked through like unwound stitches, nothing indicated what the arm or the man or the world was like when the tattoo was fresh and scabbing. I saw his tattoo whenever Tha-tha removed his jumpsuit from the Holiday Inn where he guided a cart of ammonia and towels between identical rooms and hallways.

It took a year for Tha-tha to shuffle home from the bus stop in that outfit. When he finally made it to his room he unfettered a sigh and reappeared in slacks and a sleeveless undershirt. By dusk, he had groomed the potato plants and the morning glories, dried and planted pumpkin seeds, refreshed the birdbath and restabbed his pink lawn flamingo into the dirt. He watched sparrows eat the left over rice he sprinkled. Then later that night I would hear him grumbling curses, sipping Colt 45 like the homeys up the street.

Tha-tha had owned grocery stores and taxicabs in Ceylon and had named them both after my mother, Sarojini Market and Sarojini Autos. Like most of the Tamils who migrated to the islet, he left when the resentment of indigenous Singhalese escalated to war. He had belonged to a mob of brothers—nine in all—who brooked no slights when they could help it. They had not been afraid fighting. But after his brothers died or were murdered Tha-tha followed his children to America where he scrubbed tubs free of pubic hair and changed semen-splotted sheets, partner to a new chapter of sorrow, though this one was not enlivened by the catastrophe of civil war. Anna quietly despised him; it was he who had lied to Appa's family about our mother's mental health.

It was Tha-tha who called us at Mama's one Sunday to tell us the Plymouth was gone.

"Where's Shyam?" Appa immediately asked. Though I was too young—and sociable—to opt out of family gatherings, Anna had been permitted to stay home with whatever game was on television. After all, he was getting too old to find much fun in chatting with his girl cousins. Jesudas was still too young to consider; he had a handful of calendars to exhaust before his voice would even crack a syllable.

"Engeh." Here, Tha-tha said. He handed Anna the phone.

"Did you hear something?" Appa was shocked. Why would anyone steal such an old, unattractive car? The Valiant was a decade passed its glory. It had been painted a flat powder blue and had a prehistoric radio. Its interior was as black as licorice and its safety features ancient; it predated bucket seats and standard safety

belts. All there really was to keep you from injury in an accident was its unalloyed iron frame.

"I didn't hear anything," Anna replied. He told Appa he had been asleep.

Though the police would likely have located it, the next morning Appa found the Plymouth first, stalled on University Boulevard but otherwise in shape. Appa guessed that some kids must have stolen it for a joyride to the Cineplex in Beltway Plaza. Since Appa didn't drive the old car much, he junked it. It was not even worth the towing charges to drag it back home.

The next day, Anna mentioned that Chinedu was leaving Langley Park.

"Which school did he get into?" I asked. I already knew that he had aced the exams. We were watching afternoon cartoons from our plastic-encased sofa and loveseat. The plastic was supposed to seal the furniture stainlessly new, but it succeeded only in making our living room even more uncomfortable. In the winter seats were cold, in the summer they became slippery with sweat. They were always loud. Soon, the plastic yellowed making the furniture look vaguely pee-stained.

"He got into all of them," Anna answered, "but Deerfield's giving him a full scholarship."

"It's the best school anyway," he added.

I would learn all about Deerfield eventually. When I was old enough for high school, they began admitting female students. By then Deerfield's star status among prep schools had worked its full magic on me. I was desperate for escape naturally, but also for a civilization of pleated plaid and old money. There I would morph into every girl about whom I had read. My problem might be with a mean popular girl or

with a Chase-Anthony-Alexander whom I wanted to ask me out. My world would shrink to the size of an emerald campus. Of course I had no idea what I would really have been in for had I been accepted. After graduating from Yale, Chinedu would tell me that his peers came from different galaxies. Perhaps fortunately—or at least partially so—I would bomb the math portion of the exam and tuck that dream away next to Anna's.

We returned to *Heathclif and Friends*. I had no meanness in me for Anna, so I didn't rub in Chin's success. Anna didn't perform any sour grapes routine either, though it would have been a fine defense mechanism for anyone his age. Anna only felt proud of Chin and silently disappointed in himself, the way any decent person might feel—if he were ten years Anna's senior. I changed the subject.

“Who do you think stole the car?” I asked. It was great drama and we had hardly discussed it. “What do you think happened?”

“I don't know.” He crackled as he adjusted himself on the plastic. “Probably just what Appa said.”

As an adult Anna would tell me that it was he and Shon who had taken the Plymouth that Sunday, pilfering the key from the ring of extras Appa nailed to a kitchen cabinet. They had planned, as fourteen year olds on hijinks invariably do, to have the car back in plenty of time. When it refused to awaken after a long red light, they rolled it onto the shoulder and bolted home. Appa had figured it out though some softness prevented him from tattling to Amma and me. Anna's guilt had left an obvious trail to an observant fatherly eye; there was no broken window or wounded

ignition, no evidence at all of thievery or what, for that matter, had provoked Anna into his first criminal act.

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Cabbage Patch Dolls were a big fad. They had to have been since I wanted one and I usually had no idea what to do with baby dolls. I preferred kits, like the Mad Scientist Lab where you slabbed green goo on the plastic skeletons of two monsters. Next, in a vat filled with water and citric acid that came in a packet, you sizzled the flesh off the monsters' bones. That was my idea of a good toy. The only thing that excited me about Cabbage Patch Dolls was the pile of extras I would receive with it. I liked the reality implied by removable diapers and official looking adoption papers. Even these accessories were not enough, however; only seeing Alice with a line of their pumpkin faces on her bed made me want one. Badly.

At twenty-seven bucks they were pricey dolls, but I had been saving my kitchen cleaning money while eyeballing them at Zayres. When I had the money, Amma and Appa took me there to purchase the doll.

Each doll had its own name. The faces were duplicates, other than the color of its eyes, its skin and the yarn it had for hair. Toy companies had yet to alter the facial features of their non-white dolls to reflect any physical difference between ethnicities; they simply darkened their white dolls to make black-faced white dolls. The nose, lips and hair texture of these dolls remained staunchly Caucasian. This produced an odd effect: Black dolls didn't look like white *or* black people. Wandering in a Toys R Us years later, I noticed that Mattel had created different face molds for its nonwhite dolls. These new Black Kens grinned through their plastic cases with wider mouths,

broader noses. They even had kinky looking crew cuts molded in hard plastic. My god, I remember thinking, these dolls *look* Black.

There wasn't as large a selection at Zayres as I had hoped. I scanned for a box that hadn't already been opened. Eventually, I found a Cabbage Patch Doll with white shorts, yellow top and bib. I showed her to Amma.

"Chee, chee." Tsk, tsk, she said. She looked at the doll thoughtfully. It wasn't exactly a big deal, but she didn't like it. "Look what your daughter has," she called to Appa.

When Appa came over he did an about face and stood apart from me a minute. He could be theatrical when he wasn't upset.

"It's my money," I pointed out.

That was the wrong thing to say.

"Whose money?" Appa asked. He put his fist by his ear and gave it a few tiny, questioning shakes. "It comes from my pocket or your mother's pocket." After a pause, his tone shifted. He panned the shelves around him. "Why not get a nice, pretty doll?"

"I'm not white."

He jumped back jokingly, as if I'd hit him. "You're not a *kurpee* either."

"My skin is brown." I held up the box to him. "Maybe this doll is for anybody with dark skin."

"Dark skin?" Appa asked. What did I mean by that?

He took the box slowly. When he finally looked at the doll, he frowned. "It even looks ugly," he said. He rubbed his jaw. It was apparent he thought I was

making a big mistake. Still, Appa disliked arguing. Always dueling Amma, he'd lost energy for controlling every inch of my life the way other Indian parents did. He put on his fed-up face and smiled his you'll-see-one-day smile. After a standard side to side head shimmy, he told me to buy whatever I wanted.

I still don't know what reason, other than defiance, made me choose to buy that Black Cabbage Patch. I'm sure I liked the idea of being different from my cousins who all had white dolls. I was moved by the logic of having a brown-skinned doll, especially since it was rationale my parents despised but couldn't argue with. That was the type of annoying child I was, determined to showcase my smarts even if it meant being disagreeable. I only wanted to show off and show up everybody else.

I got bored with the doll right away. I had no urge to play Mommy with it, nor did I really take to the game of house. I took a few photos with it, holding it as if it mattered. It didn't. I let Anna tackle it and perform full nelsons on it. I no longer cared that my friends had whole football teams of Cabbage Patch Kids. Neither Lauren nor Alice played with their dolls either. They just sat in rows like the vegetables they were supposed to be.

One afternoon, I collected make up I had amassed from dancing with Rani Auntie. I organized them in columns, enjoying the tight snaps and clicks of their lids as I displayed them for the commercials in my mind.

Whenever we girls had performances our mothers were to apply liquid foundation to make us more fair, draw red and white dots over our eyebrows, sketch heavily lined eyes in ink black, place a beauty mark on our cheeks, color our lips a classic red and cover our hands and feet with magic marker so that from a distance

our audience would think we had *mandhi* from real henna. For the girls who had the audacity to cut their hair—such as myself—or the bad luck of not being able to grow waist-long hair, there were single braids of human hair to attach at the base of our necks. I was the worst; I had cut bangs for myself that had to be pinned back in lumpy waves.

Since Amma was inept at everything cosmetic, including rigging anything fancier than a ponytail, Rani Auntie would have to waste valuable pre-show time smearing my face while she rushed. My head jerked back as she wrangled through my knots, bobby pins dug into my scalp. I remember thinking, as she badmouthed Amma to my face, Wow, Amma doesn't even know how to use bobby pins. I had no idea, though they were always scattered in my hair, how securely they could be fastened to your head.

While arranging the tubes and bottles, I decided to make my Cabbage Patch Doll white. Using a cotton swab, I dabbed liquid foundation on her entire face and wiped away the excess that dribbled into the divots she had for eyes. I made sure to give her an even coating. When I finished, I set her to dry.

But the make up never dried onto the plastic. Her peachy face remained wet with a Cover Girl glaze; whenever I touched it, the creamy Band Aid color came off with my finger, revealing the brown plastic underneath. She looked white only if you didn't smudge the paint job; otherwise, it was a poor act. She sat there for a while, gooey beige face and brown body, until I gave her away.

## Chapter Seven

Our neighborhood was molting. By fifth grade, it had matured from a trickle to a stampede. Our white neighbors were on their way out. Even Lauren's family, who had lived on Lynmont since Lauren's birth, put up for sale signs. I would visit Lauren at her new place only once; they purchased a home in a neighborhood so new it hadn't even regrown the trees bagged for its construction. It rained that day and everything looked dismal, especially this house that stood beside fifteen others identical to it; there was nothing nearby other than the single road that led to the island cul de sac. They had moved far away.

Other neighbors did the same. Families who had been here for whole lives discreetly snuck away; newer families stayed for just a year or two, until they noticed which way the proverbial wind was gusting. There was a family across the street with first graders and inflatable wading pool who, after looking nervously from their porch as two Salvadorian kids approached shoeless and ready for water play, staked Century Twenty One in their yards and got the hell out.

First, Indian families replaced them. Rani Auntie and a family whose daughter I had danced with moved a block away. On the corner and all over Fox, Black families bought homes. Little Toyota pick-ups and lowered Hondas thumped by as Latino neighbors joined us. More and more, our neighborhood felt like Langley Park, which was less than a mile away. On weekends, go-go music—a percussion based dance music indigenous to D.C.—competed with Salsa music for backyard barbeques. Kids cruised by on bikes as always, but now they were Black or Hispanic.

Now other men tinkered with cars as Appa did. Appa was no longer the only one whose carport collected paint cans, rags and dented fenders. For men who knew cars and did more than change their oil, projects could take weeks. While they acquired parts and parceled their free time, an impotent vehicle would wait on the curb or idle in the driveway. Appa was no longer the only culprit.

This metamorphosis held true at Cherokee Lane Elementary, too, though the popular kids were still white. Though they comprised a fractional minority, they played Snow White, Gepetto and Pinocchio in the school plays and nearly all of them—my memory cannot recall a single white child excluded but there must have been—were placed in the highest reading groups and singled out for TAG.

I adored them. By them, I mean the last ring of them, the sixth graders in my fifth and sixth grade split. After their graduation there was no succeeding tier to take their place; what remained behind, in my class and those below it, were mostly students of color. These sixth graders were golden to me. There was Sarah Brockman of the Brockman brood, four sisters who were each blond and leggy. They were all also moody, at one moment inclusive and generous, the next silent or snippy. Even teachers put up with it. You know Sarah, they'd say, whenever she rolled her big eyes or refused group work. What might lead some kids to the office, was tolerated as innocent brattiness in the Brockmans. Bridget Morris was a ballerina I sometimes played with after school, listening to her sing musicals I had never seen or perusing Normal Rockwell prints at her summerhouse on the bay. David Beard was good looking enough to have climbed out of a *Saturday Evening Post* cover with his crew cut and blushing cheeks. Sometimes he sang go-go songs he had heard on the radio,

an act that liquefied my heart. Even Nikki Quinones, a girl chubby and unfortunate enough to be called Bertha behind her back, received my envy. Theirs was the world that matched with the universe on TV and in my library books.

Not that I didn't begrudge them, too. Alice and I despised their lunch table. Though every other class separated itself by sex at lunch, Sarah, Nikki, David and the others sat together, flirting and laughing the way we knew kids in high school did. Alice resented this more than I did.

"It's not like there's assigned seats," she said while we lined up beside the plastic forks and knives. "We could sit there, too, if we got there first."

It made sense. As we carried our trays of tatter tots and square pizza back to the table beside theirs, we plotted for the next day. We'd make sure to get to the lunchroom ahead of them. Then we could plop down a sweater to reserve a seat amongst them. There were always a few empty spots.

"It's not like we'd be bumping anybody out," I said. That would have been stupid. Alice and I wanted to be a *part* of their co-ed camaraderie, not take a stand against it.

Molly Ringwald, after all, had taught us all about popularity. In those Brat Pack movies we learned that triumph over the popular kids was not in cheapening or failing to recognize their value, but in infiltrating it. Our value could not come from being naturally popular—that was unthinkable—nor would it arrive from scorning it. It would come from *their* acceptance of us. Sure, you ignored the worst of them for what they were, stuck up, but you strove to show the kind few that you were their equal. Ducky, the geek chic who chastised the rich kids, wasn't *Pretty in Pink's* hero.

The handsome snob with careless hair was. When he and his topless roadster courted Molly in her homemade dress, we knew she had won. A silhouetted kiss with Ducky would have been a letdown.

The next day I vibrated because I was so nervous, though I was comforted by our foolproof plan. Alice and I would just sit down and join them and thereafter be members of their clan. They knew us—we were in the same split grade class—the only thing that separated us, we figured, was habit. It was a mistake that we'd started out at different tables.

Our class' tables were at the far end of the multi-purpose room, which tripled as auditorium and gym, as well as cafeteria. Alice and I had made sure to get to the front of the line for lunch by having our desks clear and our mouths shut all morning. When we entered the lunchroom, my fingers tingled the way they did when I looked down from the top of the jungle gym. I had dressed for the occasion too, wearing my favorite t-shirt, a gift from Selvakumar Uncle in San Diego. It read: Somebody in California Loves Me in the lop-sided handwriting meant to reflect a child's penmanship.

Our target was not empty. Somehow Nikki Quinones was already at the table digging in her paper bag though the rest of the class was behind us. Alice and I exchanged looks. We had not planned for this. I was prepared to abort for more ideal circumstances, but Alice was bolder than I was. She walked right up to Nikki and set her jacket down.

When Nikki's face registered what we were doing, her bottom lip lost its mooring. Then, without a blink she said, "Somebody's already sitting there."

Her expression was about as neutral as Belgium, a bad sign that had me stumped. Clearly, we had gotten there first. We could have scooted Alice's jacket down a few spaces or even pointed out that there was plenty of room. As classmates and friends, there was nothing barring us from taking a seat. We could have said this, too, had we our tongues from the future. The least we could have done was ask to sit down in a friendly way, but we didn't too that either. Even Alice's nerve had been deflated. She moved her jacket to our old table without a syllable of protest.

If we couldn't break into the last remaining white clique, Alice and I still had boys about which to obsess. Since I had no outlet—being bespectacled, overweight and having only four outfits to mix and match every week—I got surrogate thrills from her many beaus. Alice always had a boyfriend at Cherokee Lane—as she would throughout high school and college and pharmacy school—and I had a crush on each of them. I liked Richard though he was as thin as a table leg, was in love with Bobby's goofy good looks and had secretly hoped that Carl would choose me since he waited for me in the mornings to walk to school, once even hiding in a tree to scare me.

But it always worked out the same. I befriended them first and then one by one they asked me to find out if Alice liked them. There was nothing conniving about it; I could tell they liked me. Boys liked me the way they liked each other, without the urge to touch or possess.

I accepted this and was happy to at least have Alice's romances to relish. I had begun spending more time at her house. Amma and Appa trusted her Chinese parents, whom they'd never met and never knew were always at the carry-out. Alice's house

was usually as empty and silent as a church. When I came over we chomped buttered rice and stole juice bottles her parents' storage in the basement. Invariably we ended up downstairs with her copy of *Top Gun*. We watched the video over and over, giggling over the self-conscious testosterone so absent from the boys at school.

The love scene between Kelly McGillis and Tom Cruise would permanently stain how I imagined sex, backlit by ghostly shadows and neutralized by the slow motion and absence of nudity. Sex would forever be without nipples or moaning; the most erotic thing being fingers dragged along a muscular back and a searching tongue on chin. The whole movie drove us nuts. We were such puddles for the gleaming cords of muscle in the volleyball scene that we decided to take photos of the screen.

“We could carry them around,” I said. “Like we know them.”

“Yeah, right,” Alice answered though she had already found her camera. She leaned towards the screen, her faced obscured by her hot pink camera except for one squished eye.

“Ready?” I poised my finger over the play button. “Make sure you can't see the TV at all.”

“Duh.” Alice began clicking.

When Alice's mother returned from the Photo Mat, she accused Alice of taking pornographic pictures. What is this? She waved the photos at us. Who were these boys? The screen's pixels had given the pictures a granular, out of focus look. The flash obscured most of what we were trying to capture, revealing only half forms of male bodies, a perfect torso or bicep surrounded by blurs. When Alice tried to

explain what we had been up to, her mother shook her head. Then she took Alice's camera to be safe.

I had the same camera Alice did, a rectangular camera that used something called 110 film. I used it all the time, snapping shots of Bridget with her patrol belt, Alice after a cartwheel, my teachers prim at their desks. Once I even took pictures of myself.

I was convinced I was pretty, though I wasn't. In the mirror before school, I scanned my face for evidence. Though masked by my thick glasses, weren't my eyes framed by fluffy lashes? Didn't my lips, though purple and wrinkly, have a nice shape? Was I really that overweight?

Of course, the reality was that the goggles I wore distorted my eyes and made them too tiny for my face and I had the sloppy, asymmetrical appearance of most fat kids. I found a way to ignore these ugly truths, however, and believed I was good looking. Home alone one afternoon, I removed my glasses and took a sincere look. I swiveled open the blinds to get more light. I checked my profile and then stared straight on. The face that I saw was undeniable attractive, I decided. I had to capture it. I had to have proof. Angling my camera at arm's length, I snapped my picture a few times.

When I found these photos as an adult, I was surprised by a plump face fogged by seriousness. Inadvertently, I hadn't smiled for any of the shots. My eyes were the most troubling. Without my glasses I couldn't see at all and thus, my staring was only in the general direction of the camera's lens. The eyes that I had thought

looked mature and alluring were unfocused and slightly cross-eyed. I looked bewildered.

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Appa and I did all of the shopping together. Every Sunday, I joined him to the Giant Grocery back in Langley Park where I anxiously watched the blue-green digits beep up and up towards my mental marker: sixty dollars. Anytime we spent more than that amount, I examined the contents of our cart with guilt, wondering which box of dehydrated potatoes or sack of Doritos should have been eliminated.

Other than the white training bras Amma gave me when I started sixth grade—which I wore without gripe though they were too small—Appa purchased everything I needed. Whenever it was time for shoes, for example, he and I perused discount shoe stores for loafers or nameless canvas shoes. Once he bought me purple sneakers with scratch and sniff logos. This time Anna, Appa and I headed to the Foot Locker Outlet in Langley Park. I did not know what an outlet was, I just knew that here there were the Nikes and Pumas that Anna wore.

The racks were overflowing with white leather, synthetic suede and shoelaces that twirled out of shoeboxes and off the shelves like Medusa hair. The store was a teenager's bedroom; order lay submerged beneath the pandemonium. Things were nearby where signs indicated they should be. Here you tried on shoes without help from the sizes you located yourself. When Appa found me I was prancing around an aisle in white Avias with toothpaste blue trim. I didn't expect to own them—they cost fifty dollars— but Appa scooped their box and motioned let's go.

“With these?” I asked. He must have missed the price.

“They fit your feet or what?” Appa asked, kneeling. He pinched the toes to gauge the growing space. He was satisfied.

“Appa,” I said, “they cost fifty dollars.”

“What is there,” Appa replied. Appa was never flippant about money. When I dumped a half plate of rice because I was full, he scolded me. If a grape rolled on the floor and I was tempted to pitch it instead of rinsing it off, Appa reminded me about the cost of produce and grapes in particular. Appa understood, as minimum wage earners do, that money measured hours. Why would he buy me these shoes? Perhaps I shamed him by assuming he couldn’t afford what I wanted, or maybe he simply felt that fatherly urge to bestow. He vanished behind an aisle in search of Anna.

The next day, I felt for the first time the anxiety that comes with new sneakers. At the ends of both my legs were blizzards. The shoes’ luminous whiteness was undeniable. Today, everyone was going to notice my feet. All morning I was careful not to scuff them, sliding my feet to keep the toes clean. I even kept my feet off the rungs of my desk. At some point, I made my way to the coat closet, which was really just the far wall of the classroom lined with hooks and partitioned by plasterboard propped on poles. As I sat on the floor rummaging for whatever I was looking for, my left foot extended beneath the partition and back into the classroom. That’s when Anthony Templeman, a rat faced boy with Sergio Tachini racing suits, noticed my lone foot.

“Dag,” said Anthony to the class, “Alis finally got some decent shoes.”

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Initially, Claudia was the evil force determined to steal my best friend. She was a beautiful Guatemalan girl and I detested her at first, slicing her out of the photos I took of us as a group during recess. Eventually I recognized inevitability. I took the Can't Beat 'Em, Join 'Em axiom to heart and decided that if I couldn't oust her from Alice's side, I'd invite her into the pack officially. When Alis split a pair of heart-shaped earrings and carved them with "Best Friends Forever," there were three of us: Alice, Alis and Claudia. I had changed the spelling of my name in fourth grade, tired of my work being confused with Alice's when we shared classes. The switch stuck even after we stopped being assigned the same teachers. The three of us would cement as friends. The three of us would never suffer any serious rifts or alliance shifts though we embarked on Bible College, drug addictions and even medical school in the Philippines.

Claudia was even better versed than Alice when it came to boys. She had kissed plenty of them and even wore hickies on her throat like it was no big deal. Despite myself, I was impressed. When she suggested we make a trip to the roller rink the summer before sixth grade, I knew accepting Claudia was a smart move. This girl made sense. Alice and I secretly phoned the boys in our class to meet us at the rink Claudia had selected.

Claudia's mother, a gorgeous woman with the huge dark eyes and fuchsia lips Claudia had inherited, drove us to the rink. I had put on my best outfit, a long-sleeved Pepto Bismal t-shirt with matching socks and black shorts. I looked, however ironically, my best. Once inside Claudia's mother thankfully disappeared, promising to return in a few hours.

The rink was lined with hormones, pubescent bodies positioning for currency. We spotted the boys we had invited and after ordering our cola colored skates, we looped around the rink with them.

“Do you know this song?” Scott asked. *The Humpty Dance* played, the rap group Digital Underground’s first mainstream hit. Scott used to be a skater boy complete with the skater do—head shaved on the sides with long hair up top—but he was making the transition into “wiggerdom.” By high school, he would never leave home without his fake gold rope and b-boy white Nikes.

“I love these guys,” he said. “They’re hilarious.”

I could do little more than skate forward and even then there were moments when I shuddered with imbalance. A few times I got carried away with momentum and raced away from my friends, weaving through crowds with daydreams of finesse in front of me. What it would be like to be a real ice skater, I wondered, or a real anything.

I’m sure I noticed them. I must have seen them as we lapped the room, a circle of white kids, well dressed and indifferent, a whole scourge of Sarah Brockmans and David Beards. When one of them approached me, I mistook him for a movie star. He was just right. He had the flinty look of a true prep, rumped and self-assured. He rolled right over to where I stood with Alice and Claudia.

“Do you want to skate with me?” he asked, taking a quick look at his friends who pretending they weren’t watching. When he turned back around blond bangs fell into his eyes the way they were supposed to. Then, with boyish grace, he flipped the hair out of his face so he could see.

“Yes sir!” I replied. Why should I contain myself, when he’d taken such a risk to come over to me? Nobody else had been asked to partner up. I took the arm he had outstretched for me. I peeked at the girls as he led me away. They couldn’t believe it either, but they were smiling for me like good friends.

We skated a few feet together and I couldn’t believe my luck. Finally, the proof was here for everybody to see. I *was* pretty, pretty enough to warrant this cute boy to single me out, over both Claudia and Alice. He had taken a chance, I knew, by coming over to a gang of unknown kids. My beauty had compelled him to rethink those natural inhibitions. Tonight was my night.

A short distance from where we had started, I started to ask if he liked this song, but he unhooked his arm from my mine.

“I was just kidding,” he said, unraveling himself from me. Then he skated back to his friends who were gripping their sides it was so funny, impressed no doubt by their friend’s ability to follow through on mean bets.

## Chapter Eight

Mrs. Humphrey, my sixth grade teacher, hated me. She hated two black boys in our class as well, supposedly for their smart attitudes and unruly desks, although I saw negligible difference between them and the now gone Brockmans. In fact, Michael and Frederick seemed genuinely nicer kids. Mrs. Humphrey hated Frederick so much that his desk always faced the back wall. He had to turn in his seat to see her scowling at him from the blackboard, though I had never heard him say anything that wasn't a joke. She disliked my chattiness, which there was much of, but she seemed to resent my questioning more. Either way, I was disruptive. I had a needling way of raising my hand again and again to make my own point. Even my classmates found it grating.

“Why is Europe a continent?” I asked once. “It’s not a ‘large land mass.’”

“When I ask you for continents, you will name Europe.” She moved her eyes away from me though I had already started to wag my arm again. “It is a continent,” she reiterated.

“But it’s not,” I insisted. My classmates groaned.

When she refused to look at me, I continued, one arm holding up the other by the elbow. “Isn’t it a peninsula?”

She had had enough.

“Move your desk, Alice,” she ordered.

I asked why although I knew. I was being banished.

“Move it!” By now she was beside me, yanking my desk out of my lap. “Get yourself up.”

When I got to Frederick's end of the classroom, he was laughing at me, but I didn't feel bad. Frederick always got more than his. When she saw him having a good time, bobbling his desk on his knees to mock me, Mrs. Humphrey marched back and instructed him to stand up.

We all knew what was coming.

She pushed his desk forward so that the mouth of its cubby landed face first with a metallic thunk. Then she suspended the mouth of the desk over the floor so that dittos, workbooks, library books, pens, coins and a cardboard school box landed on Frederick's sneakers. Papers slithered all over making shushing sounds. Then she gave the desk a final shake. Frederick's desk had been dumped.

"Isn't that funny?" She weaved her way back to the front of the room.

We required no further invitation to be mean. As children we believed that threats are random; when they passed us we delighted, never forgetting that next time it might be us on our knees gathering the mess we were powerless to stop. That's why we had to laugh, while we had the chance.

By lunch I had forgiven Mrs. Humphrey and was ready to let bygones go their way. Recently, the teachers who presided over lunch had devised "silent lunch." Whenever the wave of our noise refused to recede or too many of us got up from our tables, the entire cafeteria was gagged, heads down for the last five minutes of lunch. For every child who giggled or whispered to her neighbor, silent lunch was extended into recess. This was clever. As seconds ticked off our half hour recess, we got quiet, the only sound irritated shushes to fellow classmates. None of us wanted to screw with recess.

On this day, perhaps cowed by desk dumpings in their own classrooms, the lunchroom was well behaved. There was no barking from teachers. For no particular reason, there were no fights, no bursts of carefree guffawing, no shrieking or chasing of any kind. However, when the last five minutes of lunch approached, Mrs. Humphrey began silent lunch anyway.

I asked raised my hand. If we had been good why did we still have to have silent lunch?

“Put your head down,” Mrs. Humphrey replied. “And be quiet.”

I put my face in the crook of my arm, but kept my hand raised.

She ignored me.

Finally, another teacher asked me what I wanted. I told her. Silent lunch was punishment. Today we had been good.

Before I could finish, Mrs. Humphrey was on us.

“I’ll take care of this,” she interrupted the other teacher. “Get your tray, Alis.”

I assumed I was getting recess detention, where I would have to sit on the cement steps for the thirty minutes of recess, barred from communicating with my classmates even with hand gestures. I knew because I had tried once to participate in a game of tag by waving and pointing from my perch at the top of the stairway. This was not my doom, however.

“Have a seat with the boys, Alis,” Mrs. Humphrey ordered. “You’ll sit there for the rest of the year.”

She meant it, too. I sat between Scott, Carl and Jason for all of sixth grade, the luckiest girl in the class.

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Anna, who had been driving illegally here and there for months, was now on the heels of sixteen. Conveniently, we also needed a new car. Station wagons, especially the kind with faux wood paneling, had always enchanted Appa but Anna wanted something more red-blooded. Like many Americans, Anna fell in love with the SUV. He wanted a Chevy Blazer.

The woman at the dealer looked like Oprah Winfrey and Appa, who was usually too shrewd about any kind of purchase, seemed dazed. Though there were models with nice packages and decent engines, Appa eliminated each. One had windows tinted too dark. What were we, gangsters? Another was everything we wanted except that its exterior was painted black. Bad luck. We'd look like a funeral. Finally, Appa settled on a Blazer with no perks and a below stock engine. It had just four cylinders, about the number required to power a go-cart. It's only plus was it was white.

"They're big cylinders," said Oprah when Appa expressed concern about the v-4 engine.

Though we had clearly flung ourselves from the plane and were now plummeting towards signing the papers, Appa paused briefly to reconsider.

"Don't buy it," I warned Appa. "We can't afford it."

"What should I do?" Appa asked into the phone. He had called Uncle Chandradas the only other Indian man who was as unsuccessful as Appa. "Shyam really wants it."

"Don't buy it," I repeated. I had no daring. "Don't."

“New car, you know,” said Appa. “Not used, brand new. 1988 model.”

“It’s too much, Appa,” I said again. “We can’t afford it.”

“*Pothum*,” Appa ordered. Enough.

I shut up.

On the way back from the dealership, fear finally took over Appa, too.

“It’s a nice car, yes, but,” he said, smoothing his hands down the steering wheel, “if anything happens, that’s it.”

I had felt badly the entire time. I felt that Oprah had swindled Appa using every grimy car salesman ploy. When I had mentioned that we could show off the new truck at Sandy Point Beach the next day at Indian community picnic, I had been joking. But Oprah immediately pulled open the back hatch to show how well the Blazer did at picnics, cookouts and tail gates. She reminded me of the salesperson at Sears the weekend prior. We had come to use a coupon Amma had found for one family portrait. By the time we left, the woman had convinced Amma and Appa the bargain in wallet sizes, pictures of Anna and me together and cheap wooden frames that used clear plastic instead of glass. As we drove in our new Blazer, I considered how easily money moved out of our family’s hands.

“If the fridge goes or the toilet,” Appa continued, “that’s it. Blazer gone.”

The next day we showed up at the Langley Park Community Center in style. The Blazer roared—later we’d soon discover that its noise was due to 2.5 liter engine straining to move the truck’s heavy frame—into the parking lot to the buzz of the aunties and uncles packing up potluck meals into their cars. Appa loaded up the Blazer with whatever they handed him—video equipment to tape Rani Auntie’s

dancers on the beach, bags of paper picnic supplies and stainless steel cooking pots already striped with spills.

“It’s a little prestige, no?” Appa asked, smiling. The Blazer was taller than the other cars and in it, so was Appa.

It was an ideal day to head to the shore. The water dazzled like glitter beneath the Bay Bridge which also flickered as sunshine flashed off windshields and chrome. Once there, we ate and shielded ourselves from the sun as Rani Auntie orchestrated dance numbers on the sand.

As soon as she started her recording, the dancers began to bounce around the waves.

“Jellyfish!”

Rani Auntie, desperate to complete her filming, assured the girls that the jellyfish didn’t bite.

“Keep dancing, girls,” she ordered. “If you don’t bother them, they won’t bother you.”

One after the other the girls got stung, some even continuing to perform through the initial pain. Appa and I laughed from where we sat in the back of the Blazer, parked on a rise. From our angle we could occasionally spot the globs of danger just below the surface, though we were too far to warn anybody.

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There were tears ready to go and all I had to do was blink their permission to roll. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. There were a line of B’s down my report

card for every category excluding music and P.E., those subjects Mrs. Humphrey did not directly govern. Beside spelling and math and reading (reading!) and science were angry handwritten B's, and beside behavior there was a C. This was wrong. All wrong.

I waited for lunch to talk with her. While the others headed towards food, I went to my teacher's desk. She was an older Jewish woman with that orange out of the box colored hair and a reputation for being crotchety that had proved completely accurate. She let me stand by her desk for a crucial few seconds before asking me what I needed from her. She looked like she had been expecting me.

"Mrs. Humphrey, these grades aren't fair," I said. As soon as I said the word "fair," my voice got watery. "I get A's in everything."

"It's time you understood, Alis," she said wearily, "that your behavior affects all of your grades."

I told her that wasn't fair.

"Fair smair."

I started to roll my eyes but remembered my position. I took a breath. I started to tell her there was a Behavior grade. She could give me an F there if she wanted, if I was so bad.

"This is your problem." She stood up. "Stop arguing and maybe your grades will improve." She was now by the door, shutting off the lights. "You have to learn."

At home that night, I pleaded with Appa to talk with her. In addition to her B's, I was now one of three sixth graders who were not permitted on the big class field trip to New York. The other two victims were the two black boys she hated,

Michael and Frederick. We had each, one by one during a single afternoon, earned our exclusion by talking out of turn too many times or, in my case, by talking back.

“Everybody else is going,” I begged. I left out Michael and Frederick as beside the point; they should have been going too. No one from any other class was staying home from this daylong trip. It was just we three.

“What can I do, ma?” Appa was shuffling between the sink and the stove, occasionally letting loose a blast of steam from a pot or the faucet.

“Just talk to her,” I said. “Tell her you want me to go and my grades aren’t fair.”

“I don’t know what I can do,” he replied. Then he wobbled his head yes.

I figured that Appa would speak with her and she would relent, telling him I was smart but mouthy and she liked me after all.

That did not happen. Appa went to the school, eerily lit in the evening dark, in a wool suit and paisley tie. He had taken his second daily shave early and smelled of heavy musk cologne. I waited in the Blazer, busying myself with stories of children being trapped in the library, haunted by ghosts from the building’s fire. When Appa returned, he shook his head only this time he meant No.

“She doesn’t like your talking, Ma,” Appa had said simply. He put his arm on my headrest as he reversed the Blazer from its space. Then he slammed home what I had missed. “She says you should apologize to her.”

I’m sorry’s, like thank you’s, were not major components of my Indian upbringing. I say nothing else on the short trip home, surprised that she did not yield to Appa although I am unconvinced that it was staunchness on her part. Appa was not

one to take a stand. If Sarah Brockman's mother had marched in there, I suspected, Sarah would have been driving the bus to New York.

A few weeks after the entire sixth grade class—other than Michael, Frederick and myself—returned from New York, I developed pneumonia much the way my parents always said I would if I kept going to bed with wet hair. I had been admitted to the hospital a few times that year, once for food poisoning and another time for something akin to a ruptured ovarian cyst. The school nurse phoned Appa and he jostled through midday D.C. traffic to get me, the Blazer like the pale white horse I had read poetry about. I actually liked getting sick, despite the pain. I enjoyed any kind of singling out, even if it was for pity.

I had just gotten over missing the trip when it happened. It had taken me a while to let it go, primarily because I never actually thought I wouldn't go. I didn't even think there was a chance I wouldn't be on that chartered bus at six am, drowsy and duffel bagged with Alice and Claudia and everyone else. I even thought Frederick and Michael would be there. I waited for reprieve into the morning of the trip.

But it was too late for any of that. The field trip came and passed, the boys and I skipping school that day with the sympathy of everyone. By the time I was wheezing through the fluid in my lungs, things between Mrs. Humphrey and I had returned to normal. I had seen Alice and Claudia's photos from the Chinese restaurant where they had all eaten dinner, their cheap I LOVE NEW YORK key chains. I had heard Scott retell how he had seen an actual hooker. I was over it.

After a week at Holy Cross Hospital, I returned home to rest. The first day I was home, I stared at the television from my spread on the couch. Amma had covered

the plastic sofa covers with blankets and left me juice and a newly acquired inhaler I loved since it verified my fragility. I had cosmetic cotton balls to twirl around my fingers—an infantile habit that complimented my thumb sucking—and copies of *Bop* and *Teen Beat* magazine.

The curtains to the front windows were open, but the living room was dim because it was another overcast day. Clouds made it seem later than it was. Two boys had just walked their wobbly puppy out of my view when I noticed a red sedan pull up to our curb. I wondered who it was and heaved a sigh at the state of the house.

It was in its usual disrepair; Amma's sandals were here or there or both, a cereal bowl balanced on the couch, its pink milk beginning to leave a ring. The agape closet door exposed even more disorder, the carpet was coated with debris, the dining room which could be seen from the front door was a battlefield of soiled plates, junk mail, Jergen's lotion, tools adrift from their toolbox, empty scotch tape dispensers, blank cassettes, plastic grocery bags and last weekend's *Sunday Post* insert. I assumed whomever it was outside was one of Appa's friends here to pick up some of the Johnny Walker liquor Appa got at a discount from the Embassy. They would have seen the hurricane of our house before, but it would still be embarrassing. At least I'm sick, I thought. That could be an excuse. I leaned over to see if I could recognize which uncle it was.

The Halloween hair was unmistakable. Climbing out of the car was Mrs. Humphrey. She carried a bouquet of flowers, a stack of what appeared to be handmade cards from the class, and two cardboard boxes that turned out to hold a stuffed lion and polar bear.

I sat up. When I stood a second later, blackness rushed the sides of my vision. I shook it off.

“Amma!” I shouted. “Someone’s here. My teacher!”

For a second I considered grabbing whatever I could to tidy up while Mrs. Humphrey made her way up our dissolving driveway. Then I rushed to the bedroom and shut the door. There are moments in childhood when you realize that no one can really make you do anything. It’s a fleeting awareness—at least until your teens—and usually you can be bulldozed again. The threat of punishment returns. But during moments of real terror, you realize that force only compels your will and your will is ultimately your own. I was not coming out. It would be the first stand I ever took.

From the living room I heard Amma’s voice hit its high notes, the murmuring of awkward introductions and finally the rustling of Mrs. Humphrey taking a seat on our sealed furniture.

Amma came into the bedroom and shut the door behind her.

“She came to see you, ma,” said Amma. “Just come and say hi.”

No way.

“Please, ma.” Amma began to smile at the situation. She didn’t know what to do. She knew she could not command me to do anything; perhaps she never was able to. “I know, you are feeling shamed.” She grimaced. “It’s my fault. I should have vacuumed the house.”

I sighed. Amma, whatever else she missed, understood that our house was humiliation.

“What should I tell her?” She asked. “She knows you are here.”

That was true. We couldn't lie; Mrs. Humphrey had surely heard my voice as I could hear her squeaking for comfort on the couch. I liked when Amma and conspired together. She had always been like a strange older sister.

"Tell her," I said, giggling, "that I hate her."

"She *is* a bad lady," Amma answered, laughing a little too. Amma knew about the B's—grades she felt her daughter could never deserve—but more than that, Amma believed in her impressions of people. And though Amma had been wrong about nearly everyone, I was pleased that she disliked Mrs. Humphrey. It meant I could tell Mrs. Humphrey to go to hell without having to say I was sorry about it.

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The summer before high school, Alice's parents took us to Ocean City. By September the crowds had headed back west and Ocean Highway, the main strip, was blank. The convertibles and bass heavy jeeps were gone. The drunk bus was empty except for a few retired folk. The beaches were sprinkled with towels and umbrellas, mostly families using up lingering bits of vacation time before the school year escorted their children another mile from childhood.

It was my first time at the beach without my parents and Alice's parents had even splurged on an extra room for us girls. They allowed us to wander the boardwalk alone probably because they knew there were no boys our age around. At the beach there was no one to suck in our stomachs for so we fooled around like the kids we were.

I lost my glasses right away. They were thick and very heavy and I didn't have the sense to take them off before I got in the water. One good wave knocked

them right off my face and after a few minutes of hopeful scanning, I gave up. I'd have to spend the weekend blindfolded.

It wasn't too bad. I rode go carts without too much trouble, though I didn't dare go fast or do any steering other than right down the middle of the track. Miniature golf was pointless and renting bikes impossible. We spent the most time on the beach.

Alice was the one who figured out we could just borrow the boogie boards.

"There hasn't been anybody anywhere near them," she said. "Even if you wanted to pay for them, who would you pay?"

I looked up and down the beach. To my right was the carnival, closed and skeletal, to my left endless shore. Other than a lifeguard post at regular intervals there was nobody but beachgoers for miles.

"The worst they could do is ask us to pay," I said already walking over to the wooden shed they sat on. "We could just play dumb."

"Easy for you," Alice teased.

I had never learned to swim and thus had never experienced the weightlessness of riding water. Now I understood the thrill. Before when I visited Ocean City I had braced myself in shallow water, waiting for waves to slam into my body. I thought this was what was fun.

How wrong I had been! With a boogie board I could corral waves and ride them until they gently deposited me on the beach. I bobbed in water deeper than I'd even been in, gleefully waiting for the next caress to catch beneath my body. Then I'd glide like a bird. The exhilaration was unlike anything I had experienced before.

I rode the boogie board all afternoon. By the time the sun was setting, I had been pulled out pretty far. Without my glasses I couldn't judge distances well. I just knew, all of a sudden, that the tide was going out. There also weren't any big waves anymore, I had slipped passed them. Waves broke ahead of me, their white caps barely visible. When I tried to kick and paddle on the board, I couldn't tell if I was making progress. In my blurry view, I wasn't moving at all.

I didn't panic just yet. I called out to a Black boy who was paddling nearby.

"I can't swim," I told him. "Can you tow me in?"

He swam over. He took the cord that linked the board to my wrist and tried swimming with one arm. After several futile strokes, he realized that he wasn't going anywhere.

"It's not working," he said. "I have to let you go."

The sky had grown murky and the dots on the surface of the water were fewer than just minutes before. Everyone was heading in. We couldn't be that far anyway. As the boy slapped the water away from me I decided to try to walk in. I'd bounce on my toes the way I did at the pool. It'd be slow but I didn't have a choice.

I slid off the board. I wagged my feet and waited for them to touch sand. They didn't. The next instant water closed over my head. As I sank, I could still see the splotch of white that was my boogie board. The cord around my wrist finally caught at full length.

Maybe I'll drown, I remember thinking.

Using the cord and adrenaline I shot out of the water and reached for the board. It wobbled in and out of my reach. Between gulps of sea, I began to yell.

I never saw the lifeguard until he had me. I must have been screaming even after he was well within view; he must of thought I was such a baby. I remember wanting to tell him I didn't have my glasses. Or else I would have stopped yowling when I knew I was rescued. The glasses had caused the whole mishap in fact.

The lifeguard towed me in so far that my knees dragged in the sand before he stopped. Alice Ip and her parents were waiting for me, shaken up and embarrassed by the spectacle, but happy I was okay.

I slept the ride home, lamenting having to tell the story, especially the part that required Appa to buy me new glasses. When I got home, I still had sand in the creases of my lap.

"Where is everybody?" I asked. Anna was at the dining table doing homework. Though the cars were in the driveway, no one else was around.

"Where are your glasses?" Anna asked.

"The Atlantic Ocean." I said smirking. I started to tell my adventure, when Anna stopped me.

"We got some bad news here, man." Anna had on that smile.

Oh, shit. I thought. Anna was the king of understatement, dean of downplay. Even the most blockbuster fight wouldn't warrant its mention. This would be dreadful news.

Appa had been fired from Holiday Inn, he informed me. Fired for dozing on his break, a policy that was just put into place. In one swipe, fifteen years of pension were gone. He had already begged for forgiveness; they knew he juggled two jobs. If

anyone had a reason to choose napping over a snacking during his break, it was Raj. They didn't care, Anna told me.

I didn't absorb the news at first. I only half paid Anna attention. I thought instead of sliding on the ocean and slipping underneath its brown blueness. I thought about drowning and dying. I thought about how easy it had been to call for help. I had experienced the sensation of drowning for less than a minute and then I'd been saved. What would it be like, I wondered, to always be half submerged, forever waiting for the one big wave that would take you out?

## **Interlude Two: On Dolls and Identification with Blackness as a Classed Identity**

Race as a social construction is a well-beaten horse. In fact, a true signal that a concept is entrenched is when new theory revisits it with a critical stance; some literature has begun to swing tentatively towards biological understandings of personhood, as we glacially grasp at genes and all their mysterious predictors. In terms of our daily experience, race is generally defined by phenotypes that we quietly assume to be natural—as David Lionel Smith points out, we are unable to nail down race, but we are convinced we know it when we see it. “We feel that we know who and what is truly black. So what if we cannot explain what constitutes blackness?”<sup>141</sup> Yet our fragile “common sense” reading of race can be whimsical and is always subject to context. I am reminded of my Cricket Auntie, whose name alone should have tipped me off to the fact that she was white.

As a child, I saw Cricket Auntie at all our family functions, dressed sloppily in a sari and seated with the other aunties who never mingled with their or others’ husbands. She did speak with unaccented English but I concluded that it stemmed from the same source as her husband’s flawless speech. Charlie Mama, her husband and my uncle, as well as other younger aunties like Southa Chithee<sup>142</sup> were then still childless and free—young enough to have easily adopted American drawls since they were teenagers when they arrived in the States. Cricket Auntie’s elocution, her unusual name and her discomfort in saris were not the only obvious clues to her being

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<sup>141</sup> David Lionel Smith, “What is Black Culture?” in *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 180.

<sup>142</sup> “Mama,” “Chithee,” “Athai,” each connote a particular kind of uncle or aunt in Tamil.

white, however. She was an Irish, freckly pale, she had blond hair and her eyes were pool water blue. There was nothing, other than context and association, that could have led me to believe she was anything but white.

Yet I did not see her as white.

I believed, without questioning, that Cricket Auntie was Indian like me based plainly in the fact that she was with us. She dressed, lived and celebrated with us. She moved through the hallways and holidays of our lives without initiating any outsider ripples. She would eventually mother an Indian daughter. Why else would she be with us if she weren't what we were?

Of course, this attests more to my childish myopia than it does to the malleability of race. Like the phenotypically black girls in France Winddance Twine's "Brown-skinned White Girls," who considered themselves "white" or at least racially neutral when they were children<sup>143</sup>, I too learned to see race as we all do: based irreducibly in phenotypic appearance and how others see us.<sup>144</sup> Yet Cricket Auntie does point to the nuanced, culturally contingent nature of race. Race is not simply skin tone, hair texture and parental lineage; otherwise "acting white," "selling out," being a "wigger," or an "oreo" would be impotent harangues. Racial identity is performative—I'm drawing from Judith Butler here—, inarguably essentialist, and in an American context, irrevocably tangled with class identity. Whiteness is collapsed with middle class sensibilities—deviations from which are dismissed as aberrations—

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<sup>143</sup> France Winddance Twine, "Brown Skinned White Girls: Class, Culture and the Construction of White Identity in Suburban Communities." *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* vol. 3 no. 2 (July 1996): 214-43.

<sup>144</sup> And although I cannot say for sure, Cricket Auntie having disappeared decades ago when she left Charlie Mama who himself is long gone by way of heart attack, I can guess that her acceptance was not nearly as total as it was portrayed to me.

and authentic blackness is perceived as stemming from or having an affiliation with urban poverty.

It is no anecdotal aside that each of the female subjects in Twine's study of biracial Berkeley students housed their claims to a white identity in their class status. In studying "the role of suburban residence in the acquisition of a racialized identity,"<sup>145</sup> Twine discovered that "purchasing power" and the linking of blackness with being "economically underprivileged," not only cemented the girls' identities as upper class, but also as specifically not black.<sup>146</sup> This despite each girl having at least one black parent and appearing phenotypically black. For one girl, "her excellent grades, her interests, her friendships with whites and her material privileges,"<sup>147</sup> enabled her and the other subjects to "acquire a white identity as children despite possessing biological markers of African ancestry."<sup>148</sup> These girls are not unique nor are their views outdated, however misguided perhaps. In the longstanding debate on Senator Barack Obama's "blackness," Robin Givhan reminds that on the question of the "nature of blackness," "too many talking heads imply that it is essentially the underclass, suggesting that middle-class blacks are somehow disengaged from the true black experience."<sup>149</sup>

This conflation of class identity with a raced identity stems from an overall American tendency to "promote ethnic and racial identity at the expense of other

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 224.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 225.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>149</sup> Robin Givhan, "Plunging Back into Blackness," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2008, M12.

identities”<sup>150</sup> that is replicated on the opposite spectrum from Twine’s subjects as well. The girls interviewed in Julie Bettie’s study of “working class white and Mexican American girls in their senior year of high school in California’s central valley”<sup>151</sup> each “explained differences among themselves solely in racial/ethnic terms.”<sup>152</sup>

Students found it useful or necessary to describe class performances in racial terms such as “acting white” because of the difficulty of coming up with a more apt way to describe class differences in a society in which class discourse as such is absent and because the correlation of race and class (the overrepresentation of people of color among the poor) was a highly visible reality...<sup>153</sup>

Class was never perceived as racially neutral since “class performances had race-specific meanings linked to notions of ‘authentic’ racial/ethnic identity.”<sup>154</sup> Although this mode privileged race and its performance, this did not prevent the girls from switching their racialized performances to be in tune with class-based contexts regardless of their actual phenotype. For example, when one white girl temporarily attended a nearly all Mexican school, she felt she and “some whites at the bottom of the heap like herself were almost brown.”<sup>155</sup> This speaks to what M. Ibrahim uncovered when unraveling the ways French-speaking African immigrants claimed an American Black identity despite living in Canada. As much as the “genetic

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<sup>150</sup> Nadine Dolby, review *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* by Sunaina Maira, *Educational Researcher* vol. 31 no. 8 (Nov 2002): 41.

<sup>151</sup> Julie Bettie, “Women without Class: Chicas, Cholas, Trash and the Presence/Absence of Class Identity.” *Signs* vol. 26 no.1 (Autumn 2000), 2.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

connection,” the brown-skinned immigrants also pointed out an “inability to relate to dominant groups, the public spaces they occupied, and their cultural forms and norms.”<sup>156</sup>

My disjunction from what I perceived as normal and ideal resulted in part from the days I spent in front of the television. Like many “latch key” kids I lived in front of the TV. Diane E Levin and Nancy Carlsson-Paige, in their review of the exceptional impact of television violence on children, point out that “children from low-income families are the heaviest viewers of television.”<sup>157</sup> I was no exception. Removed from the mainstream middle class universe I watched on *Saved by the Bell*, *Beverly Hills 90210* and *The Cosby Show*, I fell prey to similar, essentialized notions of identity when I partially rejected the general identity of my ethnic ancestry because the collective representation of South Asian identity in the American imagination did not align with my experience in the suburban ghetto of Langley Park.

My parents’ lives and social status did not match the upwardly mobile, highly educated class identity represented in popular consciousness and in the lives of my Indian peers and relatives. Although I looked like my cousins and checked the same boxes on official forms, it was my class identity that became paramount to me, most likely because it was the most obvious point of disjunction from the Indian community around me and what I perceived to be “authentic” Indianness (a conceptualization no less silly than “authentic” blackness). Lacking the lexicon to articulate this class affiliation/disaffiliation as such, I racialized my classification as a

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<sup>156</sup> Ibrahim, 361.

<sup>157</sup> Diane E. Levin & Nancy Carlsson Paige, “Marketing Violence: The Special Toll on Young Children of Color.” *Journal of Negro Education* Vol. 72, No. 4 Commercialism in the Lives of Children and Youth of Color: Education and Other Socialization Contexts (Autumn 2003): 429.

working poor girl, thereby asserting the essentialized version of black identity with which I was surrounded and in which I participated. This became my route to an American identity. This was not a simple equation that operates without critique. First, considering that I was not actually black, this interpretation of my identity was fundamentally a *mis*interpretation. It is further complicated by the fact that my original definitions of Americanness were coded white.

Upon their arrival in the States my parents, however devoted to their own cultural longevity, were eager to fit into their new American homes. In Chapter One, my mother lovingly participates in the rituals of the tooth fairy, while my father was determined to see as much of the country as his short vacations and AAA maps would allow. My parents encouraged what they considered innocuous paths to assimilation such as my engrossment in books for girls and my friendships with white American girls. Thus my first introductions to American normalcy—what I perceived as such—were defined by whiteness. From Sally, the Jewish girl who had my mother’s “total adoration,”<sup>158</sup> to the lengthier and more complex relationships I had with white girls at Cherokee Lane Elementary, my models for Americanness had phenotypically similar faces. In fact, the day I spent with Sally’s family stands out as the “first time I felt the painful urge to be part of someone else’s normalcy. I could covet it years later with white families who were uncomfortable with me...”<sup>159</sup>

Her working class world was trumped in desirability by the middle class whiteness I devoured in Judy Blume and Beverly Cleary’s books. I dreamed of the

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<sup>158</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 38.

<sup>159</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 39.

scenes depicted on the covers, “spiral bound notebooks splayed across a desk, a window seat, a languid cat coiled on a patterned bedspread.” I did not so much yearn for the “mundane objects” as I pined for what they represented to me: “normal young womanhood.”<sup>160</sup> Despite the abundance of other bodies of Americanness in surroundings, this normalcy was always coded, at least initially, as white. Escape from the Beirut of home was envisioned as a scholarship to the largely white universe of boarding schools. To me Deerfield’s application materials were identical to *Tiger Eyes* and *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* with its “blue blazered boys on lacrosse fields.” These boys, “bound for plush knolls, Roman columns and yuppie adulthood,” were always white.<sup>161</sup>

The popular kids at Cherokee Lane were also all white, despite their dwindling numbers. In Chapter Seven, Alice Ip and I plot to infiltrate the “last remaining white clique” by crashing their lunch table. Though we are thwarted it would be reductive to say our rejection was based entirely on race. For one, Alice and I were fifth graders, not sixth graders like the cool kids, a distinction that should not be undervalued, never mind that all in crowds savagely guard their borders irrespective of race. What is notable then, and also verifiable, is not that Nikki excluded us based on race—which we will never know—but that I perceived it that way. This rebuff maintained racial connotations to me, much like Mrs. Velez leaving me on the doorstep to wait for Lauren in Chapter Five. Was it bigotry that kept me waiting there? I cannot say for sure. I can only insist that the humiliation of waiting

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<sup>160</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 40.

<sup>161</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 73.

outside felt that way to me then, so informed by race that I racialized my future interactions with her.

What does it mean that many of my most stinging memories involve white players? How does this impact my eventual identification with a kind of blackness? The only instances of fear felt on my father's behalf were perpetrated by white actors. I recall only the "sunburned magenta" scalp of white junkyard attendant who disrespects Appa without provocation in Chapter Three<sup>162</sup>. When I quivered at Appa's obsequiousness to the police officer who pulls him over in Rock Creek Park, I believe his helplessness is tied not simply to the cop's authority, but to the officer's rightful white authority that guards the world upon which we "intrude."<sup>163</sup> Is it extraneous that it is Mrs. Humphrey who is the only teacher I can recall who does not pretend to be budged by my precociousness? That it is this woman who leads me, when she witnesses the ugliness of my home during an uninvited visit, to take "the first stand I ever took"?<sup>164</sup> Is it irrelevant that my first scholastic disappointment, one that would inhibit my academic goals for a decade afterwards, is from the alabaster cosmos of top tier prep schools? Is it immaterial that my most memorable instance of rejection arrives, as it does for the 'brown-skinned white girls,' at the hands of white boys whose amorous attention I achingly desired? Was it race that motivated that white boy and his friends to play the trick of asking me to skate at the roller rink for a few feet for a bet? Perhaps not and surely we will never know. But if not, what does it say about my own racialized understanding of our interaction that I decided,

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<sup>162</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 38.

<sup>163</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 124.

<sup>164</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 88.

unequivocally, that it was? This incremental transition, from defining American normalcy as white and then subsequently feeling rejected from inclusion in this whiteness, undoubtedly played a role shifting the basis of my racialized American identity construction from white to nonwhite.

Proximity, structured by forces such as white flight, was also key. As Bridget, Lauren and Sarah Brockman moved out of Adelphi, my immediate surroundings began to parallel the dark-skinned tenements of my early childhood. As long time residents like the Yosts, uprooted themselves from Lynmont and Hughs and Fox, I cannot help but speculate that their departure was related to the influx of browner neighbors. As the scenery of our streets “revised its racial hues”<sup>165</sup> my own definitions of racial identity, class affiliation, what was cool, and perhaps more importantly who accepted me, adjusted along the barometer of what was proximate and plentiful. The malleability of my characterizations of Americanness was matched by a flexibility in what I perceived as reasonable performances and aspirations of racialized and classed identities.

Pamela Perry discovered something akin to this phenomena in her own study where white students’ sense their own whiteness and their perception of urban youth culture as “black” was dependent on their distance and interaction with disparate groups. Propinquity seems to expand racial self-awareness and to establish room for acceptable performances of racial identities by outsider individuals. “Whiteness, as an identity, is experienced differently for white students at Valley Grove and Clavey

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<sup>165</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 103.

because of their contrasting proximities of interracial association.”<sup>166</sup> Students at the nearly all white Valley Grove had “little sense” of whiteness as a relevant identity, whereas students at the racially mixed Clavey utilized race as the main rubric for categorization whereby “tastes in fashion, music and leisure activities were racialized.”<sup>167</sup>

This held true for children of color as well, as in the case of the Puerto Rican boy Jaime from Prudence Carter’s ethnography, whose favorable description by a black classmate as ‘trying to be black’ was predicated on the basis that his was not a decontextualized appropriation or imitation but a reflection of his taste and surroundings. His classmate validates Jaime’s performance of black identity since it was rooted in the fact that “...he’s in the middle, because black people are all around him. Like mostly, it’s more black people over there than Spanish... so he’s in the middle and he’s like surviving with all these black people.”<sup>168</sup> Thus Jaime’s phenotype and ethnic identity did not prevent him from performing what was conventionally conceived of as “black” by his black peers in order to gain some “black cultural capital.” Accumulation of this capital, and thus membership, was not exclusively based on racial heritage (nor is biological heritage itself alone enough to warrant membership, as the case of the question Barack Obama’s blackness clearly indicates).

Ascribed ethnic identities would not preclude from partaking in certain cultural practices. On

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<sup>166</sup> Nadine Dolby, review of *Shades of White: White Kids and Racial Identities in High School* by Pamela Perry,” *Educational Researcher* vol. 31 no.8 (Nov 2002): 38.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>168</sup> Prudence L. Carter, “‘Black’ Cultural Capital, Status Positioning, and Schooling Conflicts for Low-Income African-American Youth.” *Social Problems* vol. 50 no. 1 (Feb 2000): 144.

the other hand, their prescribed identities, in addition to the manner in which they deployed cultural cues, determined whether or not they could be considered 'authentic' members of the group.<sup>169</sup>

Although Jaime was not 'black,' his adaptation of the "dress, music and speech styles... the most salient signifiers of racial identity" was acceptable in part because of his proximity to other black young people. Despite his Puerto Rican ethnicity, the 'everyday' culture of his daily life matched those of his black peers. This is not to imply that clothing, hairstyles and musical taste are indicators of race, but rather that the import of these "class specific styles, such as standard or nonstandard grammar usage, accents, mannerisms and dress," is that they are "learned sets of expressive cultural practices"<sup>170</sup> that demarcate "authentic group membership."<sup>171</sup> In other words, for better or rhetorical worse, taste, what Robert Silhol calls "a socio-economic product," is how many define racial identity, particularly young people. Thus, although Jaime was not black, his performance of style that was coded by his black peers as black, was acceptable to his black peers.

This is a notable distinction. David Lionel Smith thoroughly debunks the notions of blackness as defined by an essential characteristic, whether it be the Black Arts Movement's litmus test of 'black anger' or more nuanced stances of authenticity by so-called "organic intellectuals" who are eager to claim ties to "the" black community. I am not referring to any primordial Blackness, nor am I asserting that Blackness is a construction that can be totally divorced from that brand of essentialist

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Bettie, 11.

<sup>171</sup> Carter, 142.

racial sensibility. Rather, I am valuing how young people, including young black people often define, blur and (re)create Blackness, however misguided or theoretically questionable that haggling may be.

I adopted modes of cultural performances that were read as ‘ghetto’ or ‘black’ by my peers (and by me) as I acquired more control over and awareness of my identity. Race to my adolescent imagination as well as to the young black girls in Elizabeth Chin’s ethnography, “was not absolutely defined by skin and hair, but by style and way of life.”<sup>172</sup> One example of how style can trump the limits of ancestral lineage was the fact that though my hair was not what is commonly—and at times derogatorily—described as kinky, I spent hours having my hair braided into box braids (that instantly frizzed instead of lasting for weeks) or gelled into finger waves as hard and glossy as record albums. Additionally, like the “cholas” in Bettie’s study, my working class gender identity was not only racialized but sexualized, characterized by an adulthood in daily interactions.

“Hairstyles, clothes, shoes, and the colors of lip liner, lipstick, and nail polish were key markers used to express group membership as the body became a resource and a site on which difference was inscribed.”<sup>173</sup> Every day I wore layers of make up and lipstick red as coagulated blood, slithered into painfully tight colored jeans, and got my nails impractically done in thick tips for school dances, whereas the few white girls like Sarah Brockman and Bridget Morris wore scant make up and relatively modest clothes. The girls of color with whom I was close each became sexually

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<sup>172</sup> Elizabeth Chin, “Ethnically Correct Dolls: Toying with the Race Industry.” *American Anthropologist, New Series* vol. 101 no. 2 (June 1999): 315.

<sup>173</sup> Bettie, 12.

active before the age of fifteen and I surely would have done so myself had I had the chance. I flirted with grown men whenever they seemed amenable, innocently practicing as in the case of Mr. Selma and less so with Mr. Bouma. I donned large fake gold hoops and band aids where I had no cuts. My dress was appropriately baggy and boyish and my daily speech, even at home and often in the classroom, was black vernacular English.

This was a major component of my performance. In his historical survey of blackface, *Black Like You*, John Strausbaugh argues that “how you speak determines how others perceived perceive your individual identity and social identity. It is also a way to signal how you identify yourself.”<sup>174</sup> This was a deliberate rendering, distinct from the accented speech that can emerge unknowingly from cultural emersion, yet not quite a complete an affectation since it was the product of said emersion. Rather, I was aware that the way I spoke was identified racially as ‘black’ and my legitimate claim to that speech was my being classed as ‘ghetto.’ This is a concrete example of how I moved through separate cultural worlds seamlessly. At home, I still used the Tamil names for my parents in a slight “brown voice,”<sup>175</sup> in the classroom and at church I opted for racially neutral or “white” speech patterns and in the universe of my peers where the bulk of identity was established I employed black vernacular English garnered from both my habitat as well as from its increasing presence in the media.

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<sup>174</sup> John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You* (New York: Penguin Group, 2007), 302.

<sup>175</sup> Shipa Dave, “Apu’s Brown Voice: Cultural Inflection and South Asian Accents,” in *East Main Street: Asian American Pop Culture*, ed. Shilpa Dave (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

The latter had its limits, however; I never even considered using the n-word, despite how ‘down’ I was.<sup>176</sup> Ghetto, yes, ‘acting black,’ perhaps by some measure, but not black. My identity was based on a qualified “fictive kinship,” or collective identity that was created by mutual experience and “status problems.”<sup>177</sup> We were mostly poor, mostly of color, we liked the same music, and we all knew somebody who carried a gun, had been shot, and was headed for jail—these cliché signals how we coded racialized identity— but I was aware, as were my classmates, teachers and anyone who saw me, that I wasn’t racially black; I was black in the clumsy, essentialist terminology of teenagers fumbling with racialized terms meant to describe class, style, proclivities.

This “symbolic economy of style that was the ground on which class and race relations played out”<sup>178</sup> was exhibited in things, as well as stylistic performance. My brother’s “booming system” is one such example. When Mama admonishes Appa for permitting my brother to purchase such an expensive toy, it is for allowing Anna to “do what the Blacks do.”<sup>179</sup> The 45 caliber handgun he illegally buys is, whatever else, a designer accessory too; he never fires it except into the air, instead donning it every Saturday night on the way to the clubs.

My white Barbie and black Cabbage Patch doll are particularly rich texts for unearthing the multifarious and erratic nature of my racial identifications. Although I

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<sup>176</sup> Years later I would do an ethnographic study of the usage of the n-word by my South Asian friends and discover that for them the n-word was a stylistic, American that was inclusive and no longer bound by its historical ugliness.

<sup>177</sup> J.U. Ogbu, “Collective Identity and the Burden of ‘Acting White’ in Black History, Community and Education.” *Urban Review* vol. 36 Issue 1 (March 2004): 4.

<sup>178</sup> Bettie, 14.

<sup>179</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 121.

am loathe to place much emphasis on these dolls, most especially since as a tomboy I cared so little for them in the first place, I must acknowledge that the “expression of self through one’s relationship to and creative use of commodities is a central practice in capitalist society.”<sup>180</sup> In this light, the evolution of my desire from a white Barbie to a black Cabbage Patch must reflect at least some cultural and social meaning that corresponds with my protean sense of self.

“An important aspect of identification is that it works over a period of time and at the subconscious level.”<sup>181</sup> This might explain how at first I happily accepted my white Barbies, both the cheap imitation hollow kind that floated and the real Mattel Brand Barbie I was given for a birthday. I received both before the age of seven yet by the time I was in fourth grade I was willing to wage a lengthy battle with my parents in order to acquire a black doll, one I argued looked like me, more or less. Although I cannot totalize my emotional and intellectual mindset at the time, I do know that some of my preference for a black Cabbage Patch doll stemmed from the quiet racism my parents exhibited during my childhood.

When my mother singles out Kelly as “nasty” to be avoided in Chapter One it is surely linked with Kelly’s dark mahogany skin tone and the vivaciousness my mother associated negatively with black children. In Chapter Three she recoils from the thought of letting Nigerian Adounsey into our apartment for a drink of water because my uncle and cousins are visiting. This implicates not only her racism, but also those of my adult relatives. My father is not exempt either. In Chapter Four, he

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibrahim, 360.

treats my brother and his friends to Chuck E. Cheese for my brother's birthday, yet he invites only my brother's Indian associates, leaving behind my brother's actual best friends, the Nigerian trio of brothers that includes Adounsey and with whom he would remain close with even as an adult (who, incidentally, all eventually graduate from the Ivy league).

My father's reaction to the doll itself is unambiguous. He says the doll "even looks ugly." When I attempt to reason with him by pointing out that I do not have the white skin of the other dolls, he remarks defensively that I am "not a *kurpee* either," the Tamil word for black person an insult that doesn't need to be explicated further. In addition to my reacting to the pure racism that I had already learned to read as distasteful—both morally and as oppositional to the American ideal of colorblindness—I was perhaps also responding to the colorism of South Asian aesthetics. This rubric defined pulchritude by "fairness," an unfortunate yardstick for someone as dark as me.

This indoctrination began early. Drinking milk was intended not for bones and grin, but to make me "fair." When we are stuck walking up New Hampshire Avenue in Chapter Two, Amma holds her "handbag over her head the entire time, fifteen minutes or so, to shade her face."<sup>182</sup> I too am subject to it as when in Chapter Four I refuse to wear a visor in order to punish my mother for putting me in a dress for our trip to Universal Studios. I have her hold the hat so she "felt the full brunt of my defiance—it would be her fault when I turned black from an unprotected day in the

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<sup>182</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 29.

sun.”<sup>183</sup> It is my guess that these undercurrents girded my desire for a black doll as well as my acceptance early on of white dolls, rendering each as complex sites of identification and racial desire.

Dolls have been the focus of much analysis and critique; Barbie’s creator and Mattel founder Ruth Handler goes as far as to assert that “everybody has a Barbie Story.”<sup>184</sup> This includes dated work by feminists who once asserted that all dolls and most especially Barbie, are part of the “hegemonic, patriarchal culture.”<sup>185</sup> This may have some historical footing with Barbie since the original toy created in 1959 was based on paper dolls yes, but also on the German sex doll for adult men, Lilli.

The racial history of dolls is no less compelling. The NAACP produced black dolls as early as the turn of the century and even Eleanor Roosevelt publicized the Sara Lee doll. In 1968 Mattel introduced the black Christie Doll as a companion for Barbie. This doll replaced the doll that had been released the previous year, Colored Francie, a doll that did not sell well for an assortment of reasons, including the implication that she was the product of miscengenation. A decade later, Mattel finally released the Black Barbie.

In her book, *History of Black Dolls as a Sociology of Black Children*, Sabrina Thomas asserts that, “Throughout our history we’ve used dolls to transport and

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<sup>183</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 51.

<sup>184</sup> Karen Harper, “Review of *Barbie Nation: an Unauthorized Tour*.” *The Oral History Review* vol. 27 no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2000):145.

<sup>185</sup> Chin, 307.

mutilate racial sentiments.”<sup>186</sup> This is at least anecdotally confirmed by facts like the first minority doll maker, Shindana, was founded by money granted after the Watts Riots, and the Project People Foundation found dolls such a “crucial ingredient to self esteem”<sup>187</sup> that they delivered fifteen thousand black dolls to South Africa. Molloy Toy, Inc has a line of bi-racial dolls called Real Kidz and Erik Erikson, famed psychologist, used dolls in ground-breaking psychotherapy. Even adult memories of dolls are mined for critical analysis, most significantly of which is Erica Rand’s *Barbie’s Queer Accessories*. Dolls, seemingly innocuous, are loaded in such a way that Anna Wagner-Ott suggests that teachers “‘read’ dolls as multi-dimensional texts” by asking questions such as, “What are the observable and hidden privileged and oppressed struggles within society relating to white and Black dolls?”<sup>188</sup> This is in keeping with the A. DuCille’s broader sense that childhood playthings are “more than simple instruments of pleasure and amusement, toys and games play crucial roles in helping children determine what is valuable in and around them.”<sup>189</sup>

The most famous use of dolls is psychologists Dr.’s Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s Doll Experiment. During the 1940’s, the couple asked both black and white children the same questions about two sets of dolls, one black and the other white. They were asked to select which of the dolls were desirable and attractive, which

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<sup>186</sup> Eleanor Lee Yates, “More Than Child’s Play.” *Black Issues in Higher Education* vol. 21 issue 3 (March 2004): 35.

<sup>187</sup> Rachel Kliegman, “Finding Power in a Black Doll.” *Lilith* Vol. 21 Issue 4 (January 31, 1997): 4.

<sup>188</sup> Anna Wagner-Ott, “Analysis of Gender Identity Through Doll and Action Figure Politics in Art Education.” *Studies in Art Education* Vol. 43 No.3 (Spring 2002): 256.

<sup>189</sup> A. DuCille, “Dyes and Dolls: Multicultural Barbie and the Merchandising of Difference.” *Differences* 6 (1994): 47.

looked “nice” and which looked “bad.”<sup>190</sup> The dolls were identical outside of color. The results were predictable—perhaps in decades old hindsight—and significant enough for their research to grant them expert witness status in one of the cases, *Briggs vs Elliott*, that was eventually combined with others in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. The conclusions drawn from the doll experiments were considered a “main component in Thurgood Marshall’s battle in Supreme Court case *Brown vs. Board*, cited in Footnote 11 of the Court’s decision to integrate public schools.”<sup>191</sup> According to their interpretation of the study, black children, in preferring white dolls to black dolls were suffering from a self-hatred that was neither organic or incidental, but based in “the Clark’s view that kids understood all too well that the larger society devalued and denigrated blacks. As a result, the children’s feelings about themselves were complicated by this knowledge.”<sup>192</sup>

The results were not without controversy, however, the most notable being that the children’s answers actually inverted argument for integration and self-esteem. Black children in the segregated South preferred black dolls at a higher rate than those in the north, which would seem to contradict the line of reasoning that integration was the antidote to the “self-rejection” supposedly illustrated by doll preference. By the limited scope of the experiments, it would appear to suggest that mid-century integration, without a broad scale revolution in the racial climate, might be even more devastating than its counterpart. Although she doesn’t assert that the

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<sup>190</sup> Kenneth B & Mamie Phipps Clark, “The Development of Consciousness of Self and the Emergence of Racial Identification in Negro Pre-School Children.” *Journal of Social Psychology* (1993): 591-99.

<sup>191</sup> Richard McCulloch, “What We Can Learn from Dolls.” *Broward Times* Vol. 63 Issue 24 (June 30-Jul 6, 2006): 7.

<sup>192</sup> Chin, 310.

Clarks' findings on the correlation between doll preference and inferiority were misleading, Sabrina Thomas does say that "the interpretation of the imperative evidence is not strong enough to come to that conclusion."<sup>193</sup> Others have expressed similar doubts about the significance of white doll preference and self-identification with white dolls.

At minimum, the Clarks' groundbreaking research points to the complexity of self-esteem as enacted through the use of racialized toys. The studies continue to be replicated half a century later with often similar results. Numerous copies exist. The recent youtube marvel, eighteen year old Kiri Davis's student documentary, mimics the Clark study informally and with chilling results. The black boys and girls predictably identify the dark-skinned doll as both being "bad" and resembling themselves. When responding to the question of which doll looks like him, one girl reaches for the white doll before correcting herself and picking up the black doll. She had just identified the black doll as the one that "looks bad" in response to the previous question.<sup>194</sup>

In Penelope Greene's version conducted at Harvard, color awareness is assessed by examining the impact of the order of the questions asked as well as observing how much the children played with the dolls before the interview. Its primary distinction is the installation of a third, green doll to appraise the import of dichotomous choice.<sup>195</sup> Hobson and Hobson replicated the study in 1986 and found

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<sup>193</sup> Yates, 35.

<sup>194</sup> Kiri Davis, "A Girl Like Me." Student documentary (2006):  
<http://bl148w.bl148.mail.live.com/mail/TodayLight.aspx?wa=wsignin1.0&n=535409845>

<sup>195</sup> Penelope J. Greene, "The Doll Technique and Racial Attitudes." *The Pacific Sociological Review* Vol. 23 No. 4 (October 1980): 474-490.

that 65% of their sample preferred white dolls. Their research was featured in their 1990 book, *Different and Wonderful: Raising Black Children in a Race Conscious Society*. On the basis of this book, they became consultants for the Shani Doll, Mattel's first explicitly Black Doll with "African" features. Sabrina Thomas' research, funded by a \$40,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts points to a relationship between age and doll preference, with "the older the black child becomes the more she or he prefers a black doll or action figure."<sup>196</sup>

This might help to explain why I chose a brown-skinned doll, one coded as black, when I was eight but not when I was five. Throughout my childhood I had been given white baby dolls and, like A. DuCille, I did not notice until I was older.

For most of my childhood I neither noticed nor cared that the dolls I played with did not look like me, the make believe world to which I willingly surrendered more than just my disbelief was thoroughly, profoundly white. The "I" I imagined, the self I daydreamed in Technicolor fantasies was no more black like me than the dolls I played with.<sup>197</sup>

I can recall a crawling, balding white doll, the memory more sweetly linked to Appa remembering during a busy trip to the auto store to buy batteries for it. There are vague recollections of baby dolls that were gifts, boxed and still, fastened so tightly to their cardboard cages I needed help to rescue them. During my first visit to India, one unmentioned in the memoir since my remembrances are so thin, I am three. We are there for Appa's father's funeral, a man whom I never met. Of the skimpy recollections I have, one is of a kewpie doll with a head of glass. Its hair is painted on

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> A. DuCille, 48.

and its face is a perfect peach. Idling at a train station after dark, I drop it accidentally and cry for hours at my carelessness.

What did these white dolls mean to me? Did they contribute to the disaffection I would eventually feel from my brownness (“I felt American, unbrown”)? Were they precursors for my absorption into the white worlds of my library books? When I imagined myself in my daydreams as beautiful, thin, rich, brilliant, older and free, did I see myself, as DuCille did, as white? I do not think so, at least not entirely. Although I agree with her that “dolls in particular invite children to replicate them, to imagine themselves in their dolls’ images,”<sup>198</sup> I do not remember wanting to be white, only to be accepted by whiteness. A small distinction, but nonetheless significant in that my experience was colored by an outsiderism that derived from my not being American first and foremost. I desired an American identity, one that was originally coded as white, but could also be envisioned as nonwhite, as black. For me, membership in American culture could be either black or white, although each had its own relational value. As Jorge de Alva points out in an interview with Cornel West, there is nothing more American than the American black person.<sup>199</sup>

This too might contribute to why I chose a black Cabbage Patch when I was at the tail end of my enjoyment of dolls. In addition to resisting the unattractiveness of my parents’ Indian racism, by age eight, I had entered into the early stages of a new

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Jorge de Alva & Cornel West, “On Black Brown Relations,” *Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1999), 505.

sense of American belonging that was based on a newly racialized self (one no longer exclusively coded white) and how I might demonstrate that self through my belongings. The black Cabbage Patch doll I chose was made in what Elizabeth Chin might call the old school way, “basically by pouring brown plastic into the same molds used to make white dolls.”<sup>200</sup> I must have noticed this “assimilationist ethic” at work when I covered my doll in gooey liquid foundation to make it a drippy white doll.

Elizabeth Chin is interested in this brand of “racial queering” in how children—and adults for that matter—actually play with their dolls on the ground. In her fascinating ethnographic study, *Shani*—the black Barbie introduced in 1991—seems nearly as alien as white Barbie to her informants from Newhallville, Connecticut, a neighborhood in New Haven. Her ten-year-old subjects are “not simply raced beings, but also poor, working class, ghettoized and gendered,”<sup>201</sup> and they interpret their immediate world of toys and play through the prism of those lenses.

The girls point out that Barbie is never “fat,” “abused,” or “pregnant,” descriptors that indicate a classed as well as raced frame of reference. The girls play on race and whiteness, remaking their white Barbies with distinctly “un-white hairdos” that remind me of my own cooptation of hairstyles that my texture could not withstand for long. These girls cannot either locate or afford *Shani*; the mall in New Haven being too far and too expensive. Though toymakers are adamant that

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<sup>200</sup> Chin, 311.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid*, 306.

ethnically correct dolls “serve an important social function, it is not their responsibility to make these products available to economically disadvantaged kids.”<sup>202</sup> This is not to say that Shani was not a hit. Although Mattel had previously sold “ethnic dolls,” prior to 1990 their print and television ads had only “featured white dolls.”<sup>203</sup> In the year that followed the inclusion of “ethnic dolls” in their ad campaigns, the sales of the brown-skinned dolls doubled. Shani was popular, she simply wasn’t that accessible to poor black girls.

But like me these Newhallville girls do not appear to fully buy into the whiteness of their dolls, as is evidenced by their “racial queering” of the dolls and their recognition that the white Barbie they play with does not represent their surroundings. Barbie does not, like we can assume young women around them might, gain weight, get hit or become an unwed mother. Again, this is not to say that the white dolls do not “dictate ‘white’ values and ‘standards’ of good taste.”<sup>204</sup> Even the Shani doll, despite being dark-skinned, is not the answer for DuCille, especially not for these girls from the ghettos beside Yale. DuCille (quoted here in Wagner-Ott’s essay) contends that “dipping white Barbie into black, brown, or honey-colored dye and putting on stereotypical African costumes, like Shani wears, for example, still promotes ‘bountiful hair, lavish and exotic clothes, and other external signs of beauty, wealth and success.’”<sup>205</sup> This does not mean that DuCille believes that black dolls are

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 311.

<sup>203</sup> DuCille, 49.

<sup>204</sup> Wagner-Ott, 254.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 255.

useless. After all, she remembers her first black doll as the “most beautiful thing,” something just like her.<sup>206</sup>

Of course, my first black doll was neither just like me nor would it ever be. I would never own an Indian doll, although I surmise in Chapter One that I might have “wanted a brown-skinned doll if it were labeled ‘Indian,’” but I cannot say for sure. Although I must have identified with the black doll at least to some extent—I did argue that the brown-skinned doll might be for all dark-skinned girls, not just black girls—I wonder if my covering the doll in white make up did not demonstrate the incompleteness of my identification with blackness. Was I remaking the Cabbage Patch into what I not-so-secretly craved for my own skin color? Was I reenacting through the doll the lightening of my own skin with make up before dance performances with Rani Auntie? Did I gain some satisfaction by grandly pointing out what was visibly true: the black doll was only a (lesser) version of the white doll that was ultimately the norm? Again, I cannot say for certain, but it is clear that the doll and my treatment of it is symbolic of the racial wrestling in which I was enmeshed not only at that moment, but in the years preceding and the years that followed.

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<sup>206</sup> DuCille, 64.



## Chapter Nine

The back-story of Appa's dismissal from Holiday Inn was at once less interesting and more infuriating than the one I concocted at the time. I had envisioned arrogant blond heads blind to my father's capricious hold on the conscious world. I painted them either as Frankensteins, frozen voids in their chests where feeling organs should have been, or alternately mandarins who could not see the ceaseless crusade my father waged in order to remain awake during designated breaks, far flung respites amid an unending series of shifts that found him whether the sun was up or down in the sky.

The truth, though perhaps seedy, was not the incomprehensible injustice with which I had depressed myself. The main villain, Appa's manager, was a crater-faced but otherwise unremarkable man who was having, with what I now guess was deep gratitude, a pedestrian fling that expressed itself in the hotel's empty suites. When Appa shook his head at some request related to enabling the affair—his instinct ordering him to stay out of it—he was fired at the first infraction. His bosses knew nothing of the brown man that was let go and no grousing, at least what little Appa was capable of, moved them. Instead he braced himself for an intense nightmare of his worst imagining.

It was a well-rehearsed fear of mine, too. Homelessness, the ocean floor of the poverty we bobbed along, was a circumstance I did not consider out of plausibility. Your living room shipwrecked on the sidewalk, your dresser drawers vomiting underwear to a dispassionate audience of neighbors and passersby was a possibility no more hypothetical to me than Appa being fired. Lost in the whizzing world outside

a car ride window, I routinely daydreamed of how it would be to live in a vehicle. I tricked out family sized SUV's with unseen compartments, refrigerators that ran on batteries, and bulletproof windshields as dark and impenetrable as Ray Bans. The Dean R. Koontz paperback thrillers Appa bought me at Safeway fueled my fantasies of eerie rides on empty highways, a warm car with a teeming gas tank the savior of escape from ambiguous pursuers.

In the our catastrophic plot twist, however, the Blazer was not hero but albatross, a wasteful white ballast that reliably announced, with every thirsty drive and each monthly demand that arrived on its behalf, how Appa had ignored his own good sense. Its comically undersized tires hydroplaned at the suggestion of rain, its undersized engine groaned at the merest incline. Its every detail seemed to disappoint, from its substandard fuel injection—2.5 liter as opposed to 2.8 or 3.6—to the lack of four-wheel drive that made it as impotent in the snow as a bicycle. In this way the Blazer suited us; we were a family that came up short.

This didn't prevent us from fawning over the machine, however. I dove into the iconography of the leisurely weekend carwash: cut off jean shorts, sudsy buckets and a green hose snaked on the lawn, so different from the coin-operated drive through washes where Appa raced against the timer with Palmolive. This was no more than a midday errand, not the exercise in Americanness it could have been. Even Appa, who half hated the slow hulk, doted on the Blazer, donning it with whimsical accoutrements, a decorative visor drilled into its hood, a burgundy accent that clashed with its navy interior. It was Anna who invested the most in the truck, however, stuffing its rear with pizza-sized speakers.

The day the speakers arrived was like a holiday, the occasion for my favorite social activity: hovering around Anna's friends while they groomed, ate and waited to embark on some masculine excitement I would later hear about in fractions. Today Anna's pals, around whom I was permitted to linger as long as their jokes remained relatively PG13, had come to watch the installation. I oiled my stay by baking chocolate chip cookies that squeezed out of a sausage-like tube.

"Anybody want cookies?" I was already halfway to the kitchen, swiveled flirtatiously at the hip. Nobody noticed.

"Alis, men love a woman who can bake." Sean Link nodded to himself without looking up from his hand of cards. "Remember that."

Sean was tall enough to disguise his pudginess, with skin like margarine and the "good" hair that made you popular with girls. He had grown up in a split-level with unseparated parents, and despite being as willing to box as anybody else, there was an altitude of toughness to which he didn't belong that tacitly wed the other boys; Sean was bourgeois. It was the breeding ground for many a jone, the DC term for the general mean spirited teasing that had evolved from the yo'mama-specific dozens.

Shon Paul, Anna's best friend, was the most hardboiled. He, like Sean Link, was as imposing as an oak and his eyes bulged like cue balls out of his Hershey dark face. Despite this he was equally endorsed by girls, having a searing knack for parody, prank and generally being the center of the show. He was expert at joning, an indication of quick intelligence that was not apparent in his school record.

"What *you* need to remember, you Missing Link, is that you dropped two eights that I scooped up," said Shon Paul, tossing a spread of eights onto the piano

bench upon which they were playing tunk, a version of rummy whose hands, which could be played in short bursts, were ideal for gambling. “You about to buy me a gallon of gas. That’s about how much it takes just to ride your big ass home.” Shon Paul leaned over so I could see him in the kitchen. “Don’t give Sean no cookies, Alis.” He widened his bugged eyes. “Give them to your brother. Shit, just give him the whole roll now. Coach was about to put in him in a Pom Pon skirt back in the day. They didn’t have no regular uniforms, what’s the size? *Petite* enough for Alf.”

He turned his spotlight on Eric. “And this mother,” teased Shon, “you should have been the mascot. With no mask. Looking like a gay Godzilla in a sweatshirt.”

The room wheezed with laughter.

Eric was the newest addition to the crew. Anna had met him at Montgomery Community College, where the pair of them had devised a method for cheating in their accounting class. Eric’s last name was Strong, a fact that yielded bottomless irony since Eric had coils of unearned muscles that distended his clothes, making them just slightly too tight for the excessively baggy look that was in.

“I bet you was marching in the band in high school.” Eric cracked back.

“If I was in the band,” replied Shon, right on time, “You was twirling the baton.”

I handled myself prudently during these precious hours, cheering along the funniest jeers, attending to minor needs like napkins or refills, observing greedily. Although puberty had attenuated my tomboy urge to indiscriminately imitate my brother, and thus his friends, the sensibility of our geographic zeitgeist encouraged boyishness. Girls routinely engaged in threatening shouting matches and had to be

convincingly willing to brawl, as well; “going hard” was not reserved for males. Fashion was equally androgynous; our protean bodies vanished beneath oversized baseball jerseys, jeans that sagged over sneakers, unflattering XL sweatshirts as mammoth as trash bags, and the billowy hundred dollar Starter jackets that replicated what professional football players donned on winter sidelines. Girls even clipped pagers prominently to the fronts of their drooping pants, a trademark of hustlers. From Anna and his friends I studied the jocular nonchalance that constituted the cool for which I was panicky. I was determined to be as popular in high school as Anna had been.

The jokes and the cards meandered on until Bill and Evan arrived, Greek brothers who were going to install Anna’s system for free. Systems were the high-powered stereo units that rumbled with the rap and dancehall music designed especially for them. Everyone thumped by with the scalp-rattling systems, from white boys with their “No Fear” windshield tints that dripped like cartoon goo to the Guyanese kids who stuck to themselves. “Jeep beats,” meant for “booming systems” were part of a car culture that originated in Miami and then LA, and spread east via MTV. Cable television nationalized that local music and soon bass heavy tunes arranged to disrupt public space were adopted by gangsta rap, the acutely political form of black music that had gained intense popularity in the nineties. It would eventually penetrate the public sensibility terrain so thoroughly it would show up in everything from commercials for kids’ cereal to public skits by Karl Rove.

Although hip hop in its original form extolled both gritty puissance as style and socio-politically stoked unrest as motive, it was the former that captivated us. In

that year alone, the “Murder Capital” stacked nearly 500 homicides to its reputation and the crack epidemic from which much of the bloodshed stemmed would climax in Mayor Marion Barry’s videotaped drug sting. “The bitch set me up,” would be a punch line for months, but the racial underpinnings of the events that surrounded us, the “Black on Black” crime about which we heard and the hum of gangs we intimately knew, felt as natural and immovable as trees. We were too unschooled to follow Public Enemy’s cries for revolt though we could recite every polemical line of their latest LP, arguably the most significant album of the nineties. Looking back at Chuck D’s militancy and the clamor around the band’s popularity, never mind the eventual acceptance of *Fear of a Black Planet* as one of the most important albums in modern music overall, I’m startled that we imbibed so little of it. What we heard was the rebellious hardness that suited our adolescent appetites. What exactly those angry rappers were railing about was irrelevant. Those brothers were *hard*. The repetition of the word “ghetto” instructed us on whom we were or should at least try to be, even if the conventional ghetto of public housing was not exactly where we lived. To us, “ghetto” was not a locale but an aesthetic, the sole route to authentic Blackness which we knew was the only way to be down.

“This is going to be loud, man.” Sean tried lifting one of the speakers. “What size are they? Fourteens?”

“Eighteens, baby.” Anna smirked with pride. He had financed the two eighteen-inch subwoofers, tweeters, mid-range speakers, gold plated amplifier, and Blaupunkt stereo with short money he had earned by delivering the *Washington Post*. In high school, Appa had forbidden him to take on a legitimate part-time job since it

would interrupt constant attention to school. Appa disliked seeing his son hauling newspapers in the twilight as he had done twenty years prior, but he permitted it as long as Anna agreed to take on no other employment. The arrangement continued at Montgomery Community College, where football practice prevented Anna from finding work. The regulation only nurtured Anna's innate capacity for restraint. Anna was expert at self-discipline, a skill he would spend a lifetime cultivating, often in peculiarly austere ways. In the next few years, he would grow increasingly Spartan, cutting a variety of meager vices, even going as far as refusing to take seconds at meals. He did this discreetly for a year before I detected it.

“Why don't you eat the food Appa made for you?”

Home from college, it irritated me to see saucepans of dahl, sautéed mutton, curried ramen noodles and fish slices deep fried in a skim of red chili powder that he would not enjoy beyond a single plate.

“I just don't want to be full.” He sighed into his empty platter. “Every day people are hungry, right? I want to remember that by never being totally full.”

He then stood wearily, like old man. He muttered self-deprecating jokes, drove slowly, told stories from his youth as if they were from another century, proclaimed exasperated distance between himself and “young'uns,” became zealously muslim, had a maniacal relationship with the gym, mastered mind games like chess and soduku, removed all logos and brand identification from every truck he owned, wore only black, brown and blue down even to his socks, and it all befit him because he had always been an old man. On a boy and teenager as fine-looking and charming as my brother, this quality was bewitching. All sad children are beautiful. His adult

persona was indebted to this sadness. As an adult, this old man quality took on the poignancy of something preordained. I could not recall him having ever been whatever his age was. He had always somewhat been this old man.

Bill and Evan packed the speakers into a carpeted trapezoid they built from pressed wood. It took several of the boys to wedge it into the back of the Blazer, plastic shards shaved from the truck's interior as the box was angled every which way. The following hours Bill and Evan looped themselves in cables and wires, orchestrating threateningly low hums interspersed with blasts of static. Utility flashlights were extension corded into the carport as the sky turned purple, then navy. Appa came out all chuckles, marveling at the strange project and offering a hand. After Appa went to bed the boys became lethargic. The eager grins dissipated. It was nearly ten.

An hour later, gravel from our disintegrating driveway rattled from behind. It was our neighbor, Mr. Yost. I remembered his name only because he was as narrow and white as a fence *post*.

"When am I going to get some rest, boys?" Mr. Yost clapped his hands and rubbed them together as if he were bargaining. His hair was a translucent blond and age spots leoparded his pink skin, but his voice was firm with adult ease.

Sean swiveled the lamp he was holding and splayed Mr. Yost in daffodil light. Bill and Evan sat back on their haunches. Shon Paul came onto the porch from inside where he had been using the phone to sweet talk a girlfriend. I thought Mr. Yost brave, approaching beefy boys in a neighborhood where he was rapidly becoming outnumbered. He might have seen it differently. Anna and his friends were all still

technically teenagers and Mr. Yost had lived on Lynmont long enough to raise and grandfather children their age. Still.

“We keeping you up?” Anna broke into his trademark grin, potent enough to disarm nukes. It was uneven, the left dimple yanked up slightly higher the other. It sparked up his already striking face like spotlights.

Anna outstretched his hand like a grown man and each of the boys returned to the noisy electronic mess with the exception of Shon who went back to what he was doing, what they called making love on the phone.

Mr. Yost remained for quarter of an hour, inquiring about mechanics and cost of Anna’s system, admiring the engineering it required to install such sizeable speakers in such a compact and visible space. He was one of the friendliest of our old neighbors and only one of four who had remained on our street since we had first moved there. Bridget, Lauren and Mrs. Velee had each moved off Lynmont in successive seasons. The Yosts, on the other hand, behaved as if they planned to die on our street.

When they retired they erected a second floor and continually made attractive additions as the years went by: a flowering tree in the center of the front yard, robin’s egg blue to the siding, wood fencing in place of a ratty chain link, landscaped gardens rimmed by big stones, power-washed front walk, even a plasterboard sign indicating the house had been fitted with an alarm system. They invested in their home what appeared to be loving interest. However, three months after Anna got his system—which he shut off before entering the neighborhood both out of manners and to avoid attracting thieving intentions—the Yosts moved.

All around me the scenery was changing. As the neighborhood revised its racial hues, the deepening colors and class shifts altered my social landscape as well. The school bus that hauled me to High Point, the high school I began attending as an eighth grader because of renovations to the actual middle school, was the first I'd ever ridden. A dozen or so new faces emerged at the start of the school year: new neighbors.

In that morning dark, we dragged ourselves to the corner, chucked our luggage onto the sidewalk and pretended to be too exhausted to look at one another. During October, the bus' headlights punched through bluish shadows like foggy jousts, the diesel grumble loud enough to alert anyone still inside with their breakfast. In the complicated register of adolescent friendships, these kids became my after-school friends. Though we would spend entire afternoons idling around our houses, we did little more than nod amidst the clanging of lockers of school, if we saw each other at all; High Point was home to over 3000 students. These friends were not real friends—like Alice and Claudia who knew my secret crushes and ugly family—nor were they quite school friends, those friends who were close but with whom I did not talk on the phone. Those friendships existed during the school day; they paused during vacation breaks. School friends rarely intruded into each other's homes. When they did, compelled by the requirements of say, a group project, the violation of backdrop invariably produced a faint unpleasantness. My bus stop friends were a variation of school friends; their parameters did not cover the eight-hour school day or the private chaos of home, but the afternoon hours between.

Invariably the bus ride home was rowdy. Unlike the solitude imposed by 7am, the afternoon churned with sociability.

“The hell with ya’ll,” Marcus would shout, his head turned sideways to fit through the rectangular bus window. He had skin the color of peanut butter like his best friend James, a quiet boy who years later would shoot and kill two sheriff’s deputies on Lynmont in a schizophrenic rage. He was categorically Marcus’ opposite. Marcus roiled with pubescent bravado: pinstriped boxes brimmed over his colored jeans revealing flat youthful muscles and the standard black pager.

“Two one two, homies,” he would warn the kids who rode to Belford Towers, “don’t play around.” Then he’d stretch out his hands in front of him, ring fingers bent to the palm, thumbs tucked in, pinkies aligned so they overlapped, a butterfly of digits that signaled 212. This was the state route number for Riggs Road, an avenue that divided the northeast corner of DC before stabbing north into PG. Neither Marcus nor the rest of us had any real connection to the murderous Two Twelve Mob, but we felt entitled by geography to own its fame.

“Can I get some, Shereen?” Tony, the third of the trio, would inquire everyday as we hopped off the bus. Tony mimicked his big brother’s afro and unaffected cool though with the attenuated success typical of manufactured charm.

Shereen would only roll her eyes and sigh. She was an unusual Indian girl. She, like me, attempted the ghetto prep look—V neck sweaters from the Gap over shapeless jeans—but she was boyish enough to play sports, basketball in particular, although she was captain of the volleyball team too.

Although the boys' flirting resembled rudeness, Sher and I lingered with our bus stop boys, happy to practice tough comebacks and enjoy the flattery implied by their raunchy attention. Their eyes snuck down our collars, their hands were always in our seats before we sat down, palms up.

Once off the afternoon bus we sprawled out onto the street in front of Hector's house, scooting away from intermittent traffic. Eventually someone got a nerf so we could watch Hector fling the foam ball the length of the block, splitting the sky with spirals. A Salvadorian immigrant, some of his athleticism—which was profuse—must have been related to the fact that he was older than all of us. His exact age, however, was up to jocular speculation.

"Hector," we teased, "who you going to vote for this year?" Then we congratulated ourselves with shimmying shoulders and creaking gurgles that was the cool follow up to a good jone.

Beside the Presbyterian Church, Sher and I watched them tackle each other to impress us; at the cemetery up the block—where a decade later cops would find mangled MS-13 gang members—we marveled at the purple shits geese took; at the decaying tennis courts where a neighborhood boy had shot himself dead, we tightrope walked the concrete wall of an abandoned rec center looking for new pornographic graffiti, or followed trails in anorexically skimpy woods.

The woods were just clumps of unexceptional trees, never more than fifty yards thick. Dribbles of water from drainage pipes sufficed as creeks. Kids looking for short cuts between backyards had burrowed a slender path, at most six inches wide. There was no adventure here, by which I mean danger, just the gloom of shade.

Peril was at the McDonalds where a year after graduation, football player Eric Dash would be shot dead in the eye, or how we joked tensely “drive by” whenever a mysterious approached. After all, Sher’s rich cousin had been shot, the cuff of his jeans singed by two bullets. Years after his parents had shipped him to a military academy in Ohio, a body was dumped on their lawn, in a new bourgeois housing development on the other side of the cemetery. Bullets were peripherally familiar, constants we understood as unique to our locality—like marble monuments, cherry blossoms, percussive go-go music and the iodine-rich breeze that blew in from the Chesapeake Bay.

Yet despite this worldly sense of drugs and handguns, we remained goofy kids who rode ten speeds and hooted after ice cream trucks. Once by the tennis courts Sher and I strapped on roller skates. She clung to my belt loops and I to Hector’s waistband as he pedaled on James’ new bike. We wobbled along, self-consciously touching. We had hardly picked up any speed when Hector took the first corner. Despite our dawdling pace, Sher and I whipped off into the gravel, our momentum tipping Hector off the bike. We skidded away from each other into collapse.

I tried to wipe my scrapes free of sand and mud, but my side was cramped with laughter. Sher’s face was frozen in a silent grimace; only her hand slapping the pavement indicated that she, too, was laughing. Hector and James had doubled over, occasionally letting slip a high-pitched wheeze before submitting to another round of soundless huffing. From behind, they looked as if they were vomiting. Anyone wandering by might have thought he were witnessing a bad accident. Beside whirring

tires and wheels, four kids lay bloodied on the asphalt, clutching their guts and gulping for breath, unable to talk, because of glee.

Eventually we lifted ourselves up and returned to less childish games, lest a group of older kids mistake us for whom we thought we weren't: a crowd of young chumps. The threat, though not wholly serious, was present. Older kids, mostly boys, roamed the playgrounds too, usually indifferent to us but occasionally ready to harass, their freedom to do so sanctioned by their physical, psychic and experiential authority. The response to which was either a bold but friendly retort or—more often—resigned silence.

Luckily they weren't all fearsome. Tony's big brother, an ally of Anna's, was generally kind to us and also an excellent model of cool. Eddie's outfits were tidy, his shoes and socks Cloroxed to spotless. His gait was unhurried, his rope chain real 14K gold and his headphones were as large as a deejay's and propped in front of his ears so you could hear the tinny echoes of underground tapes from local go-go shows—shows I was forbidden by Anna to attend since there were always shootings afterwards.

Eddie's finest accessory was Champ, an outsized husky we claimed as mascot. His milky paws reminded me of the padded fists of a jungle cat and he was tall enough to ride though we were never allowed to try. Champ's fatal flaw was howling, which I now realize was due to the lonely hours he was holed up in Tony's sunless garage.

One morning, the boys serenaded Sher and me from the bus stop. They doo-wopped like The Temptations, pumping their hips back and forth in unison as their voices cracked and failed; none of them could sing.

*Don't tell your friends*

*That I don't mean nothing to you*

*Please don't deny*

*The truth*

Their crooning was soon accompanied by Champ's single note bellow. It was a sweet, if inharmonic, recital.

Days later, Champ, still a puppy in years though beast in size, was put down by poison injection. Neighbors had complained so repeatedly about the noise that it became sensible for Eddie's parents to wiggle out of Champ's expensive care. Each of us recalled the daybreak concert, sheepish. After his death, Champ became mythic, reappearing in our anecdotes as a departed comrade, a banished ghost. To us, the catalogue of evidence against the dog was at once concrete and immaterial. We accepted that Champ had been a disturbance; his baying, however integral to his demise, just wasn't central to our memory of him, or of all of us together.

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In addition to being talented at everything that was even tangentially athletic, from soccer to ping pong, Hector was gifted with girls. These included my best friends, many of whose virginities he would collect, one by one, despite being shorter

than even the youngest seventh grader. He sparkled with charisma, brimmed with genuine fondness for nearly everyone, his signature move the hearty kiss on the cheek, an affection he bestowed liberally and with such uniform sincerity that everyone believed they were best friends and, in fact, in some ways they were. His corporeal finesse and strutting confidence impressed the boys, since it implied an readiness to fight, while his friendliness orbited him out of the routine fistfights that stemmed from everybody going hard. Simply put, Hector was well liked. His ultimate testimony was the fact that he had managed to snag Alice, a feat considering first how good looking Alice was—even seniors had noticed her—and secondly, how short Hector was.

I wanted a boyfriend desperately, although how I would manage a romance with my old school parents had I had one was an inscrutability. So far only dimwitted boys seemed to notice me anyway. It agonized me.

“Hey.”

I kept walking.

“Hey! What’s your name again?”

“Alis.”

“That’s a pretty name.”

I rolled my eyes. Dorian’s hair was interesting, a high top fade that was never truly in style and was surely outdated now. That and the fact that he was a senior was all that recommended him.

“Please.” I paused outside my Algebra II class. “It’s an old white lady name.”

“You funny.” He cupped his hand over his mouth to catch his light chuckles and asked innocuous questions while eyeing me lasciviously, like every R&B song on the radio instructed. As the ten minutes between bells dwindled to seconds, he got to the point.

“Can I get your number?”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“It’ll have to wait for another day, Romeo.” Mr. Bouma put his hand against the small of my back, a gesture I knew to be intimate, since no boy my age had performed on me. He eased me in front of him as he pulled the door shut. Mr. Bouma was narrow all over, from his tall frame to his miniature face. His front teeth were small and bucked which made him resemble, not unpleasantly, a rodent.

“Aren’t you too smart for that?” He slouched and pretended to check an invisible pager.

I giggled, glad he recognized that Dorian was not my type. I took my seat on the stool behind the overhead projector which sat in the center of the room—where he placed me when I told him that, because of an expired prescription on my glasses, I couldn’t see.

The touching was minimal, his stomach against my back as he leaned over me to finish a problem on the projector, his thigh against mine as he squeezed between rows to check someone’s work, his hands casually on my shoulders as he explained from behind me. I didn’t mind; I had always wanted to be a teacher’s pet; my mouth usually blocked that goal. I was happy to be perched above my classmates, the favorite. I was guilty of encouraging him by feigning innocence, but I knew from

countless after-school specials and talk shows that Mr. Bouma was being inappropriate with me. It was attention that I courted.

Until Easter. Cadbury's Crème Eggs, life-size chocolate eggs filled with white and yellow crème, were too rich to enjoy more than one at a time so I carried a three pack with me during the day, savoring their gooey, oddly realistic shape in between classes.

"Those are gross." Claudia, more stunning at fourteen than most woman are at any point in their lives, disliked band aids, the labels on fruit, or anything that sticky. "I can't even watch." She started for the throbbing hallway. There were several minutes before the bell would ring and the classroom was empty with the exception of Mr. Bouma.

"You crazy." I split the sweet in half like one might crack an actual egg, so I could portion the filling and chocolate shell evenly. "These are my absolute favorite."

"You like those?" Mr. Bouma, easing beside me onto a desk, indicated the egg with his hand, grazing my breast as he passed by.

I was stunned. That was too much.

"It's all wet and sticky," he said, hoisting one leg onto the seat of the chair so that his crotch was eye level. "And you have to lick it with your tongue."

His eyes, blue as pool water, were quizzical. He was gauging me. His Sharpie marker was frozen over the transparency on the projector where he had begun to write our warm up. This was a crucial moment: the empty classroom, the overt breach of our tacit agreement. He was feeling me out. He leaned back and glanced at the

doorway before moving towards me with the menacing ease of lawyers I had seen on television.

He asked me if I liked it on my tongue.

Two girls raced in, Claudia behind them. I took my actual seat at a metal desk and finished my egg.

“Gross,” said Claudia.

Dorian and the occasional hooting praise in a boy-lined hallway aside, I had yet to corral a single boyfriend to my friends’ countless relationships. I, thankfully, suffered the occasional crush powerful enough to distract me from the outrageousness of home but the mess of that house was never totally submerged, bobbling irrepressibly just beneath my consciousness no matter how immaculately I groomed myself. It was too visible an announcement of everything I considered hideous about my life.

Amma’s behavior had only escalated as I grew older. My fixation shifted from her abuse of Appa to the cleanliness of our house. It was a selfish adjustment. All I desired was the semblance of normalcy that a clean home might provide.

“You’re not even putting it in the trash!” I pointed at the onion peels on the floor. “It’s the same thing in the bathroom! Why do I want to look at your underwear? And it smells. It always smells! I can’t even let my friends use the bathroom here!”

The shower curtain was rigid with mold, the plastic bucket Amma insisted on using to bathe was equally rimmed by parasitic growth. Shards of grubby soap littered the tub that was eternally crusting over and remnants of Amma’s homemade face masques splattered the mirror and floor. Sacks of strange powders, half full containers

of talc and lotion—themselves stained or ruptured—sat unconcealed in the discolored glass shelves. The plastic trashcan, gummy itself from god knows what, was perpetually surrounded by a stray cotton swab or wad of toilet paper. For years before I had finally been given my own bedroom—the result of moving my grandfather downstairs to a room Appa built—the shower had been my refuge. The buffering rush of water, the solitude of uninterrupted privacy led me to bathe twice a day although sometimes I wouldn't even lather up but simply stand, back to the water, thinking. I would likely have showered three or four times but worry over the water bill prevented me from indulging myself. The fact that my sanctuary was the filthiest room in an already polluted house, would regularly drive me past my general infuriation.

“It's nasty!” I recalled the word that had threatened me as a child. “*Nasty!*”

Amma was silent, seated Indian-style on the floor in the walkway to the kitchen, her skirt ballooned by the blast from the heating duct. She crouched there like a homeless woman every time the swish of the furnace downstairs indicated the heat was on. I couldn't imagine my friends' parents huddled on the ground like urchins over a sidewalk grate, blocking entry into a kitchen that looked like a medieval hovel.

“You look ridiculous! You think Athai does this?” I was getting shrill. From my position in the dining room, I could see the entire first floor: the chaos of her bedroom, the disarray of the living room, the wrecked kitchen. Her shoes, her hair combs, her cassette tapes, her half eaten TV dinners still frozen in the middle, her purse, her bags from Safeway full of groceries, her spools of thread, her soiled socks,

her knots of hair yanked and wound from her comb, her glass knickknacks, scraps of doodle paper, her stained coat, her teacup, her magazines, her Tamil to English dictionary, her catalogues, her plastic bangles, her tube of fairness cream, her fake flowers in cheap vases, her real flowers drying on every surface, her iridescent rainbow stickers, her newspaper clippings were strewn over every visible inch. Whereas Anna, my grandfather Tha-Tha and I kept our things in our respective rooms in relative order, it was Amma who left a trail from room to room. When harangued about this, most often by me in my pubescent fright for normalcy, she disappeared into a dark world where relatives, neighbors, coworkers, and sometimes even Anna and I were plotting against her. I was the only one fool enough to battle with her daily although everyone in the house occasionally succumbed to the urge to shake her, with words, out of the preposterous universe she described.

My mother was, in some ways, a genuinely mean person, but mostly she was nuts. Certifiably crazy, though culture, sloth and miseducation kept us from medicalizing her behavior. She was an undiagnosed schizophrenic, I am sure. Her paranoias were mild—no was out to kill her or ensnare her in any world-wide conspiracies—but an unseen force of malice bound nearly everyone she knew. They weren't out to get her, but to make her look bad and maybe steal her stuff. To combat this she waged strange wars, which often resulted in Appa having to buy something—a too small house, an overpriced truck, yet another piece of unwearably fancy jewelry—rather than incense her obsessive stewing.

One of the big purchases Amma and Appa made after we moved into Adelphi was a cheap piano. No way my cousins were going to be virtuosos while Anna and I

looked like villagers, never mind that neither of us wanted to play the piano, nor was ours a musical house.

Anna dropped off his lessons once he joined the JV football team but I pushed fruitlessly on, despite having even less aptitude than interest, which was negligible in the first place. I found the piano to be the dullest instrument, having no sex appeal, although it was surely one of the easiest to learn. Ms. Reynolds, a woman who instantly reminded me of Claire Huxtable from the *Cosby Show*, adored me and was likely the main reason I continued my lessons into the eighth grade.

Your parents had you, Ms. Reynolds would say, but you're mine, too.

Her studio was in the basement, a baby grand surrounded by every variety of instrument, each that she could play least some and all sorts of whimsical knickknacks, pencils shaped like quarter notes or treble clefs, notepads headed with "Gone Chopin!" When my hands were cold she rubbed body butter on them. When I was sick, which was often, she had me sit outside to put the sun on my back. I always had a cold, consequence of the giant Petri dish of high school, to the point where illnesses that would bed me later, were hardly noticeable to me. I came to class with bronchitis and walking pneumonia, pockets stuffed with Sudafed tablets, a roll of toilet paper in my backpack. I hardly stayed home from school, pained equally by the worry of missing hallway socializing as of falling behind in class

"Are you sick today?" Ms. Reynolds asked one spring evening. "You look glum."

I wasn't sick, nor did I think my expression betrayed that anything was newly wrong. Was something bothering me? I wondered. I thought about my day, which had

been nothing uncommon, and told her about it anyway since it would trim the actual time I would spend pounding the piano, an act that inescapably exposed how little I had practiced.

When the hour was over, I found Appa asleep in Ms. Reynold's driveway. There was no change in him that I could see. Year after year he lived at the razor's edge of exhaustion, his body in constant rally for sleep. At home that night, like every night, he slept on the couch in a living room illuminated by fluorescent light from the kitchen. He kept his underclothes in drawers in Anna's room, and hung his dress shirts in the damp of the laundry room. It seemed he had no other possessions besides the tools and car parts he stocked outside.

Amma's things seeped from the master bedroom to every filthy inch of the house. I knew from light-hearted snooping that Tha-tha collected all sorts of cheap junk that he stored in his room downstairs. Anna and I had typical rooms that revealed little of our own private Vietnam—his fitted with a plastic basketball hoop and bookshelves crammed with old football helmets and *Sports Illustrated* and mine wall-papered with teen magazine posters and overflowing with borrowed sweaters. Appa was the only one without his own bed and, it appeared, no personal items to indicate a savored life. No ticket stubs. No cuff links. We rarely bought him gifts. He slept bent on the sofa, forgetfully without a blanket, twitching like all old men do, subject to light spilled from our trips to the bathroom or kitchen or laundry room. He slept in the living room by the front door, while the rest of us retired to the privacy of rooms he paid for.

The morning after that last lesson with Ms. Reynolds I was called into the office by Mrs. Alexander, a woman who had been a passionless English teacher in middle school and was now an administrator. She wore her hair natural and short like a man's and squinty eyes made her appear to be smiling even when she wasn't. I had never disliked her.

“Is there anything you want to tell me?”

There was a television-quality to the whole thing. I felt an anticipatory surge of adrenaline and the alluring tug of victimhood to which I had been subject my whole life. I desired pity, mostly because I had never real experienced it. I didn't know it was an ugly thing yet. This was a theatrical moment.

“We're going to arrange a meeting with the principal.” Mrs. Alexander leaned back with a yellow pad in her lap. She poised a cheap Bic pen. “But first you have to tell me everything.”

The mix of adrenaline and powerlessness yanked my chest tight and tingled through my fingers. The simpatico of the two, how one demanded the other, crystallized in this exact moment. It was the feebleness of my position, my impotence to rewind or reroute the course set in motion by someone else, that forced me to brace myself.

“Who told you?”

“Someone from outside the building actually.” Ms. Alexander sounded curious. “Did you tell someone? An aunt or something?”

I pictured Ms. Reynolds in her kitchen fussing with 411 to locate the number to my high school, the name to which she couldn't have known, waiting with

monkish patience as she was connected from one guidance counselor to another, having to discreetly explain the point of her call.

I trusted Mrs. Alexander simply because she had given me A's in middle school. I assumed, wrongly, that all teachers adored their A students. As a grad student instructor, I understood that strong students are not usually loved but prized for their capacity to oil the teaching process. Good students make teaching easier: grading them is less challenging and their presence in the classroom grounds the class—their 100%'s validate the accusing incomprehension of D's, their colorful projects saved for years act as emulative examples (“Do something like this.”), rescuing teachers from the work of provoking creativity through teaching, their waving participatory hands deflect from exasperated yawns, often more numerous. The brightest eventually take on partial responsibility for the class, the first to volunteer guesses and question their classmates. There are few that matter more than that, however.

I had been one of Mrs. Alexander's best students, a fact I believed was an indicator of integrity to teachers. Moreover, she was a woman of color. Surely she understood the weakness of my position, a curvy dark-skinned girl chest high to her math teacher. I told Mrs. Alexander about the gentle touching, trying gingerly not to implicate myself. The whole interview had me too aghast to feel the words I was using. I was emotionally paralyzed, operating on a protective autopilot. I sighed heavily, glanced sideways and counterfeited timely jerkings in my throat. I was expert at faking strain, or at least channeling it from the reservoir my daily life kept supplied. But as I recounted Mr. Bouma's misdemeanors, I became uneasy. He had

hardly touched me. He had only been sexual with his language once and even that was questionable. I ended chronologically, with the Cadbury Egg.

“Oh, I see,” said Ms. Alexander. She tipped her head towards me to ask if she had gotten it straight. “Slippery like an erect penis?”

I stared at my lap for a few seconds. I couldn’t believe she wasn’t embarrassed to speak to me so precisely. When I looked up she was still eyeing me expectantly, waiting unnecessarily for a lewd confirmation. I recognized the expression: I was titillating her.

“I guess so.” I relaxed my gaze past her head, no longer acting. “Yes.”

I spent the rest of the day skipping class in the office of Mr. Spellman, the head of janitorial services. Although Mr. Spellman had never hinted at traversing what had become his avuncular relationship to me, the fact that the suspiciousness of our friendship never aroused any doubt from anyone should have bothered me, but the singularity of it, just like the title of pet with Mr. Bouma, won me over.

“What’s the matter now?” Mr. Spellman was wearing his blue High Point polo shirt, his graying fade hidden beneath a Redskins cap.

“I need to get into the office, Mr. Spellman. I have a huge test last period.”

“Oh, brother.” Mr. Spellman rolled his eyes as a joke. “You look like you’re about to cry and you’ll probably get an A anyway like you always do. I’m surprised you don’t have an ulcer, girl. Or maybe you do, with that sour face. Come on, let’s go.”

Mr. Spellman gave Alice, Claudia and me an extra locker to store the bags of clothes we lugged back and forth to school for each other. We named it “The Closet.”

He gave us spare Honey Buns from the vending machines, loaned us change, let us use his phone and his mini-fridge, and let me in particular use his office to finish homework. I was in his office in the main hallway so often that friends would look for me there. When adults noticed me at his desk, face down in a textbook, there were none of the double takes there should have been.

On this day I locked the door, switched off the fluorescent light and concentrated on the coolness of his metal desk on my forehead. When the occasional knock that I normally answered roused me, I stayed put. I slept with my head on his desk calendar, counting the bells that woke me until before sixth period. The shotgun meeting was scheduled for the last twenty minutes of school. Its finite endpoint would be dramatic: the bell-ringing stampede of the end of the day.

It went fast. There was talk of misunderstandings, gratitude for the timeliness of the resolution, and more ruminations on misunderstandings. No one mentioned my parents and I was not asked to speak.

“I just never should have done it, Alis. I should never have insulted your boyfriend,” concluded Mr. Bouma. “It’s none of my business what kind of person might be. It was rude of me, plain and simple and you know what? I would have been upset, too. I was thinking about all day and it just hit me like a ton of bricks, Alis.”

Mr. Bouma had leaned forward in his chair to look me directly in the face.

“Mind. Your. Own. Business. That’s what I should have done. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

It wasn’t until I was already in the humid throng of my classmates’ nubile bodies, the meeting over, that I understood what had happened. I had decided to

remain in Mr. Bouma's class, fearful of risking a B in another class when an A was assured me with Mr. Bouma. I had been given the choice since it had been established that what I said occurred between us, what Mrs. Alexander had so studiously recorded and about which she had kept smilingly silent during the entire meeting, was a lie told by me in revenge against Mr. Bouma for accusing a friend of mine of being a drug dealer. I could remain in the same class because bygones were bygones and Mr. Bouma had grandly forgiven *me*.

## Chapter Ten

Two years after he had applied and weeks after he was fired, one of the crucial cogs of Appa's American Plan sank into gear. The green card had been Appa's White Whale, elusive yet constant, a silvery haunting that promised redemption. The final stride to citizenship was acquisition of a green card. Appa's journey had been forestalled by a preliminary mistake: he had arrived in the US with a tourist visa.

Several years before my birth, my father fled the U.S. because of a problem with this visa. He adjusted; it was one of his talents. Ontario was colder than he had anticipated, but bearable. The snow was not new; he did not marvel at its ubiquitous, muffling coverage the way he had when he first encountered it, upon his arrival in the US the previous winter, 1974.

On his last day in Ontario, he said a dutiful Lord's Prayer in the sunshine splayed by the YMCA's mammoth windows like any decent Anglophile Episcopalian. My father was thirty, recently wed, and handsome. He resembled Elvis: square face, thick black coif gleaming with coconut oil. When he ploughed to the Consulate for the tenth time in nearly a month, he wore dress shoes; he would never buy sneakers and would only briefly own a pair of work boots. Whether flattened beneath a oil change or conducting the register at 7-Eleven, for a lifetime he will sport only dress shoes. Perhaps it occurred to him—perhaps repeatedly since he took flight—I should not have come. America, maybe, was not everything.

But why else was he idling near the border of its hospitable northern neighbor? The days were at once overcast and oddly bright, giving him the impression of being in the clouds. It was not the import of the day that propelled him

to rush. It was his nature to hustle. The cosmic joke of the universe, he knew, was the skimpiness of time. Decades later, disputing a heart attack in the touch up paint aisle at the Trak Auto, he would rush to purchase a tube of pewter high gloss before the clamp in his chest fully disabled him. In the US, my mother's brother awaited his return though they were nearly strangers.

“You are feeling well?” My uncle had asked when he first arrived at Dulles International. He had arranged for my father's “visit” to the US.

“Yes, yes. What is there?” my father replied, using his version of the nonchalant What's the big deal? At the time he had been staring out the window of my uncle's Chrysler, startled by how gray and off-white America was, how covered in asphalt and concrete.

No one had wanted to remain in Ceylon where riots had besieged beaches and waterfalls. My grandfather Tha-Tha had survived fistfights. My granduncle had been knifed. But it wasn't the sirens or violent chatter that drove them out—that after all was politics—it was money. A blade or a bomb could be guarded against, retaliated for; whom do you pummel for a job?

Once in the States, Appa promptly applied for a working visa through the Indian Embassy. Leaving behind my mother and brother, he joined the fully loaded one bedroom apartment of his in-laws. On walks with his baby niece—who both relieved and augmented the longing he felt for Anna—he would smile. Otherwise, he was overcome by a general loneliness.

So this was America. Traffic consisted mostly of autos not people, and the apartment complex in Langley Park he endured with his in-laws was occupied not by

whites as he had expected but by Blacks, Latinos, Vietnamese and South Indians like himself. It should have encouraged him, those just like him navigating labyrinths like the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Giant Grocery Store, but they only inflated his desire to be home in Trincomalee where at least everyone looked the same.

Yet on his last day in Ontario, feet already damp from the leaky walk to the Consulate, he must have admitted that Trincomalee, although home, was not happiness. He worried about being reunited with Amma, his fresh wife, a then twenty something too miserable to take on the charging locomotive of a new family.

But there was no time for specificity in an arranged marriage. When they met briefly before the engagement, shyness and propriety had prevented him from saying much. They had the customary, concise exchange.

You are well? he asked.

Yes, yes. When she did not meet his eyes he was pleased by her modest manners. A fortuity. A good sign.

For your mother, I am sorry. He offered. Some usual ailment had taken her mother early. He'd had a moment of fleeting destiny: two motherless orphans could be a strong match. It is a sad thing, he repeated.

What is there? she had replied.

She was hateful as soon as they wed. She was disappointed in him, she detested him, she knew what thoughts crept in his head about her cooking and her plain round face. Shortly after the wedding and before the marital war that would outlast everything else, Tha-Tha had pulled Appa aside to admit that there was something askew about his daughter. He prayed for Appa's patience.

I hope you enjoyed your day, wandering the streets and lounging around the city, Wandering-Raj, Amma would say, addressing him with his first name, an announcement of disrespect.

Having bused around the city all day pleading for a job, Appa was certain of one thing: this was not how a wife was supposed to behave. He went over the lecture again. Work was impossible to find Ceylon. Why else had her brother dump everything to go to America? It would be nearly a lifetime, however, before he conceded defeat on their happiness. At first he volleyed silence when reason predictably failed.

Where is the money?

He looked away.

Why do I go like a beggar in these cotton saris, while your cousins in Tuticorin all wear silk? That must be where your money goes.

She rocked on a veranda swing that faced the beach.

She refused to cook, clean or wash any clothes. It was her revolt. Instead she devoured gossip magazines, refused to bathe, hid his spectacles, and beat their son because of her temper. She was a lemon of a housewife.

Is there nothing to eat? My father asked.

You hate my cooking no matter what I do. She sulked.

I must hate the way you clean, too, he would think, although it was true she was a sorry cook.

Here and there you eat like a pig, but my dosai and chutney you barely touch. She dared him to respond. My sister-in-law's dahl is a great thing. Go eat at her house since you like it so much.

My father had seen his own father occasionally slap his obedient mother and although he knew men were obligated to thrash unruly wives, he was a mild man raised among dotting female cousins. They loved his movie star face and Elvis hair. Never had an occasion been provided for him to exercise his manly right to meanness. He clutched his tongue at my mother's mouth until some outrageous accusation or hidden wallet or missing diabetic medicine spun his grip out of control and towards her neck.

Sensibly, scowling with a black eye, her unreasonable hatred for him legitimately grew. No uncooked meal or scowl could warrant a smack; her womanly dignity—whatever its source—instructed her of that. Unable to convince her, neither with fists nor logic, my father scooped the responsibility for frying and stewing and washing clothes outside in their well—a humiliation he hid from everyone.

It was my brother who worried him. She flung magazines and can openers at him or sat outside on the porch where she could not hear him. My father relied on optimism: his wife was young—ten years his junior—perhaps she would warm when she became accustomed to being a wife and mother. He was confident that success would change her, as if her neurosis could be won over; he was certain that money would extinguish their fights, as if her suspicions were rooted in valid gripes. Until he could provide her the success he believed would shush her, he tried other things.

He came home armed with the magazines she read.

Here, he'd echo into the silence when he handed them over. He wished they would not fight. When they invariably did, he left her swollen and self-righteous with bruised cheeks, and then rammed his head against their cheerful pastel walls. On some days he had to chuckle at his family—a wife with a black eye, a husband with a ripped forehead, a son with a scarred ear, a family of wounds. He even left her once, marching home to complain to his father who only chastised him.

What is this? My grandfather, a schoolteacher, eased eyeglasses down his nose. Control her or she will crawl on your head.

Even on that day my father raced back on ferry and rickshaw in time to heat milk and uppama for my brother's breakfast while my mother crooned into my brother's breezy bed, a wide cloth hung from the ceiling in a U-shape. It swayed with the hidden weight of the baby.

If you do not love your Amma, Shyam, she murmured, who will?

My father listened.

If you do not love your mother, she will die, she sighed. Who will love you then?

The tin plate roasted my father's hands. He blew coolness onto the small bites he handed Shyam, waiting for my brother to cry out if they burned his mouth.

By the time my father reached the Consulate on his last day in Canada, there were long lines—or queues, as he called them, British vocabulary trickling down as far south as the rural schools in Trincomalee. He returned to the Consulate cyclically and had been confused each visit. He floundered, submerged in a system studded with pitfalls and landmines so pervasive that all advice, even from the most expert

source, even from the administration itself, had proven to be unreliable to the point of being treacherous. A pronoun or misplaced prefix was all it would take to send him directly home a failure.

The Consulate's waiting room was bursting, so my father leaned against the wood paneling until it was his turn to speak with someone. In the office, he picked the chair that allowed him to conceal his deaf ear.

Since you came to the US have you had any employment other than clerking for the Indian Embassy? The skeptical man leaned forward on his elbows over a metal desk. The lighting was unflatteringly fluorescent, the walls eggshell. Outside it began to snow again.

No, sir, Appa lied. No other job.

Are you sure, Raj? the man prodded. The Embassy isn't paying you much. He glances at the pile of thin papers in his grasp. I'm not sure how you could survive on this.

Although he fears it will make him appear lazy, my father replied again, No, sir, I am working only at the Embassy.

Appa did not inform the man that he also shuffled fried foods at Gino's Chicken, mopped at 7-Eleven, or that he borrowed my uncle's Chrysler to deliver *The Washington Post* to three neighborhoods back in Langley Park. He only confirmed clerking for the Embassy and taking a few classes for car mechanics. There was no format to give the man any evidence of his diligence, his ambition. He was embarrassed by the lie.

Do you have a social security number? The man, never introduced himself nor made the point of the interview clear, kept his gaze fixed.

No.

Are you sure?

My father remembered of the blue card he was coached to acquire back in D.C., the one with nine numbers typed across its face. He hoped they could not trace it. He thought of the Washington Redskins jacket he had purchased for Anna, a varsity-style winter coat with the Skins' logo emblazoned on the right breast: the profile of a Native American Indian warrior. It was a good gift, perfect for the blustery winters of this hemisphere.

I am sure. No card, sir, my father answered. He tried to recall whether eye contact was polite.

Do you know that an A-2 Permanent Visa is not a work permit?

My father sat stunned, then recovered. He swiveled his head to hide his astonishment. Yesterday a staff officer he spoke with had said that it was.

Raj?

Yes, sir, I understand very much, he answered, comforted at least by the familiarity of his uncertainty. Surely tomorrow someone will tell him something else, anything, as long as it contradicts what he was told today. Sensing that the meeting might soon be concluded, he succumbed to a grandiose vision: Amma smiling proudly on their cement stoop, waving the blue tissue-soft aerogramme announcing that he was settled in America and would send for her soon. He pictured my brother, no longer a baby, almost four.

I have a son, too, said Appa, nodding at the solitary photograph on the man's desk. A blond toddler waves, pink from sun.

We all have families, the man answered, suddenly frosty. The framed memory must often be mistaken as an invitation to chat.

Someone from the Embassy will be calling on your behalf after lunch, the man said vaguely. He reordered the stack of papers and pushed them towards my father. "If he makes a good case for you, we should know soon." Despite what he said, he did not sound optimistic.

Thank you, sir, said Appa, trying to gauge whether the exchange was over, whether it had gone well or poorly.

The man nodded and turned his back, Appa's signal that he should leave. On his last day in Canada, on his cot at the YMCA—what he called a hostel—my father readied himself to wait. He should have napped. Despite the wet chill, he leaned his head against the window where beyond there was whiteness and the infrequent dark streak of a tree trunk or branch. He urged his mind to go blank. He eyeballed a few swirling flakes, but it was useless. Accustomed to working nineteen hours a day, this was what was most difficult for him, what will forever require the most effort: rest.

Appa's reprieve from the Embassy, the kind result of a network that connected him to those more powerful for no other reason than the brownness of his story matched theirs, would end up handicapping him for two decades. The visa he received entitled him to legally work only for the Embassy and slid his green card application to the end of an intestinally long line.

Fifteen years later his long delayed turn in the green card line was up, Appa, Amma and Anna had to re-enter the US from their home nation properly armed with immigration visas. After much haggling, it was agreed that I would join them after they had completed the immigration business. The totality of my argument was that missing even one unnecessary day of school was a threat to my academic career. Although they likely saw this focus on school as a reasonable attachment to getting good grades, for me this career had only one culmination: a scholarship to anywhere at all as long as it included room and board. I gave no thought to what I would study or who I would become; escape was the end point beyond which little mattered. I probably could have stomped around less about missing the first leg of the trip, since my parents rarely resisted me and mostly let me manage my life. As long as I didn't arouse their interest with anything outlandish, I was expected to handle my affairs. No one asked to see any report cards or demanded answers about the hours I spent on the phone or at my friends' homes. I was too boring to make use of my sovereignty, however. At the time I had yet to accept that I was and had in many ways always been in charge of my life. I believed it was my artful rendering of the hyperbole that had convinced them. All young people crave governing order against which to thrash; my longing was not unique. Generally, Anna provided the aegis. When he failed to do so out of indifference or inexperience, I hoisted my parents like scarecrows and battled it out. I always won.

I remained at home with Tha-tha and under the evening supervision of an uncle for two weeks. During that time I did not have the courage to commit a single misdemeanor although there were several cars in the driveway that I knew how to

operate, numerous windows out which I could have crept and I was nearly fifteen. I enjoyed the solitude, envisioning the empty house as my life would be when I finally escaped: the tossing of keys and mail onto a clean counter, the lounging around in underwear, the endless hours of television. It was a dull two weeks, although I had enough sense to brag in school about my temporary emancipation.

“Can you stay after school today?” Alice was a member of The Fashion Club which held its meetings after school. Their single event was a Fashion Show held during the school day. Although some of the models wore outfits garnered from stores at PG Plaza, most wore snazzy outfits of their own devising. Alice wanted Claudia and me to be models, too.

“I can do whatever I want for two more days, youngin’. I’m the boss of this show.”

Alice ignored my sauciness as usual. She was particularly silly. “Don’t forget the meeting. Me and Claudia got something to tell you.” She slipped into her class before I could harass her for a clue.

Hours later, I rode home on the activity bus with Hector, my brain unable to escape the news, which I pictured, then cringed, then imagined again before scolding myself to stop.

“You okay, man?” Hector wore his standard grin. “They were scared to tell you.”

Pride and shame kept me confessing my heart—I was achingly jealous—I instead reverted to my reputation. I was known for being judgmental, an evolution of the know-it-all syndrome I never shed as a child. Black eyeliner was too dramatic for

the daytime, skipping school was a waste of time, bangs that sat on your forehead like a hairy cinnamon roll was a fad, thinking you were in love in high school was immature. I pronounced the whole school population immature. I don't know how my friends put up with me.

“Seriously, you ok?” Hector was still smiling. “You look crazy.”

I found it hard to look at him since he was culprit to the news. I saw his bare back arched over Alice before I could stop myself. Then my mind's eye conjured Roger, Claudia's boyfriend.

“Say something!”

I shook my head again. It was unbelievable. Within two days of each other, each of my closest compadres had ditched me to become women and here I was, not only the only remaining virgin in the universe, but for all of the cup C's that preambled me everywhere I was the most undeveloped of them all. I had never even been kissed.

I sat on the sidewalk where the bus had dumped us. My backpack slid from my shoulder. I leaned into my lap, laughing.

Hector, now laughing too, asked me what I was doing.

Soon I was crying, too, but still laughing, always laughing, like I always did when I couldn't stand what was happening and I remembered there was no where to go.

Two days later, I boarded an airplane headed for my origins. It was my fifteenth birthday.

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I arrived in India after two days of solo travel, including one twelve hour lay over in Singapore where I stayed in an airport hotel and watched professional wrestling for comfort. The world of brown faces that met me was so startling I at first couldn't locate the source of my disjunction. Soon, as I took my seat in a motorized rickshaw and became engulfed by the sweet odor of sewage outside the airport, it dawned on me. I was on a different planet. Even the skyscape was alien, more crisply star-studded than any I could recall. Here identical faces surrounded me, clumps of shit floated by in cement gullies, crowds moved shoeless over dirt roads, bugs and lizards scurried like elves in the periphery, unnoticed but present.

My first night, I woke to thumb-sized cockroaches crawling over my body as I slept on a pallet on the floor of an uncle's house. Although they must have been racing over everyone's bodies, no one had woken up. How could they have become so acclimated in just two weeks? Then I remembered that, Anna, like my parents, had first encountered the world through this doorway. I pulled the corners of the sheet that covered me into my stomach and made myself into a sealed package. At least the roaches wouldn't sneak into my ears. When they continued to race over my body, I plucked them off through the sheet. By morning, I was so shaken that when a rooster began to crow, I started to laugh. I had never heard the straining cry and never knew that the rooster actually called: cock a doodle doooo. Cock a doodle doooo! Cock a doodle doooo! This wasn't the metaphorical "bow wow" of comic strips that barely resembled a real bark or the "oink oink" that sweetened the congested snorts on Old MacDonald's farm. This rooster crowed like he was reading a script, enunciating each

inane syllable as if he were drawn from *Tom and Jerry*. Cock a doodle doo. It was hysterical. Where was I?

Anna began to chuckle, too.

When tears bathed my face, we both kept laughing. American, yes, but American hood, too uncultured to be excited by a third world vacation. Where wealthier travelers would have reveled at the prospect of blending with locals, I chaffed at the inadequacies of my motherland. A spoiled American, yes, but a specific breed of American, the type that usually never makes it off homeland shores.

For a month we rode first class trains, visited relatives we would never see again, wore mismatched outfits we would never don in the States and faced each other without respite. Where this would wear on any family's cohesion, it was traumatic for ours. At every home we visited, around every family with which we socialized, it was apparent that ours was an afflicted family. Although we were comparably wealthy—as even the poorest American would have been here—with our headphones and bright sneakers, it was evident to everyone that we were strange, not simply American. Amma mumbled outrageous criticisms of Appa to everyone's embarrassment and the two seldom spoke except through Anna and me. By the last two weeks of our month together, Anna and I vacillated between whiny and catatonic, sharing a walkman that was useless except for the two cassettes I had brought: Take 6, an a capella gospel group, and Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet*. We hardly spoke to the eager relatives we met, even those kind enough to forgo our broken Tamil for their shy English, which they hoped we would not judge. They must have thought us American assholes.

We relaxed only once, at a resort in the Ooti Mountains, elevation 14,000 ft. The cooler weather negated the rampant bugs, and the mountain lakes and colonial hotel reminded us of real vacations. On the rickety ride up, children reached their arms out of glassless windows as we veered vertiginously around the switchbacks. Although I knew their leaning did not have the power to tip us into any ravines, I felt an exhilarated twinge in my stomach each time that was no different than the chemical rush at roller coaster parks for which I not only paid but for which I drove hours. The air intensified steadily. My head swooned from the eucalyptus trees, the cool burning making my ears ring.

The soothing climate shift gave me a chill, however, and by nightfall the whistling in my chest sounded like a flaccid accordion. Nothing quieted my lungs and I hadn't thought to bring an inhaler with me on the trip. Appa walked me to the local doctor.

Like nearly everything in India—and in much of the so-called Third World, I would later learn—the walls were a cheerful pastel, this time peach. The line unfurled into a small yard where skinny chickens pecked. I had never known birds for eating could be so thin. As Appa walked me ahead of the line, I wondered why they permitted him to do so. The ailing in wait were suffering in crimson: a gory eye infection, several drippy gashes, and a few with what I guessed were long-standing maladies that didn't have acute manifestations in blood. Gnarled limbs primarily, although there were growths, too. Visible deformities the likes of which I had only encountered in glossy books on diseases. Pity, an ugly thing for which I often craved myself, overtook me, as it had repeatedly during the trip. Beggars with knees that

operated in the opposite directions scooted on makeshift skateboards, little girls with grotesquely enlarged jaws and eye sockets begged blindly from a cardboard mat, little boys with lesser disfigurements—crooked fingers, a club foot—stepped in and out of crowds with grubby hands extended. The few rupees I kept with me never lasted for long. As we eased past the line, pity turned to shame. Who did we think we were?

“I’ll give you one big shot, ok?” The youngish doctor wore mustache like most Indian men. It obscured his age.

“Very busy, no?” Appa mentioned in English. Although his English was deeply accented, he had grown accustomed to using it, even here. When he did speak Tamil, it was scattered with American diction.

“In this country there is no shortage of sick.” The doctor replied formally.

On the way out of his office, I fainted.

Appa hooked his arms beneath my armpits and I felt my toes dragging across the cement as Appa tried to get me back into the office. He struggled with my limp weight while the crowd watched. Eventually someone alerted the doctor who held the door open for Appa.

“Sir, sir,” he apologized, “it is no problem. Sometimes they give this shot one by one. I gave all together for her.”

I put my head on the table, already feeling better.

“It is no problem.” The doctor looked scared.

A young man tapped the window. “Her spectacles.”

I assumed they hadn't helped Appa with me because we had butted in line. No, Appa assured me, it was propriety. Even the doctor hadn't tried to help Appa corral the cumbersome body of his unconscious daughter.

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It was scant months before Anna's first system was stolen in the dark. He had dawdled too long on installing the Viper alarm system he would eventually buy, but more significantly, he hadn't bolted down the speaker box as Evan and Bill had suggested. The combination was an invitation to get robbed.

When I woke that morning, I assumed the chatter from the living room was from Mama, my uncle, who had planned to stop by that morning to gather some visa applications from Appa. Instead, I found Anna bare to his waist in boxers, standing sentinel in front doorway. He looked ferocious.

"It's gone, shorty." He smiled sadly when he saw me. As he propped his arm against the doorjamb, his triceps involuntarily pulsed and his lats swelled into ropey wings. His muscles were evident despite the body hair that made us call him a monkey. On the occasions when he was shaved for one of his religious tattoos, I would see the true cut of his physique, unblurred by the usual shroud of fur. He was a statue.

"They was fast about it, too. Maybe two hours. Tha-tha got up at six he said, and I didn't turn my light out until four."

After his football career culminated in a 10-0 season and the fact of this apex to his football career was incontrovertible, Anna finally settled on his first job: a twilight loader on the gold belt at UPS. In the summer I would wait up for him while

gossiping on the phone to Alice. He wouldn't get in until after 3am most nights, sweat towels hanging from his dusty shorts, rips slowly lengthening in the rags he wore for shirts, Timbalands abused in ways they were designed but seldom used for. Most people wore the work boots unscuffed to the club.

In the driveway perfect cubes of windshield twinkled in the sun. A few loose cables fell from the Blazer's rear, as they had done when the system was installed. Appa, in his faded cotton sareem—a lounging garment that wrapped tightly around the waist—rubbed his graying stubble gravely. He fingered a dangling wire.

“It's bad luck, Shyam.” Appa smiled with his big teeth. “You're like me.”

Anna was silent.

By the time Mama arrived, the glass had been swept clean and Anna was holed in his stygian room, consulting his friends about recourse. There was no boisterous talk, as I would have guessed, only the disquiet of subdued murmuring and the irregular slap of the blinds as Anna needlessly monitored passing cars, including Mama's minivan when they showed up.

Although his hubris would soften in the years to come, the marriage of his eldest and the numerous grandchildren that followed mellowing his imperious swagger, our Uncle could not resist scolding Appa for letting his son climb on his head. Surely he felt it his obligation, as a patriarch of some sort, to provide a useful lecture. Mama, after all, had the fearlessness required to weasel into the States first and alone and he had done so without any of the graduate degrees many of those who had arrived with him had brought along. He had moved efficiently out the trap of the embassy, owning his own carpet cleaning business, his own photography studio and

eventually making his way into selling cars. Savvy and cocksure to Appa's conciliatory mildness, I guessed it wasn't the first disquisition Appa had acquiesced to.

"What are you doing Annan?" Mama was younger than Appa and addressed him so. It was a formality of respect to which they all adhered.

"This is what the Black boys do. You put junk like this and of course they will steal it. Don't you think? Let me tell you." He stood closer to Appa, who stared idly out of the window.

"You think you live in some good place? This is not a good place. You do things like the Blacks do, and they'll treat you the same way. Always. Stereo like this is stupid. Stupid." He pinched his lips as he shimmied his head, *stew-pet*. "Why does he need something like this? You let him waste his money like this? You have to control him. A good father controls his son."

Anna's door clanked with the belts he hung on it. In an instant he was in the living room, still dressed in his cotton boxers.

"What are you saying?" He clipped the words precisely.

"This was my fault, not his. You want to blame somebody, you talk to me. I did this. *I* put those speakers in the car. With *my* money. I made this decision. It's my fault." He stood directly in front of Appa, who hadn't moved from the window.

"You're not going to talk like that to him. Not in his house. Not with me here."

Mama, though noticeably taken aback, was not about to be chastised by a nephew.

“Shyam, you better sit down and shut up.” He put his finger against Anna’s nose.

“Shut up, ok?” His eyes, which had been shrunken to beady nubs by his glasses, quivered from left to right as he tried to decide at which of Anna’s eyes to glare.

“Who are you to come out of your room like that? Like a big man?” He huffed and puffed an imitation. “You don’t come to me like that. I’m your *Mama*.”

“And he’s *your* Annan,” Anna answered calmly. “You can’t talk to him like that here, in front of Alice, in front of Vasanthi.” He glanced at the two of us, dinner plates for eyeballs.

“I may curse him today and kiss him tomorrow, you know that?”

“Look, you can’t come here and talk to him like that.” He wasn’t giving. “I don’t care if you did before.” He sighed mournfully, accepting that this moment, however unanticipated, however set into motion by a completely unrelated event perhaps even less expected, was like a loaf of bread being sliced. Barefoot, in his underwear and bearing a fresh swipe at both his first adult purchase and his ego, he did not balk at the outcome: Anna and Mama would never be the same.

“If you don’t talk to me anymore I can’t stop you, Mama, but I nobody will talk to Appa that way. Not a stranger, not you, nobody. Nobody.”

Mama told Anna where he could go with his bigheadedness. Then he gathered Vasanthi and the papers for which he came, and left.

Appa remained on the porch, waiting, as was custom, for the minivan to pull away before he turned back to the house.

“You can’t talk like that to his Appa.” Appa grinned mischievously. During the squabble inside, Appa had been wordless. He had tried bashfully to restrain Anna with a palm on his back and a firm “Shyam,” but hadn’t interrupted the skirmish in any meaningful way. His brother-in-law had never yielded to him and Anna would only do so in courteous pantomime. These men were out of Appa’s reach.

“In a way, it’s good.” Appa’s smile had not diminished. “A son should have,” he shook his fist to supplement the vagueness of his words, “some feeling for his Appa like that.” Then he glanced at the battered Blazer and sucked his teeth.

The quest for retribution—the mechanisms for which had been dormant and bored—had a propitious start. Within days, Anna’s network had located the culprit: a white boy named Larry who had scoped Anna’s system when they had been introduced during a weekend in Ocean City.

“He asked all the right questions,” Anna remembered.

I knew Larry as a hot senior who had graduated the year before. His girlfriend, an upperclassman herself, once had a note delivered to Claudia, announcing that she knew all about Claudia sizing up her man and that Claudia, as an eighth grader, was silly for doing so. The note was punctuated with firm underlining and the occasional application of all caps. Though the element of threat was properly understated it was a scarce mask for the girlfriend’s well-founded fears. Despite being validated by the popularity inbuilt to the varsity cheerleading squad—never mind her handsome beau—she was unequivocally outmatched by Claudia, next to whom she was the merest, mousiest white girl.

The thrill we took in that note was soundly woven with racist desire. Here the pleasure was not simply from inadvertently rattling an older girl with established credentials, but in disrupting the bubble within which we believed a white girl lived. Although white kids were outnumbered by nearly every other group at school, they were hyper-represented on High Point's stage for inductions into honor societies and for theatrical productions of *Midsummer's Night Dream*. They ran student government and staffed the yearbook club. As seniors they roamed the hallways cradling crunchy paper bags of fast food, brazenly attesting they had violated the school's rule we never leave campus. Even as their population at High Point declined exponentially just within the five years I spent there, they remained the pink face of the school in many arenas.

Our resentment, which was steeped in admiration, manifested incongruously. We relished their discomfort in the main hallways where rowdy black boys self-consciously exerted their toughness and equally rugged black girls liberally dispensed showy insults and eye rolls. Yet we were embarrassed, too, by the gracelessness of the din, the meanness that was often unwarranted and frightening. Although I was buffered by a modicum of popularity, I knew I couldn't execute a shove, never mind land a punch, in an actual skirmish. I was only incrementally safer than the white kids who avoided the "jungle," their name for the portion of the cafeteria where no white kids sat, and yet they didn't seem to mind their segregation. They, like we, knew their world to be a desirable universe independent of ours. Theirs was the teenaged world we saw on television. There were no steamy dj rooms at their parties, but wild beer-soaked all nighters conceived in the unbelievable absence of vacationing parents.

These were the kids who threw up at Homecoming, had unisex sleepovers and crashed their parents' Buicks. Their fun was real. It was American, even if our fun—dark skinned and dangerous—was more cool.

My twin goals—popularity that rivaled Anna's and escape from home—synthesized into a single, crystalline ambition. The route was evident: popularity would be enhanced by clothes from the Gap and the careful cultivation of important friendships, but would be ultimately achieved by membership in high profile activities. Athletes, Cheerleaders, Student Government Reps, Theater technicians, Talent Show Emcees, Peer Mediators, Fashion Club Performers, Modern Dancers, anyone who was permitted to miss class and/or wear a unique costume during the school day was popular.

They were also considered “well-rounded” by those in charge of college admissions, or so I had heard from Mr. Stein, the guidance counselor assigned to me and everyone else in my class of six hundred whose name fell between SA and SN. He was a meek Jewish man who wore noiseless loafers and various shades of tan. Why he singled me out I didn't wonder, but we had become familiar. My freshman year he had stopped me in the hallway, after having only met me once.

“You owe me nine dollars.”

“Oh yeah?” I assumed it was a joke.

“You missed the PSAT registration last week. I paid it for you.” He handed me a cream colored flyer with tables and dates. “Roosevelt's the closest testing site.”

When I asked friends if they were going, some said their parents had signed them up weeks ago, while others didn't know what the PSAT was exactly. At the

time, I didn't notice who had said what, nor did I question why Mr. Stein had volunteered, with his own money, to prevent me from missing a step that was, unbeknownst to me, crucial to my shrouded mission of escape.

Since I couldn't do a Russian or any other jump that required height, I decided to try out for the Pom Pon Squad instead of cheerleading. Although the Poms performed the half-time routines at both football and basketball games and our coach was a yelling, bell-shaped Black woman named Rene, the Poms were decidedly "whiter" than the cheerleading squad which was succumbing rapidly to the changing demographics of the school. For years I had watched them during Anna's football games, marching quietly to the edge of the track minutes before halftime, the only sound the timed swish swish of their beach ball sized pom poms. They stood at a silent parade rest while the teams exited the field until Young M.C.'s *Bust a Move* freed them into motion in the icy whiteness of the stadium lights. High Point was one of only two high schools in the county that held night games; most schools simply didn't have the lights, while at other schools night games were considered unnecessarily risky. Adversarial cliques, never mind actual gangs, clashed all year without the rowdiness of team rivalries.

Thus High Point's games were community events. Crowds from the opposing school turned out for the games, their cheerleading squads prepared with their most antagonistic cheers for which we, too, were ready. Unlike most schools which had their athletic fields tucked discreetly behind the main campus, our stadium was propped at the front of campus, undisguised by shrubs, hills or fencing. Riding up 212 on game Fridays, the high tower lights flooded the fall skies with a foggy dome and

the band could be heard playing off key but recognizable songs. This, I understood, was what being an American teenager was all about.

After the second cut for Pom Pon try-outs we were instructed to attend an away game at Roosevelt High School so we could observe, one could only assume enviously, one of the best squads in the county. We were to study how crisply they coordinated their motions, how uniformly they performed their moves and all around be impressed by the quality of our competition if we were talented enough to make the squad.

It was Alice who spotted Larry, leaning against a dying tree in splotchy shade. It was a hot spring.

“Isn’t that the guy your brother is looking for?”

Anna and Shon Paul had been observed lurking around Beltsville hangouts decked in dark colors and heavy looking jeans. This did not go unnoticed since neither Anna nor his friends were the types to hold any residual affection for high school once they had graduated. I fueled the whispers that Anna’s brief appearances were predatory, shrewdly aware that an armed savage for an older brother was an asset.

“I saw your brother at McDonald’s yesterday.” Henry was one of the two Black boys in my honors classes, the other being Opel Jones, a saxophonist football player I would eventually date and consider the consummating testimony to my popularity. Where Opel—with his toothpaste commercial teeth, physique preternatural and murdered father—was rooted in a matter of fact masculinity he brought with him from Brooklyn, Henry’s boyishness was limber. I had always

believed Henry's mannerisms, which were governed by the same stylistic aggressiveness as the girls around whom he usually was, stemmed from his middle-class background. His assessments of one's breath, boyfriend or clothing snugness could be nuclear, his eye-rolling neck wobbles were instinctual. He wore flowy slacks more often than jeans and regularly announced he planned to attend, like his parents, a historically Black college. That kind of talk was itself rare. I realize now, however, that he was very likely gay.

"He was shoving a gun in his pants." Henry wiggled his eyebrows.

"Stop playing." I raised my voice while at once straining for nonchalance. An unexpected invitation to discuss how cool I was, by association to imminent violence, was nothing to waste. The cast of the potentially impressed classmates lounging about me should hear this.

"You did not see his gun, Henry. Did you? Did you see his gun?"

I had only glimpsed it myself. Anna's bedroom door never shut totally, byproduct of one particularly noisy fight I had had with Amma. Rage had led me to open and slam his door repeatedly for a full minute or so, until the doorjamb slid free from the frame. It had never closed properly after that. A sliver of view was always available for snooping, although it was as often the urgent need to know whether he was off the phone as it was general nosiness, that made me utilize it. On this day, there was an undeniable flash of black metal in his grip as I walked past.

"What was *that*?" I set my eyeball in the gap.

“Nothing.” His hand, which had been holding what looked to be a toaster-sized firearm and what turned out to be a 45—the largest handgun there is—was now shoved beneath his pillow.

“What *was* that?” I started to smile. I felt no fear at the sight of the weapon, but only a reassuring gratification; my brother was no joke.

He grinned sportively but the gun remained buried in the bed. I wasn’t going to be invited into any confidence on this. He repeated, with impermeable firmness, that I get out.

At the Roosevelt game, it was already half time by the time Alice recognized Larry and there was little evidence that he would remain seated on the steaming metal bleachers for the duration of the midday game. How to locate a pay phone from which to reach Anna before the game ended and Larry slipped into the Saturday afternoon? Secondly, how to convince the pom captain that we had to embark upon the search for a such a payphone immediately?

“My mom just paged me.” I prayed she believed I owned a beeper.

“The building is locked.”

I scanned the main road beyond the school. A shopping center wasn’t far, but we hardly walked anywhere. However ghetto we presumed ourselves, these were the mean pavements of the suburbs, where walking was reserved for the hikes across shopping mall parking lots. In front of us, the players returned to the field in a loose group jog.

“The locker room has to be open.” Alice pointed out.

What followed was hijinks the brand of which we had gleaned from countless teen movies, from *Goonies* to *Adventures in Babysitting*. Panic regularly became delirium, especially when the stakes were anything outside of public embarrassment, the only matter about which we could be serious. We ran because the situation demanded it, yes, but also because we were subject to fits of clowning. We took the most pleasure in eluding trouble after we had summarily provoked it. We raced through the mostly empty locker room squealing at the prospect of being caught. When we surprised a lone football player late for the third quarter, we shrieked first at the sight of him—risible in itself—and then again at the betraying echoes. When we stumbled into the building we were cramped from laughing, sweaty and mock frantic.

“Look at me!” I pointed at the dribbles running into my shirt as we slid around corners and down foreign hallways at full gallop.

Finally we located a working payphone and collapsed into more guffaws when we realized we had no quarters. Collect calls were nearly four dollars.

“Shit!” Oh, well.

Larry recognized the Blazer immediately as it crept, its lowest gear growling as it eased up the soft hill of the main drive way. I knew because he bolted for his Honda. The two vehicles exited the parking lot with enough cars and distance between them that I feared Larry would escape. The Blazer, after all, could be outrun by a skateboard. What if he got away?

“What’s your brother going to do if he catches him?” Alice wondered aloud.

It wasn’t until then that I realized I didn’t know.



## Chapter Eleven

Anna's swaggering return—with Larry's wallet and twelve-inch subwoofers wrested from his Honda's trunk—was eclipsed by the riots in LA. By the time he and Shon Paul returned, clammy not from the throes of a brawl but from the Blazer's muggy interior—A/C usage only further drained its thriftless gas mileage—the verdict had already unleashed the first wave of dissident display.

Pity was an emotion easily triggered in me. The useful impulses that are often attendant to pity—action, for one—were absent in me, however. I could spend days mourning or admiring, but lacked the inspirational drive that would lead other teary teenagers to volunteer or rally. I had been lachrymose for days during Rodney King's initial emergence the previous March. The cloudy video of his demise at the hands of cops' clubs and kicks looped endlessly on the evening news: King falling to his knees as the batons swirled never failed to wet my eyes. My hormonal heart could not stand it. The clip, edited to a fraction of its total telling length, was in line with the trained fear I had for the police.

My first memories of police officers were tuned with misgiving—an officer rounding the apartment stairwell when I was three. A child had gone missing and he was only knocking on doors, but I fled at the sight of him crossing the courtyard to our building. An even earlier memory of Appa, headed home from an embassy party on Rock Creek Parkway, was shaped more by Anna's recollection than my own. In that memory, the cop is passing his flashlight over our baby faces as Appa faces robotically forward. The wiggly road in Rock Creek is narrow and unlit, bordered on one side by a steep, rocky incline and on the other by a short ravine that dipped into

the creek. The road, well paved, was fraught with quick curves and closely lined by swampy trees, giving it the dreamy feel of a luxury car commercial. At night, it was spooky.

Would Appa like to take a breathalyzer, the officer wanted to know.

“No, sir.”

The officer repeated his question.

“No, sir.” A little Tamil head wobble for emphasis.

The officer was polite, but the whole weight of white authority throbbed from him in beat with the pulsating waves of his cruiser’s swirling lights. I felt as ashamed as I did fearful. As the trees vibrated red white blue red white blue, I understood that we had violated the sanctity of what the officer represented, the order to which we aspired as brown intruders who broke the rules.

Despite these fears and the “Fuck the Police” chants I heard in my favorite music, I had no organized resentment for the police as a collective whole. In my mind, we—we being those folks who evaded the law by hustling or trespassing backyards or shoplifting lipstick or carrying guns—were, at bottom, the malefactors whatever our loathing for cops. Religion still shrouded me; I believed we deserved to be caught if asking for forgiveness didn’t work.

Yet my reaction to the rioters was acutely conservative. Over the following six days, during which over a billion dollars of damage was done and fifty-three people were killed, I became furious at the Black faces I saw, those faces identical to my and Anna’s friends, those personas I tried jealously to emulate everyday. I did not link the shooting death of thirteen-year-old Latasha Harlins with the destruction of

Koreatown. I did not consider the jury who acquitted the four officers, the jury without a single Black juror. Even King's beating paled as I watched Reginald Denny staggering beside his choked tractor-trailer as hooting marauders threw one more slab of concrete on his skull. My journal is filled with all caps scrawls asking what did Black people expect if this is how they chose to act? What was wrong with Black people, I railed. Why didn't they at least burn down Beverly Hills? Why their own hoods? What good did it do? No wonder white people still hated them. What did they *expect?*

I didn't know then that Hollywood and Beverly Hills were immediately secured, while South Central and Inglewood were emptied of authority and fire trucks. I did not know the legacy of race rioting in America's cities, especially in LA. I did not appreciate that for a race riot a surprising small number of whites were killed—eight of the fifty-three—due in no small part to the truth that cops had evacuated themselves from responsibility to the color residents of LA. The fact that Anna herself had hours before been careening thoughtlessly through our neighborhood prepared for retaliatory blood was forgotten. And the fact that the man who saved Denny had been watching television at home when he saw the long haired white man have his head split, the man who had raced out into murderous streets to save a stranger at what was certain risk to his own life, the fact that he was in fact Black himself, that I hardly noticed at all.

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My religious career at Church of Our Savior began to falter as I became an upperclassman. It was as if faith in the mystical stories was liquid and someone had

surreptitiously introduced a leak; my belief drained incrementally away. I had preached two sermons to the entire congregation, both fashioned after Father Keopke's narrative model, and was the unofficial head of the youth group. As I greedily yearned for more and more popularity at school, the youth group waned in functionality. Moreover, it felt tame. While my friends at High Point were having sex and my brother's friends were selling drugs, the lives of these kids, nearly all of whom I knew since elementary school, seemed mired in the mundane.

There was the occasional new kid, brought along by one of the regulars as a lightweight introduction to the church. In the confines of the church's social rooms, religion was the soft glaze to our games and chatting, barely perceptible. We seldom prayed or discussed Jesus, the godliness supposedly inherent to the good-natured fun and baked snacks we were having. Richard, a smiling thirteen year old invited by one of the group's adult leaders, pained me. During the couple of weekend meetings he had attended we were hastily planning our annual fund-raising talent show. While everyone memorized their scripts and hammered together sets, he goofed off, arms confoundingly pulled inside his shirt no matter what task was, no pun, at hand. Although the basement where we worked had a damp chill, the fact that he never bothered to remove his arms from his sleeves annoyed me. Every time I wandered by where he was presumably helping, he was carousing while the others around him were bent to their assignments.

Finally, during one particularly chaotic rehearsal, I lost my calm.

"Are you finished writing your new lines?" I asserted my seniority.

"Not yet." Richard set his head down on the table in mock mortification.

“Maybe if you took your arms out of your shirt you’d get it done.” I turned back to the performers on stage, satisfied by the embarrassed silence my scolding had induced.

It wasn’t until much later, in the minutes before we concluded with a minimalist prayer, that some one discreetly mentioned that I had managed to miss a crucial detail about Richard. Although he had been coming to our weekly meetings for almost a month and I had spent hours near him if not with him, in my myopia, in my egoism, in my sheer ugliness, I had failed to notice that Richard did not have any arms to pull of his clothes. He had been born without arms.

This incident did not stir me take any inventory, however. Humiliated, I excised myself from youth group duties after the talent show. Claiming I had outgrown its uses, I focused entirely on school, which at the time meant Opel Jones. Track star, football player, saxophonist, and A student, Opel activated my salivary glands like sour candy. He was easily the most good-looking boy in our class of five hundred and my luck in securing his attention maintained my whatever residual belief I still had in a God. Aligned in classes and after-school busyness, we had finally started the process of “talking,” the weeks of phone conversating—distinct from conversing—that preceded going together. The extent of our passion was a single kiss, garnered on the sofa when he was technically over to work on a group project for honors English.

“There’s something in your eye.” I zeroed in on his face.

He began wiping. “Did I get it?”

“Close your eyes.”

He smiled knowingly as I leaned in for a close-mouthed but fleshy peck. It was all I was capable of, the navigation of tongues too wrought with pitfalls for my inexperience to maneuver. I pretended to be a tease the rest of the afternoon.

Football games were integral to our romance. I was desperate to drive the Blazer to school for the upcoming home game so I could escort Opel home afterwards. I would linger in the parking lot with the other cool kids who controlled their evening fates. My task was to convince Anna; it was he who drove the Blazer to work at UPS every afternoon for the evening shift. The morning of the game, I begged.

“I told him I could give him a ride.”

“That’s your first mistake.”

“There’s no reason you can’t take your bike.”

Earlier that summer, Anna had purchased a used sports motorcycle. He and Eric had ridden around DC in a team of other Ninjas and CBR’s, dodging cops and profiling in front of the clubs where they knew the bouncers.

“Just this once.” I knew there was a chance. Anna was as invested in my popularity as he was in my schoolwork. He recognized Opel as eligible enough to warrant chasing and understood mercurial stakes of high school romance.

“I don’t want anybody else to take him home.”

A hefty sigh. “You got the keys?”

That September night was unseasonably cool. By dusk, there was the unmistakable breeziness that preceded heavy storms. I knew it was going to rain. If I had a thought for anyone besides myself, if my adoration for Anna was as selfless as

it was sincere, equivalent even to a portion of what he would show for me over a lifetime, I would have driven the Blazer home as soon as I saw that 212 was wet. Sports bikes were dangerous on the sunniest days, their design crafted by wish for speed, not for the cruising one could enjoy on say, a Harley. The wind could tear through knuckles on a warm day and cars were lethally blind to bikes at night. Finding a ride to the game would have been simple; nothing short of pure selfishness prevented me from going home with the Blazer. Why hadn't I checked the weather? Hadn't he? He had to have known it was going to rain; checking the weather was a part of a daily routine from which he never deviated. Would the information have changed either of our minds—his generous and sacrificial, mine extravagantly adolescent, a synonym for selfish.

By the close of the game, when Anna would be riding home, the rain had crescendoed to an outright downpour. As I cheered Opel huddled beneath an umbrella, I resisted the image of Anna plowing through the rain, fists steady against the ravaging weather. Cold-hearted and young, I vanquished him from my conscience and dreamed of steaming up the windows with my new boyfriend.

What had begun to sprout when I changed the spelling of my name to Alis, accelerated into bloom by high school. I grew deeply selfish, monomaniacally driven by the directive that impelled me since Langley Park: escape. I retreated into the telephone, textbooks and blue and gold uniforms. When I heard my voice over the PA once a week as I read the school announcements, I exhaled. High school, unlike childhood, was a carnival. Hours in front of the bathroom mirror giggling about boys, theatrically preparing for a school day, I found normalcy in my size. Giant hoop

earrings like the Black girls wore, lipstick liners in rosey wines and weight loss. As if someone had just pulled the top of my head, I was longer, leaner. Inches to my height, inches off my waist and an eventual spot on the Pom-Pom Squad. Puberty delivered the figure I had wished for with astonishing speed. I found myself in a new body, a new place, an awkward surprise. By the time I was a senior I would achieve a size two. In fact, as my doctor and brother would mention frowning, I could stand to gain a few pounds. That was an outrageous suggestion that floated right over my head.

Confidence is valuable currency on a planet governed by teenagers. Even the adults in a high school are subject to the mandates of popularity. This was hardly avoidable considering the high overlap between National Honor Society members, varsity team starters, student government officers and Homecoming Court. At the crème of High Point society there was synthesis of disparate groups, which could lead to funny hybridity. Sarah Brockman, the uber-blond from Cherokee Lane, maintained her rank even when she was racially outnumbered. A comfortable dancer, she was a Pom Pon and on the nearly all-Black Modern Dance Team. When it was her turn to choreograph portions of their routines, she had the Black girls doing choppy moves from country line dances. The crowds adored her for it.

I had big expectations from school. I expected to be assigned teachers with interesting reputations, to have regular opportunities to be creative in front of my peers, to be offered leniency when I asked for it politely, and to have easygoing interactions based on trust in the general truth of my goodness. I expected to have the chance to shine. In fact, I almost expected to be *invited* to do shine.

When I was assigned Mrs. Conrad for A.P. Bio, I granted her one class period to impress me despite her hippy hair, teal eye shadow and uninspired waddle. The other section was being taught by Mrs. Beier, a woman who reminded me of slender housewives from seventies' sitcoms. When I had her for freshman biology, she nudged us along with deadpan sex jokes and contests to see who could name the parts of a cell the fastest. She recruited the most ripped football players to pose shirtless while she pointed out the muscles we had to memorize. I wanted her. Mrs. Conrad, on the other hand, relied heavily on dittos and was far too easygoing. There was no such thing as a late assignment and she never failed anyone.

“There’s no way I’m staying in this class,” I announced after one hour with Mrs. Conrad. “She’s garbage.”

“For real? Why?” Claudia had Mrs. Conrad, too, but for physics. We rarely shared the same teachers and when we did, our classes were immeasurably different. While I studied for pop quizzes, Claudia scribbled the “cheat sheet” she was permitted to use for tests.

“I want to take the AP exam.” I answered simply.

“You know you can’t switch classes though.”

This was generally true. High Point had a policy on scheduling: it was not allowed. You could not pick which geometry teacher you wanted or even what period you were assigned. This was a school-wide rule. Lines of begging students would whirl out from the guidance offices, but outside of asthma and clerical errors, the reply was always dream on. I couldn’t imagine, however, that the cogs oiled by the favoritism, wouldn’t bend for me. Why didn’t I deserve the best teacher? I was one of

the top students in my class. I had a right to make demands. As an Academic Center student, I had a special advisor to whom I could plead. I decided to be honest.

“She’s an awful teacher.”

I had never spoken with the blond woman before me. She inhaled thoughtfully.

“I’ve had Mrs. Beier. I know her style. I can learn from her.”

That was all it took.

“Don’t broadcast this,” she warned as she signed the necessary crinkly forms.

I nodded because I understood: the rules still applied to everybody else, just not me and those like me.

I settled smoothly into favoritism. I woke up late for class, never braking for breakfast or the long snack machine lines. At lunch, a group of us would all sneak off to the McDonald’s up the road. I snatched our favorite booth and waited for everyone else to bring back trays crammed with Super-sized Cokes and Number Three Meal Deals. The smells of my generation swaddled me—speed, convenience, grease. Double bacon cheeseburgers, toasty though ambiguous nuggets, soggy fries, and baked apple pies with steaming filling. Maybe I’d have a fry. I orchestrated the most ordinary experiences from high school, the Pom-Pom girl complete with short skirt and a large, Vaseline smile. I thought I was happier than I’d ever been and it materialized on my face in a huge grin that showed my teeth.

Vanity only augmented my selfishness. Legally blind, the goggles I wore often chipped. The lens, even the “featherweight” thin lens, were too heavy for the stylish frames I preferred. Months after I got a new pair, the frames would crack and I

would be forced to Krazy Glue my glasses together, the residual clumps of cement irremovable. I looked like a drip.

When I was due for a new pair, I wrangled Appa's Mastercard and swore I would use the \$100 coupon I had found in the weekend insert.

"I asked for featherweights." The glasses the technician presented were unacceptably thick. The lens were nearly a quarter of an inch wide. When he set them on the counter they tipped face first from the weight.

"Those are featherweights."

I ran my fingers over the numbers in Appa's card.

"How much more are contacts?"

The contact-fitting room was wall to wall mirrors. I was less nervous about seeing my face sans glasses than Appa's reaction to the receipt with which I would return his credit card. It hadn't occurred to me that I hadn't seen my actual face since I had gone legally blind in middle school. Since then when I removed my glasses, everything more than two inches from my eyes blurred to a nebulous fuzziness. To "see" my face without glasses, I would have to press my nose to a mirror. From that cross-eyed perspective I only saw a cubist version of my face. For nearly a decade, I had inadvertently managed to not know what my face looked like when it wasn't obscured by millimeters of glass.

As soon as I glimpsed myself, I flinched, yanking my eyes shut. A chemical anxiety shot through my body, my torso fluttering with adrenaline. I tried to peek out, but I was surrounded by images of myself. I swiveled about in my stool, but the view

was relentless. I felt strangely voyeuristic, though it was my face I was assessing. I cringed with unexpected nakedness.

“Are you alright?” The technician asked.

“I’ve never seen myself before.”

“What do you think?”

I was voiceless. Did I dare say it aloud? Could it be true? I raised my head and looked across the room to the furthest mirror from me. I leaned back and took a careful look. It was unmistakable.

“I’m not ugly.”

I reached home in time to find Appa leaning over the slow electric stove, bleary and smelling like cooked meat. Waking for another shift, he shaved his five o’clock shadow away for different masters, twice a day still. He had quickly found a second job at the Ramada Inn, but the debt incurred by six months of single income would trail him for years.

“Ma,” he asked sweetly, not bothering to look up from the steaming pot, “did you eat?”

During those delightfully anodyne years, I do remember eating any of the full plates of rice I had shoveled as a child.

I shook my head, no.

He had begun to think I didn’t like his cooking, perhaps I preferred to starve than to eat it. We spent far less time together, a natural evolution for any daddy’s girl. I rarely accompanied him anywhere and when I did I was instantly separated,

wandering down my own aisles at the grocery store or heading back to the car to wait while he paid for the items I deposited wordlessly into the cart.

One evening at the Safeway, I chucked a paperback into the cart: The *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Spike Lee's new movie was out and I prided myself on being the type of nerd who would always read the book first. I knew nothing of Malcolm other than he was a Black leader of sorts, an angry second fiddle to the Dr. King whose trademark speech made my eyes run every February.

I had no expectations for the book. I read the way some people eat—grazingly, habitually, with the belief that any input—even the list of ingredients on a label—was potentially serviceable. I started the book when I got home, easing into the story of Malcolm's childhood with casual interest. The Klan, the favoritism, the death of his father on railroad tracks was riveting enough. Soon entertainment fell to total absorption. By the next morning, I had abandoned all errands. By nightfall the following day, I felt as if I had been punched in the spleen. I had gone through two hiliters—in fact, the day glo pages they left behind convinced me to underline in pen thereafter. I had never been a fast read, but I had swallowed Malcolm's autobiography in less than two days.

The world was now bifurcated: the roseate universe peopled with whites to which I had aspired my entire life, however inconsistently; and the rocky earth that I had managed to ignore, the world of racialized injustice.

Racism. The scope of Malcolm's arguments, the example of his own life, the corollaries in my own stories that validated his—preposterously unseen by me heretofore— unraveled every element of my identity and worldview. Every aspect of

life was touched by this new knowledge. The history I learned at Cherokee Lane Elem—*Cherokee* Lane!—the lusting after white friendships, the fearfulness of whites I pitied, the fearsomeness of everything not white that I hardly understood. I was experiencing one of the healthiest, most frightening and sadly rare ordeals one can face: I had been wholly wrong. About everything. I felt cracked open and emptied. In whatever direction I cast my view, I found familiar things reworked anew. It was unlike anything I had suffered before, more disorienting even than India had been.

Though I didn't know it then, it was akin to being high.

The next day High Point had been converted into a crucible for my findings, a more suitable soapbox than the pulpit. I gushed to Henry.

"... and the computer lab, even," I raced through the exemplifications as they occurred to me. "Why do we get our own computer lab? Have you seen the Perkins?"

High Point had two computer labs. The one on the third floor had the gleaming, humming air-conditioned whiteness of the large appliance department at Sears. There were equal numbers of Macs and PC's as well as laser printers and free floppy discs in Ziploc bags. This lab was reserved for us, the Academic Center students, students who were largely white or Asian.

The Perkins Lab was designated for the rest of the student body, Blacks, Latinos, ESOL students. It was in the basement. It held half as many computers as the diamond mine upstairs. These computers were biblical. They were tan-colored. They resembled Commodore 64s. The ancient printer—there was only one— was the kind that shrieked and required paper that rolled on a ream and had perforated edges that you ripped off. In late spring, Maryland humidity would turn the lab into a swamp.

I turned my attention our Honors English class. Despite High Point being predominantly Black and Latino, there were only a handful of dark-skinned students in all of my honors classes.

“How come it’s just you, Angela, Opel and Isarius? There’s like 400 Black kids in our grade!”

“And how come we only spent a week on China in World History? World History my ass...” I began to work myself up until Henry stopped me. The bell was about to sound.

“You have been enlightened.” Henry agreed. He had already read it.

The book became my right hand. I drew confidence from it, I quoted from it, I found a new persona to imitate. Some friends noticed: they said that I had changed.

I felt as if I had just been born.

Like all things new, I defined the freshness of my new identity against its distance from the old me. I compiled a mental list of high profile changes that included breaking up with the white boyfriend I had acquired after Opel and I stopped dating. Creating distance from my white friends was crucial and I took clumsy steps right away.

“What’s that mean?” Morgan bent to see what I had drawn on my backpack with a white out pen. I had written the word WHITE, encircled it in a sloppy white oval that dribbled, and then driven a slash through it so it resembled a NO SMOKING sign. Its meaning was incontrovertibly insulting, practically a hate crime.

“Are you saying no to white people?” Morgan cocked her head. Though it was the question was rhetorical, she was smirking, her bemused disbelief half expecting

me to say that it meant something else entirely, homage to a favorite band, symbol of reasonable, not racist protest. Although white Morgan was “down,” her Black vernacular seamless and her best friend an overweight but pretty Black girl. At first, she did seem antagonized at all.

Unaccustomed to being questioned and unprepared for an attack by someone as vetted as I was, I scrambled for a subtler meaning. I was too chicken to tell her to her face what I had meant—in fact, I thought uncouth of her to ask. Just like white people, my mind raced, can’t take the gentlest jab.

“It doesn’t necessarily mean white people. I’m talking about how history as been whited out by white people.” I waffled.

As friends gathered behind me, I shed my usual goofiness. Normally I wore too big overalls, tackled my friends in the grass and broke out into ironic dance to garner those loving words: Alis is crazy. As the racialized conversation extended around me, as kids eagerly waited for pauses so they could offer their thoughts, as the interest behind me grew, I became uncharacteristically mean.

“You can take it how you want it.”

“You can’t say no white people. That’s fucked up.”

“I’m obviously not talking about individual white people.”

I pointed out that my recent ex was surfer blond.

“What if I wrote Black out in the same way?” Morgan was usually fiery, which I believe accounted for her popularity with Black kids, but she could see that the tide was not with her. It didn’t matter that she was right—which even then I knew she was—I was brown-skinned. In this case, it was all that counted.

“She can say what she wants. It’s her book bag.”

“I know Alis, she doesn’t mean it that way.”

“So what if she did?”

“Shit, can’t we all get along?”

Morgan and I squashed our beef the next day with one of those meandering conversations young people have when they solve their problems but need the cushion of sociability to normalize it. We talked through the three periods of lunch, racing to apologize and then to giggle over the fracas we had caused. Despite the good-natured ending to the unexpected mess and the fact that I had been unnecessarily cruel in my race baiting, my self-importance only increased. I saw that race mattered but I broiled with the desire to prove it. My knowledge was small and therefore dangerous, but at that time I only felt the compulsion to share. Everyone simply had to know what I felt I knew. The world, the US, our very Chocolate City was racist. Horribly, unavoidably, unapologetically racist.

I spent hours superciliously stewing over how to spread the news. I performed a dramatic introduction at the African Heritage Month Assembly and volunteered to lecture on Christopher Columbus in Ms. Covington’s Black Studies class—which supplanted the satisfaction of public speaking that the pulpit at church had once offered— but I craved a grander statement. I wanted empirical proof that the world I inhabited at High Point, like the world Malcolm described from martyrdom, was fucked up. If it wasn’t than my being wound up was no less vaudeville than the world I had so irrevocably left behind.

I eventually decided to heist a painting from the hallway. Surely, the risk tempted more than the point I would be making—that as an Honors Asian student I could conduct myself how I pleased despite the lockdown with which the school held the other students. Pointless stealing was always somewhat hip and the randomness of my target would only validate the empiricism that I would claim drove me. Clearly, I had no real use for the painting; I was making a point.

I skipped physics—a class I decided to fail since I assumed I would snag a scholarship to a local university— and dragged a desk from an empty room into the hallway. When the ROTC instructor approached me, comically attired in fake military garb, I pretended to be struggling.

“Can you help me get this down?” I asked. Arms stretched over my head, I affected a suffering expression.

“Sure.” He took a few quick steps and unhooked the painting from the cinder block wall.

By the time I called out thanks the administrator he too engrossed in police work to notice me. He was gravely accosting a Chicano boy though the kid wore his id badge around his neck and even waved a mint-colored hall pass. I left the boy to his ugly fate.

I was immediately noticed by Mrs. Gaye, a non-Academic Center English teacher surveying the hall from her doorway.

“That’s a nice painting,” she said.

I turned the painting so it faced us, so we both could take a generous look.

“It may even be worth money,” she continued. “It’s been here for decades.”

I wondered how she knew my name; I had never spoken with her yet she had engaged in friendly, grown up chatter with me. Perhaps she recognized I was someone being groomed to enter the adult world she inhabited. Still, that was close.

She would be the only hiccup, however. Nobody stopped me as I hauled the painting past classrooms in the anticlimactic throes of the afternoon and down three flights of stairs to the gym. When I got there, a Phys Ed teacher held the door open. It clanked with chains behind me. I set the painting into the trunk of my best friend's car and slammed it away with an pneumatic *whunk*.

I meant to return the painting having made my silent, irrelevant point to no one really besides myself since I was too yellow to broadcast what I felt was a political burglary, but I grew fond of it. The soft upholstery colors depicted a barn and an apple tree and rows of unidentified produce crept towards the viewer. There was even a covered bridge. It was the Jeffersonian ideal, an anodyne American dream void of any American complications. I kept the painting in Alice's laundry room until her mother threatened to junk it. I then gave it to Appa who hung it in the living room where it would eventually be flanked by my and my brother's numerous degrees, until Appa replaced with a tacky illustration of a lighthouse in a storm.

With my experiment a success and my escape route culminating in a handful of scholarship offers, I had little else to preoccupy me in the waning remains of my high school career. I skipped more classes, acquiescing to a C in Physics from Ms. Conrad and dropping math from my schedule entirely. My aim had been exit from Lynmont; now that it was inevitable, I lost steam not only for academics but for the very process

about which I had been obsessed, the preening in application essays, the gratitude for flowery letters of attest. I was finished with it.

“When’s the Georgetown interview?” Anna, forever thuggish in his feral goatie and bald head, was driving me to the University of Baltimore County where I was being interviewed for a Humanities Scholarship. As we entered the campus, it occurred to me that I couldn’t define Humanities with any specificity.

“I’m not going to that interview.”

“Why not? It’s Georgetown!”

Georgetown felt out of reach. Not only was the private school price tag inconceivable, I didn’t believe I could compete with their applicant pool. Despite my high SAT’s and good grades, I balked at what I imagined as sure rejection. I was smart, yes, but Georgetown was for another breed of smart kids. My self-confidence, which was excessive and reliable in the ghetto pond of High Point, evaporated when I envisioned the Deerfield types who attended private universities. Although my scores indicated otherwise, I ignored the verity of numbers. If I had spoken with Mr. Stein or anyone with any knowledge, they would have encouraged me to shoot for more impressive schools. I didn’t know any better than to assume I wasn’t good enough.

I knew Anna wouldn’t accept those answers, however.

“It’s not far enough away.”

“I see.” Anna, who would remain faithfully behind to baby-sit our parents for his adult life, understood. However, over-burdened it left him, he would never dispute my right to prodigality, my selfish duty to leave behind what was properly mine. He would seize the load.

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Anna waited in the Blazer while I attended an introductory mixer and had my interview. When it was time for dinner, the decision committee was startled to discover that I had not driven myself and that my older brother had been waiting for me in the car. It had been over three hours.

“Why didn’t he come in? He could have sat with the other guardians.”

“Please tell him to come in. At least for dinner.”

“He’s the shy one.” I tried to laugh it off but began to realize how odd it was that he would prefer to camp in the Blazer. I headed to the parking lot where he had stationed himself, knowing already what his answer would be.

“I’m not dressed for that, man.” He was wearing black jeans, a black sweatshirt and a black cotton ski cap though it was nearly summer. However neatly put together, he resembled the extras from Ice Cube videos.

“But they’ll think we’re nuts if you sit out here.”

“Tell them I left.” He scrunched down in his seat to indicate the conversation was over. “I’ll embarrass you more in there anyway.”

“Aren’t you starving? You’ve been here all day. Just come in, eat and we’ll dip. Really.”

He ignored me.

Inside, as I ate London broil for the first time and struggled to remain pleasant, I felt my comfort ebb. This was the end I was sure of it. I had hit a stride in the interview early on. I didn’t stutter or hesitate my replies and their laughter at my harmless jokes seemed sincere. I was going to win this scholarship and get of my

house. I was going to leave them all behind as I had plotted decades ago. There would be no merging of these lives: the ataxia of home I wanted to keep private if I couldn't erase it all together and this new world where my family could cease to exist if I so chose it. I saw Anna in the Blazer, simmering in prideful hope on my behalf while I left him in the evening dark to embark on my new happy fate. My heart bulged in its cage, pumping with what I always felt when I allowed myself to really think about escaping them: love love love and it felt, like it always did, indistinguishable from heartbreak.

### **Interlude Three: On Malcolm X, Hip Hop, Black as Cool and the Model Minority Myth as Presumptive Capital**

My last tattoo was simple, a single capital letter X. At the time that I had it imprinted on my ankle in throbbing ink I had been wrestling with questions that I had left unanswered in my dissertation, but had made no connection to the moment at hand. The brief and inexpensive tattoo was a much needed break; I had been swamped in research about the limits, dangers and necessities of defining anything as exclusively black.

The proverbial heart of my dissertation/life story was, I had come to think, the question of why I had been obsessed with blackness as a young person and as an adult. Why, out of all the troubling dynamics of my childhood, did I esteem the influence of blackness, however sloppily I defined it, as paramount in my development of an American identity? Why this as opposed to the omnipresent, racially neutral (white) mainstream that I aspired to as a child? Why not my literal and visible association with Indian immigrant traditions, embodied by several thriving Indian communities to which my Indian friends and cousins belonged? How was this identification with blackness the final stride in a protracted process that had its genesis in my perceived rejection by both whiteness and desiness? How was it defined by class? How did my centralizing the black experience—however broadly or narrowly defined and necessarily essentialist—fit into a larger, cultural phenomenon that was specific to the context of my upbringing in the 80's and early 90's? What did this component of my identity—so seminal in my self-assessment—reveal about the historical moment in which it developed?

It was, in one way, Malcolm X. I can be forgiven perhaps for missing how my individual introduction to Malcolm was part of larger cultural zeitgeist. His entry into my psyche was so meteoric, so personally meaningful that it felt singular. How could such a dramatic occurrence be part of a general social phenomenon? Malcolm altered the direction of my life in a single spectacular moment; it took a decade to discern that my conversion was not a unique accident of the universe, so dazzling had the experience been.

Sitting for the short minutes it required to needle a single letter tattoo, I recalled the hours I spent listening to Malcolm's speeches, memorizing his jokes, his cadence, his logical rhetorical loops, his impeccably delivered punch lines. The day I got my X tattoo, I returned to my parents' house to locate some of those ancient cassette tapes. When replaying the speeches (drawn from a wide array of engagements that trailed Malcolm's mercurial evolution as an international intellectual activist) I noticed how Malcolm's rhetoric focused entirely on the American Black 'Man' even when uniting him with the world's peoples of color. Surely this had played a profound role in the ripening of my sensibility and belief that black people and blackness were the single most crucial aspect of the American landscape. As I listened to each speech, the centrality of the black experience in illuminating what was truly American, in revealing patterns in world history, in providing possible redemption to American disaster, was repeated continuously. According to Malcolm, my new idol, it was black people who were the essential heroes, victims and symbols of the racialized reality of American (and earthly) truth.

He was only emphasizing a historical verity voiced by numerous thinkers but it was brand new to me, conveyed by magnetic oratory, rhetoric and humor.

In addition to the clever comedic intelligence that was satisfying from a purely stylistic standpoint, I recognized myself in some of Malcolm's diatribes, the self that I had instantly abolished after completing the autobiography. When he chided uncles for boasting about being the token black in a neighborhood ("I'm the only one on my job!" Malcolm mocks in "I'm a Field Negro"), I ruefully recalled my desperation to have a regular seat at the cool white lunch table in elementary school, and how quickly I'd abandoned my new but cheap plastic Halloween costume to borrow what I considered Lauren's "real" witch's hat and cape. When Malcolm proclaimed, "Any place is better than here!" to describe how any sensible "field negro" would want to escape the company of oppressive whiteness, I recognized my own dislocation from the unwelcoming whiteness to which I did not belong but that I saw on endlessly on television, read in my favorite books and experienced from a range of negative experiences with white strangers and friends.<sup>207</sup> Malcolm gave my exclusion political teeth; it was validation of my most intense insecurities by one of the most robustly charismatic ideologues in American history. I described the sensation like this: "I felt as if I had just been born."<sup>208</sup>

Yet this was no personal event isolated from the cultural terrain of the times. I had not happened upon Malcolm by chance; he was delivered to me by his return to the nation's spotlight via Spike Lee. There is no shortage of grandiloquent

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<sup>207</sup> A summary of these can be found in the second essay that follows Chapter Eight on p 95.

<sup>208</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 137.

proclamations by scholars of Malcolm's significance to the children of the Reagan years, a second coming of sorts. Michael Eric Dyson alone names him, "a unifying cultural signifier," "the vibrant hero of black juvenile cultural imagination," and "the reigning icon of black popular culture."<sup>209</sup> Even those less enchanted, or whose admiration is qualified by less single-minded praise, such as biographers Eugene Victor Wolfenstein<sup>210</sup> and Bruce Perry<sup>211</sup>, still refer to him as a "race symbol"<sup>212</sup> crucial to the public and personal enactment and understanding of blackness.

Malcolm's autobiography was introduced to me by way of the eponymously titled film biography by Spike Lee, a movie that some scholars say "warranted" a massive budget because of the "global scale and social import of Malcolm."<sup>213</sup> In addition to the explosion of hip hop that occurred simultaneously, Malcolm's reemergence further propelled interest in a particular aesthetic, and the "popular reappearance of the image and ideas of Malcolm X... was led by Spike Lee."<sup>214</sup> His film, the "monumental *X*" is considered by many, including Dyson, to be Lee's greatest work.<sup>215</sup> It inaugurated renewed interest in militancy, in black neonationalism, and in a "politics of black masculinity and its relationship to ghetto

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<sup>209</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2004), 350, 358.

<sup>210</sup> Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *The Victims of Democracy: Malcolm X and the Black Revolution* (London: Free Association Books, 1989).

<sup>211</sup> Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: the Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Tarryton: Station Hill Press, 1991).

<sup>212</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, "Malcolm X Across the Genres." *American History Review* vol. 98 no. 2 (April 1993): 433.

<sup>213</sup> J. Ronald Green, Review of *Framing Blackness: African American Image in Film* by Ed Guerrero, *Film Quarterly* vol. 48 no. 4 (Summer 1995): 47.

<sup>214</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2007), 66.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid*, 327.

culture”<sup>216</sup> that typified the period. Lee, “as a filmmaker immersed in the ideology of Malcolm X<sup>217</sup>, was scolded by “some critics at the time he released *Do the Right Thing* and again when he released *X*, for injecting the militant rhetoric of the 1960s into films of the 1980s and 1990s.”<sup>218</sup> This was “new” blackness that was at once familiarly frightening and appealing to the white mainstream.

But it was not just Malcolm and his explosive portrayal in Lee’s film that fueled the new aesthetic and related ideology but the very nature of the period’s black cultural forms and how these permeated arenas of the adolescent landscape to the degree that youth culture and urban black culture became synonyms. Gangsta rappers were no longer localized acts with miniscule range, but social antagonists who represented the defiant cultural sensibility of the LA Riots and New York graffiti. Malcolm’s imagery was present here as well, in the pervasive presence of X t-shirts and baseball caps in hip hop videos, his signature phrases cut into hip hop refrains or looped into samples. When MC Lyte danced and pumped her fist in front of a Malcolm X poster in her music video for her thug anthem, “Roughneck,” I did not flinch at the somewhat incongruous analogy. In many ways, this urbanized, masculinized version of black culture came to define youth culture during the era of my youth. As Dyson articulates, “it is almost cliché to say by now, but black masculinity is one of the most insightful and complex texts of American identity.”<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Dyson, 350.

<sup>217</sup> Hanson, 55.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>219</sup> Dyson Reader, 481.

This interest in and exoticization of black masculinity was not new. Scholars who studied the “ghetto” during the post-Civil Rights era left a legacy of defining urban black culture as male, violent and politicized. This old fascination fermented anew in the growing consequence and proliferation of hip hop. Hip hop referred not simply to rap music, but to a general sensibility that infused fashion, speech, political affiliation and visual art. Yet though it was “defined mainly by an urban aesthetic, a nihilistic attitude, and an aggressive posturing,” its popularity was undoubtedly due in substantial part to “the ubiquity of rap music and the ‘videomercials’ that sell it. More specifically, its appeal is the result of the popularity of the urban ‘gangsta...’”<sup>220</sup>

This view that urban black culture must be defined by criminal, never mind aggressive maleness, is enormously troubling. In the first chapter of *Yo’Mama’s Disfunktional*, “Looking for the Real Nigga: Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto,” Robin Kelley provides an historical perspective on how “the notion that there is one discrete, identifiable black urban culture” arose out of post Civil Rights Era urge to study black poverty, and more served the pre-existing assumptions about the “underclass” held by mostly white ethnographers than it revealed anything about urban black culture.<sup>221</sup> According to Kelley, these social scientists succumbed to three main intellectual errors: the conflation of behavior and culture; the single-minded emphasis on those behaviors that were considered representative and “authentic,” never mind that this limited the scope of study to the “real Negroes” who were the

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<sup>220</sup> Matthew Henry, “He Is a ‘Bad Mother \*\$%@!#: *Shaft* and Contemporary Black Masculinity.” *African American Review* Vol. 38 no. 1 (2004): 119.

<sup>221</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America!* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1997), 17.

“young jobless men hanging out on the corner passing the bottle;”<sup>222</sup> and the reductive tendency to homogenize all components of daily life “in terms of coping mechanisms, rituals or oppositional responses to racism”<sup>223</sup> in such a way as to render black urban communities as monolithic sites of barely contained anger. This critique matches David Lionel Smith’s condemnation of “common sense” view that “true blackness is angry.”<sup>224</sup>

My adolescent association with blackness, along with my peers’, falls prey to many of the above gaffes. My sense of blackness was defined in many ways by cliché but what is equally undeniable is the fact that we, residents of the suburban ghetto of Langley Park and Adelphi, self-identified as such. Our rendering of blackness, our appropriation of urban blackness, our sense of racial boundaries was inelegant and ham-fisted, yes, but it remains that the cliché measures distilled by mediated commercialism are what we used. White ethnographers and social scientists were not the only ones who viewed blackness through the warped prism of authenticity and stereotypical “cardboard typologies.”<sup>225</sup> Moreover, however pigeon-holed some aspects of conventional “ghetto culture” may be, their existence, although over-represented, is irrefutable and meaningful.

Thus, there is a tension between resisting the propensity to “conceive black urban culture in the singular” in such a way that ignores diversity and recreates stereotype, and acknowledgment of the historical reality of a “common history and a

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>224</sup> Smith, 178.

<sup>225</sup> Kelley, 17.

collective recognition that there is indeed an African American culture and a ‘black’ way of doing things.”<sup>226</sup> Throughout her book, *The Failure of Integration*, Sheryll Cashin defends the necessity of writing about “generalities” when examining race and class in the United States. Heidi Safia Mirza describes a similar balancing act in her review of the much reviewed book, *Cool Pose*. According to her, the authors “walk the tightrope of reinforcing essentialist images of the ‘black folk devil’ on one side, and the necessary understanding of the obvious phenomenon of black male expressive techniques.”<sup>227</sup>

How to reconcile this contradiction in my own writing is a question with which I continue to grapple. For example, I considered my brother’s ownership of handgun a tie to the peripheral violence that surrounded us during that time period, when DC and bordering PG County were suffering year after year of record homicides. The racialized nature of this violence was incontrovertible. “The racial underpinnings of the events that surrounded us, the ‘Black on Black’ crime about which we heard and the hum of gangs we intimately knew, felt as natural and immovable as trees.”<sup>228</sup> I associated this violence with the geography of daily life and with the blackness I correlated with that daily busyness.

In the following chapter I describe the casualness with which we treated bodies being found on nearby streets. “Bullets were peripherally familiar, constants we understood as unique to our locality— like marble monuments, cherry blossoms,

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<sup>226</sup> Kelley, 22.

<sup>227</sup> Heidi Safia Mirza, review of *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* by Richard Majors & Janet Mancini Billson, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* vol. 20 no.1 (March 1999): 139.

<sup>228</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 106.

percussive go-go music and the iodine rich gusts that blew in from the Chesapeake Bay.<sup>229</sup> How ready one was to fight was a yardstick by which to assess how “down” one was, a euphemism for blackness as well. When I point out that Sean Link was as “willing to box as anybody else,” it is to validate his blackness, especially since I believe that Sean’s middle class home life is what prevents him from belonging to “altitude of toughness” that marked the “true” blackness of Shon Paul, Eric and even my brother.<sup>230</sup> Clearly, I conflated the “behavior” of violence with cultural membership, much like the scholars harangued in Kelley’s work.

But I would argue that although violence, for example, is clearly not a characteristic aspect of Black urban culture, the fact of its presence in black community is an empirical verity. To deny that “black on black” crime might have some connotative effect on the imaginations of young black individuals who interact with that violence seems disingenuous. I would err instead on Kelley’s side of not over-analyzing black behaviors but still recognizing the links they have to lived black experience. For example, Kelley considers “the dozens” the “most misinterpreted cultural form coming out of African-American communities.”<sup>231</sup> Although I wouldn’t mistake Shon’s joning in Chapter Nine, for a “ritual” of blackness, I would describe it as a distinctly black. None of us was either actively or subconsciously participating in a cultural ceremony per se, but there was clearly a racial countenance to the

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<sup>229</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 109.

<sup>230</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 104.

<sup>231</sup> Kelley, 32.

performance of those teasing jokes, in addition to the simple “pleasure and aesthetics of verbal play.”<sup>232</sup>

Similarly, our consumption of hip hop was not a necessarily a politically informed choice informed by our understanding of it as a “coping strategy to deal with the terror of street life.”<sup>233</sup> Could it have been what Richard Rodriguez argues, at least on occasion, that “hip hop was not rage, but cleverness”?<sup>234</sup> I reflect on this during the scene where my brother and his friends install his system into the Blazer.

Looking back at Chuck D’s militancy and the clamor around the band’s popularity, never mind the eventual acceptance of *Fear of a Black Planet* as one of the most important albums in modern music overall, I’m startled that we imbibed so little of it. What we heard was the rebellious hardness that suited our adolescent appetites. What exactly those angry rappers were railing about was irrelevant. Those brothers were *hard*.<sup>235</sup>

Like the youth about whom Kelley speculates, we too found the “form and performance more attractive than the message” when it came to hip hop.<sup>236</sup> Our connection to the music, which was itself decidedly political, was often times more concerned with stylistic enjoyment and the model for emulation it provided in terms of that style.

The repetition of the word “ghetto” instructed us on whom we were or should at least try to be, even if the conventional ghetto of public housing was not exactly where we lived. To us, “ghetto” was not a locale but an aesthetic, the sole route to

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>234</sup> Rodriguez, 28.

<sup>235</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 106.

<sup>236</sup> Kelley, 37.

authentic Blackness which we knew was the only way to be down.<sup>237</sup>

For me and my peers, the source of our identity construction was as much the mediated, censored commercial input we absorbed through products as any organic breeding ground based in daily interactions with actual black people. Considering the heavy presence of pop culture in our young imaginations, I would argue it would be nearly impossible to separate the two. Moreover, of the two, I wonder if pop culture was the more vast, reliable supply. After all, pop culture was on the streets in live bodies and billboards, in our walkman ears, on at home as constant background noise—a constitutive source for both outsiders and insiders. “It is from pop culture that most people weave their identities and establish their relationships with others and the environment. Mass media images saturate our lives, structuring much of what we know beyond personal experience.”<sup>238</sup> This was surely true for me throughout the course of my childhood; books, television and songs on the radio did much to instruct me on the variety of ways to perform an American identity, whether I was coding that Americanness as white, black or an amalgamation of both.

This class-based version of blackness, rooted in a conventional understanding of black poverty as urban, was fueled by the highly stylized artistic forms delivered to us video screens and sound bites. “Many of the cultural styles that characterize ‘blackness’ emerged from the urban ‘ghetto’... to be promulgated by the popularity of hip hop.” This version of blackness came to classify youthful chic perhaps most poignantly to those on the margins who could assert some skin color or class linkage

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<sup>237</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 106.

<sup>238</sup> P. Duncun, “Art Education in New Times.” *Studies in Art Education* vol. 3 issue 1 (1997): 70.

to this stereotypical blackness, but it also became a barometer for “cool” to adolescents all over the US.

But this is no novel occurrence. Since the days of the colonial plantation, “white Americans have admired and emulated these concepts [of cool], which have helped mold American culture...”<sup>239</sup> As Sheri Parks pointed out, What is “cool” is almost always yanked by the mainstream from the margins<sup>240</sup>, and black culture is the quintessential marginalized group by which all others are measured. In its July 2008 issue, *Ebony Magazine* recently highlighted how the very conception of cool was still something “quintessentially black.” Just as the Beats exoticized black cultural forms to gain a racy edge, hip hop, like all music for youth, must be “sexy, ‘dangerous’” by definition. “That’s why youth music exists, from minstrelsy through early jazz to rock & roll to punk and hop hop and raves—to upset adults.”<sup>241</sup>

This adaptation was not limited to rap music, which would eventually become so defanged as to appear in commercials for children’s cereal, nor to the reentry of Malcolm by way of a Lee’s blockbuster, but included a widespread perception of black popular culture that drew from

Films, newspapers, magazines and more importantly music as rap, reggae, pop and R&B. The term hip hop comprises everything from music (especially rap) to clothing choice, attitudes, language, and an approach to culture and cultural artifacts...<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Strausbaugh, 304.

<sup>240</sup> Sheri Parks, “Class Lecture” (presented during course on Marginality and Pop Culture at the University of Maryland, College Park, Spring 2004).

<sup>241</sup> Ibid, 324.

<sup>242</sup> Ibrahim, 351.

This conception of blackness was essentialized (and thus slightly preposterous) yet its impact was ubiquitous. Mass marketed, it was and still is used by young people as “media texts to construct a sense of identity, place and community,” even when black individuals are not actually located in a given space.<sup>243</sup> What is described as or generalized as “black” can become deracialized, or opened up in terms of race, when it enters the language of cool to the extent that it defines cool even in arenas where black people are not literally present.

For example, in Bettie’s study of white and Mexican-American girls, she noted that

in spite of the near absence of black students at this school, ‘blackness’ was ever present in their youth culture. Importantly, Mexican-American signifiers do not carry the same currency in an economy of ‘cool’ that ‘black’ (read hip-hop) ones do, at least not among white students.<sup>244</sup>

Similarly, in Pamela Perry’s study of racial identity in white students, white students at the predominantly white high school, Valley Grove, often “de-racialize black, urban, youth culture so as to claim it as a space of toughness, coolness, and pride”<sup>245</sup> in order to utilize the performance modes without the accusation of appropriation or inauthenticity (even despite the undercurrent of race). Greg Dimitridis makes the same point in his study of black youth in a community center. “Race is not absent, as it is ever-present (whether discussed or not) in almost anything written American youth today.”<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Dolby, 39.

<sup>244</sup> Bettie, 24.

<sup>245</sup> Dolby, Review of *Shades of White...*, 38.

<sup>246</sup> Dolby, Review of *Performing Identity/Performing Culture*, 39.

It is not just American youth, however. A colleague from Yale University details the global appeal of black cultural forms revealed to him during a night spent singing in a jazz bar in Japan, as

An interesting lesson in the ways that American, especially black American culture gets exported abroad. Besides most of the songs being American ballads, the only poster on the wall was of an American trio fronted by a black trumpeter—photos of Japanese jazz musicians had been hung as well, but only in the bathrooms—and several women at the bar had their hair done in short, curly perms that reminded me of Ella Fitzgerald.<sup>247</sup>

In my own travels, from Guatemala to Ghana, I found have found Tupac t-shirts alongside indigenous garb, the long dead rapper as prevalent as local artists. As Strausbaugh says, “it is a hip hop planet”<sup>248</sup> where Japanese girls cornrow their hair not in “mockery”<sup>249</sup> but in participation with a racialized identity that has been packaged as American, cool and edgy. Are these girls an example of Kelley’s polyculturalism that stipulates that no group can hold “proprietary” claims on their “authentic” cultures? How might the appropriated style choice of corn-rowed Japanese girls be distinct from the identity construction of African refugees in Ontario who employ “hip hop as influential sites in their processes of becoming black”<sup>250</sup> For these students who are already thrust into a “social imaginary” where they are classified as black, this adoption of black cultural identities is more than aesthetic

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<sup>247</sup> Rob Blair of Yale University, post to blogspot, February 27, 2008, <http://robroundtheworld.blogspot.com/>

<sup>248</sup> Strausbaugh, 319.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>250</sup> Ibrahim, 364.

preference, but a “choosing of the margin” which is “simultaneously an act of investment, an expression of desire, and a deliberate counterhegemonic undertaking.”<sup>251</sup> Not that this is an unproblematic adaptation for these young adults.

We have to wonder why we try to really follow the model of Americans who are blacks. Because when you search for yourself, search for identification, you search for someone who reflects you, with whom you have something in common.<sup>252</sup>

How is this process distinct from say the Puerto Rican student Jaime, who is accepted by his black peers when he adopts tastes and speech patterns associated with blackness despite not being named in the “social imaginary” as black? Each of the above employ media texts to connect themselves with blackness for different motivations while hailing from separate individual sites where they may or may not be identified as black to varying degrees.

Even those who self-identify and are identified in the “social imaginary” as completely African-American can utilize media texts to access blackness. Trey Ellis, a graduate of Andover and Stanford who doesn’t “pretend to be other than a bourgeois black boy, who hadn’t lived around a lot of black people except my own family,” recalls the day a white childhood friend asked, “What do you know about black culture?”<sup>253</sup> The question reveals how class-based and “common sense” the friend’s sense of black culture was, yes, but Ellis’ response was equally telling: “I realized I was a cultural mulatto. He didn’t know I was reading *Soul on Ice, The Autobiography*

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid, p. 365.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, 364.

<sup>253</sup> Trey Ellis, “The New Black Aesthetic.” *Callaloo* no. 38 (Winter, 1989): 235.

of *Malcolm X* and listening to Richard Pryor's *That Nigger's Crazy* after school."<sup>254</sup>

Reading his response to mean that exploring the black canon makes one black would be, at minimum, at gross misinterpretation if only for the preposterous implication that not reading canonical black texts could then cause one to be one less black. Rather, what I draw from this scene is point that culture can be approached, engaged and participated in through texts. This in some ways begins to get at the complexity of David Lionel Smith's rhetorical, "unanswerable" question: "Is participation in black culture a biological privilege or can anybody join?"<sup>255</sup>

In my case, what led me to identify so powerfully with blackness, both as a source for my identity and as a reference point for my ideological and intellectual arguments, was fourfold. It stemmed from my origins in Langley Park and its racialized classification as a "ghetto;" my disaffection from desiness rooted in the personal and socio-economic disappointments of my family narrative; my perceived rejection fro whiteness; and finally my desire to claim what was popular, both in the immediacy of my surroundings and in broader nationalized youth culture movement. An identity culturally defined by an aesthetic that was culturally coded as black.

Although this identification with blackness felt not only logical but hip, I wonder now what retributive purposes it served. For example, my rejection from whiteness (as well as from South Asian measures of beauty for that matter) was irrevocably bound on the most fundamental level with my skin color, yet this same skin color bred acceptance amongst my black peers. Colorism is rampant with

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>255</sup> Smith, 180.

peoples of color. The byproduct of white racism, it is omnipresent. What was an indicator of difference in one arena became a mark of membership, however qualified. I can only guess that my skin tone played a role in my seeking acceptance from black peers, those folks whose skin color, however differently perceived on the American landscape, was similar to mine.

This approval and acceptance by my black peers had an underbelly. Whereas before I had sought to cement relationships with white friends and classmates, my new found association with blackness, informed in no small part by Malcolm's rhetoric, led me to distance myself from that which I had so eagerly pined. For example, when an upperclassman cheerleader notices her boyfriend's interest in the luscious Claudia, the elation we felt from the rattled note she writes is rooted in her being white. "The thrill we took in that note was soundly woven with racist desire. Here the pleasure was not simply from inadvertently rattling an older girl with established credentials, but in disrupting the bubble within which we believed a white girl lived." We resented that

although white kids were outnumbered by nearly every other group at school, they were hyper-represented on High Point's stage for inductions into honor societies and for theatrical productions of *Midsummer's Night Dream*. They ran student government and staffed the yearbook club. As seniors they roamed the hallways cradling crunchy paper bags of fast food, brazenly attesting they had violated the school's rule we never leave campus. Even as their population at High Point declined exponentially just within the five years I spent there, they remained the pink face of the school in many arenas.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 127.

This resentment manifested in both subtle and blatant ways. Where I had once felt at home with my white friends from my church group, they soon came to feel too “tame,” too dull, too bland to warrant my attention.<sup>257</sup> Who was the “corn-haired Jerry Wamaling” beside the hyper-masculinity of Opel Jones? When in Chapter Eleven I am challenged by Morgan, a white classmate who was reasonably insulted by the no whites implication of a drawing on my backpack, I failed apologize. Worse, I was invigorated by the support of my black friends in the face of what could have been named a hate crime on my part. Clearly, my adoption of a black identity was related to the class identity that distinguished me from my desi counterparts while linking me socio-economically with conventionally conceived urban blackness, but it also held some retributive utility for the insults I felt I had suffered at the hands of whiteness.

Yet regardless of my participation in a collective identity that promulgated an “oppositional culture,” a phrase popularized by anthropologist J.U. Ogbu who admits that it fails “to fully explain the variability in minority school performance,”<sup>258</sup> I was distinctly Indian as well and thus owned a kind of cultural capital, or rather the assumption of such. This presumptive capital was one factor, one of many I likely wouldn’t have admitted then, that distinguished my experience from those who grew up in the same neighborhoods and attended the same schools as children of working poor color like myself. I was, however imagined or metaphorically “black” in the mind of myself and some of my peers, I was simultaneously Indian, by heritage and

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<sup>257</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 131.

<sup>258</sup> J.U. Ogbu, 33.

also by culture, however qualified, and surely (much like the ‘brown-skinned white girls’) by an easily recognizable phenotype. Much like the whiteness that George Lipsitz declares has “cash value,” the privilege of this racial ownership from which I often felt estranged could not be divorced from me. I would eventually even court it.

This presumptive capital is distinct from the categories of capital delineated by Pierre Bourdieu, who generally refers to class-based knowledge that oils class mobility. Carter summarizes it this way,

Almost three decades ago, Bourdieu introduced his notion of cultural capital to explain how individuals’ access to certain cultural signs (such as attitudes, preferences, tastes and styles) either enables or limits their entry into high status social groups, organizations, or institutions.<sup>259</sup>

What Bourdieu perhaps fails to notice is the “ethnocentrist bias in the conventional use of cultural capital,”<sup>260</sup> since what constitutes capital, especially when it is defined as insider knowledge that creates membership, is entirely dependent on the context and the meaning of inclusion. Carter asserts that “lower status communities” employ their own forms of capital to express in group membership and status. This “non-dominant cultural capital” does not replace, however, but coexists with the traditional, “dominant” cultural capital.

Some ethnic minority students employ dominant and non-dominant cultural capital alternatively across settings to pursue different ends. They recognize the higher value which is placed on the former outside of their communities.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Carter, 136-7.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

This was certainly the case for me at High Point, where in the hallways I executed a flawless, “oppositional” identity complete with heavy make up, tight clothes and loudmouth braggadocio, while in the classroom I allowed the perception of me as a model student reign. This became a willful performance designed to achieve predetermined ends, a kind of, “code-switching.” By the time I entered High Point as an eighth grader, “I was determined to be as popular in high school as Anna had been.”<sup>262</sup> This goal could not compete with my other prime directive: to earn “a scholarship to anywhere at all as long as it included room and board. I gave no thought to what I would study or who I would become; escape was the end point beyond which little mattered.”<sup>263</sup> These “twin goals”<sup>264</sup> required that I toggle between two distinct worlds housed in the single building of my school. Much as I had swapped language and cultural performance between the Indian world at home and the American landscape that existed beyond the front porch, I code-switched not simply on a daily basis but by the fifty-minute intervals that governed the class periods of a school day. One student in Carter’s study explained it this way,

It’s like we all have thousands of faces, many different faces. When you on the job, you’re not the same person... like right now, I’m with you. I’m acting pretty laid back with you, but I’m like on the street, ‘What up, nigger, ya’ll chilling? What up?’ But like in court, I’m going to be quiet. I want to win the case, so I’ll be respectful. In school, I’ll sit back, be quiet...<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 106.

<sup>263</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 121.

<sup>264</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 127.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 141.

School was the main crucible for the enactment of these various forms of cultural capital, both non-dominant and dominant, as well as the capital I distinguished above as presumptive capital. My phrase presumptive capital describes the presumption of class based knowledges and the association in popular imagination (via stereotype) with a cultural identity—in this case the model minority—that acts as a kind of capital with real world currency.

There is no shortage of ruminations on why exactly children of Asian descent outshine all their counterparts in the classroom by reliable and ample margins. Interestingly, Asian Indians are even more exceptional according to research cited by Sung Joon Jang. They “show an even better profile than other Asian Americans in terms of socio-economic status and stability.”<sup>266</sup> This is notable considering the overall statistical consensus that, as stated here by Carl Bankston and Min Zhou, it is “Asians, not whites, who are consistently found to show the highest levels of achievement in American schools.”<sup>267</sup> Two clear structural factors are self-selection inbuilt to the extensive and pricey process of such far removed immigration, and the state selection of immigrants arriving from Asia under the “special skills provision.” On the whole, for example, “asians are more likely than any of the other groups to have both fathers and mothers with college degrees.”<sup>268</sup>

This doesn’t seem to sufficiently account for the disparity, however. Ethno-cultural explanations seem somewhat inadequate as well although the angles from

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<sup>266</sup> Sung Joon Jang, “Race, Ethnicity, and Deviance: A Study of Asian and Non-Asian Adolescents in America.” *Sociological Forum* vol. 17 no. 4 (December 2002): 654.

<sup>267</sup> Carl L. Bankston III & Min Zhou, “Being Well vs. Doing Well: Self-Esteem and School Performance among Immigrant and Nonimmigrant Racial and Ethnic Groups.” *International Migration Review* vol. 36 no. 2 (Summer 2002): 390.

<sup>268</sup> Bankston & Zhou, 399.

which researchers approach this notion of an Asian “ethos” that cultivates academic success and obedience would appear to be endless. According to Jang, Asian parents “often pressure their children to ‘bring honor’ to their families through educational achievements,” while being themselves “more willing to sacrifice their lives as well as resources for their children’s best education.”<sup>269</sup> According to Bankston & Zhou this success does not necessarily correlate with self-esteem, a component oft studied since the Supreme Court “adopted a ‘self-esteem’ perspective on education.”<sup>270</sup> They claim that Asian children do well in school despite or perhaps because of higher rates of angst and uncertainty about their social place. This is in contrast to psychologist J.W. Osborne’s findings that black students appear to “detach” their self-confidence from grades in school.<sup>271</sup>

Self-image is inextricably woven with how others perceive any given group. Expectations must therefore also be integral in understanding how “adolescents define their goals primarily in the terms of the stereotypical images attached to their ethnic group.”<sup>272</sup> Grace Kao’s study of the connection between racial/ethnic stereotype and how groups constructed success, uncovers a powerful bond between “how popular group images that link race to behavior contribute to the differential development of possible selves among adolescents.”<sup>273</sup> While many black students

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<sup>269</sup> Jang, 652.

<sup>270</sup> Bankston & Zhou, 390.

<sup>271</sup> J.W. Osborne, “Academics, Self-Esteem and Race: A Look at the Underlying Assumptions of the Disidentification Hypothesis.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 21 (1995): 450.

<sup>272</sup> Grace Kao, “Group Images and Possible Selves Among Adolescents: Linking Stereotypes to Expectations By Race and Ethnicity.” *Sociological Forum* vol. 15 no. 3 (Sept 2000): 407.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid*, 408.

speak of success in terms of “avoiding failure,” Asian students “focus on keeping up with high expectations.”

Teachers fall victim to this as well. In Bettie’s study she found that how students performed class culture not only correlated with their stated “aspirations” “more than [their class] origins” did, but it also informed “treatment by teachers.”<sup>274</sup> This may contribute to understanding how schools with diverse populations often resegregate within their classrooms despite the fairly accepted notion that all students desire to succeed and recognize the role school plays in that success. High Point was no different than the large diverse schools described in Pamela Perry’s study where, “like many desegregated schools, Clavey was largely resegregated through tracking practices, with white students overrepresented in higher tracks.”<sup>275</sup>

Despite (racialized) class performance, more so than actual class status, seeming to impact teachers’ perceptions, my conceptualization of presumptive capital places high value on how my visible ethnic identity impinged upon my performance of and affiliation with non-model minority identity outside the classroom. I eventually perfected the practice of “code-switching.” I recognized that teachers were the “gatekeepers” who “granted rewards to those students who embrace the ‘right’ cultural signals, habits, and styles.”<sup>276</sup> This did not mean I abandoned the ‘ghetto’ sensibility I cultivated on the school bus and at the mall. I, like students from Carter’s study, “juggled both ‘black’ and dominant cultural capital, strategizing how they

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<sup>274</sup> Bettie, 9.

<sup>275</sup> Dolby, 38.

<sup>276</sup> Carter, 149.

would attain both authentic in-group status and academic mobility.”<sup>277</sup> Despite how central blackness was to “the moral imagination of America,” Richard Rodriguez points out that “nobody wants to be there except by metaphor.”<sup>278</sup> I wonder how this might illuminate how quickly I took on the image of the model minority when it served my purposes. I enjoyed my association with blackness, but it became a symbolic connection when I discovered my favored place in High Point’s academic hierarchy. Although I railed about it in social conversations and conducted the social experiment of stealing a painting in Chapter Eleven, when it came to the business of school, I was happily Indian again with all its requisite, racist privileges.

Although my performance of these distinct identities accounts surely for some of my success in the classroom, I imply throughout the memoir that it was tracking based on positive stereotyping that singled me and boys like “Victor, the Korean boy who never wore jeans or sneakers” out for the skimpy best my public schools had to offer, while leaving students like, “Francisco, a mouthy Nicaraguan in grubby, too big t-shirts,” behind.<sup>279</sup> I am more explicit in last chapter, detailing how my guidance counselor Mr. Stein paid for me to take the PSAT without having even met me, how administrators gave me preferential treatment, how I and a tiny minority of mostly non-black, non-Latino students, were provided more tools for accomplishment than the rest of the student body.

How much of this is verifiable? Could my success at school be the sole result of “the popular image of Asian American adolescents as well-behaved compared to

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>278</sup> Rodriguez, 30.

<sup>279</sup> A. Sandosharaj, 74.

other racial/ethnic groups”<sup>280</sup> Is it insincerely modest on my part to assert that my expert code-switching was responsible for my grades and high scores? How true does that ring in light of the converse, which would mean that my failure to perform different cultural attitudes in the classroom and hallway would have resulted in lower grades and scores? It is, at best, unclear. After all, there were early indicators of aptitude on which I do not dwell: I taught myself to read at age three to name one.

But to single out my own story without contextualizing in the narrative of those around me would be equally misleading. What accounted for Anna’s academic reversal once we moved to Prince George’s County? Why were Henry, Opel, Angela and Isarius my only black classmates in the Academic Honors Track, despite the school being predominantly black (and Latino)?

Like every young person, I had multiple identities, some that acted in concert and others that demanded a sophisticated reckoning and reconciliation. As much as the location of Langley Park as a “new” ghetto, caused me to racialize my class identity, the competing presumption of my identity as a model minority, allowed me to code-switch my way out of the pitfalls associated with the “oppositional culture” of a ‘ghetto identity.’ I did this willfully, aware of the dual privileges of membership I wanted to enjoy.

This double-sided desire did not disappear as I finally and forever exited the sad confines of my parents’ house in Adelphi as a joyous college student.

As an undergraduate, my classmates would have to take my word about many topics; whatever

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<sup>280</sup> Jang, 648.

their politics they had to acquiesce to my authority on poor public schools, on Mobb Deep's, if not Darwin's, survival of the fittest. I was surely taking liberties—I have never lived in a project, High Point High had only endured one shooting about which I knew, and my parents had managed to escape the poverty line (though barely and only because my father worked to fulltime jobs, the hourly wages to one I exceeded as a twenty-year-old). Yet among my college peers my mild indigence allowed me to feel singular dropping references to gang activity in my neighborhood, my father making hot dog curry in the absence of decent meat, my teenaged brother carrying a handgun, our house being robbed twice. Overriding it all was the plain fact that I was there at the university at all because I had received a full ride. What had once been a childhood mortification to disguise and elide, was now my signature stance."<sup>281</sup>

This trailed me throughout graduate school as I straddled the class I escaped, and its unavoidable racial face, and the class to which I ran as an adult. Richard Rodriguez describes this straddling as the plight of the “scholarship boy,” and it rings true for me as well. I never lost the impulse to revisit the contours of my racial, ethnic and class identities and retool them so that they fit more snugly. This despite how each morphs on its own and in concert with its counterparts. This purposeful manufacture of identity, this sense that my childhood identity was integral not only to my sense of adult self but might perhaps be useful in conceptualizing how identity can rest in spaces that are at once devalued and preeminent, can arise in contradictory and mercurial forms, and is invariably a contested, elusive ghost.

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<sup>281</sup> A. Sandosharaj, “A Reoccurring Envy,” in *American Literary Review* (Fall 2008), p. 112-122.



## Conclusion

A year after I graduated from High Point, Eric Dash, a smallish junior who still managed to start for High Point's varsity football team (albeit at the smallest position of cornerback), was shot dead in the eye at the McDonald's across the street from school. I had met him tangentially in junior high when he and my best friend Alice were "going together" for a few weeks. They made an adorable couple: he the self-identified baby thug with big loops of "good" hair, she the petite Chinese girl who could dance just like the black girls. I remember nothing about him other than he often wore a cartoon band-aid on his face, an odd fashion statement that would reappear in a few music videos years later when the "Dirty South" emerged on the hip hop scene. I wore ornamental band-aids myself, usually one on each knee, although I never purchased the cutesy ones, choosing instead to sport whatever I could find in the medicine cabinet.

At the time of his shooting death, little compelled me to take interest. Eric's murder was hardly more than an anecdote to verify the squalidness of my childhood to my new peers at college. I may have looked like the other South Asians wandering the commuter campus at UMBC, but I hailed from the wannabe hood. Eric's death was a misplaced way to verify my street credentials as authentic, never mind that I failed to consider what I thought I authentically was or what, for that matter, constituted authentic *anything*. I hardly thought about him. In fact, his death didn't even make the evening news.

Years later in grad school at Ohio State, when CNN alerted me that my childhood friend James Logan had shot and killed two police officers four houses up

from my parents' home, after which he was subdued by tasers in Langley Park under the throbbing of helicopters, I felt a renewed interest in Eric Dash's death. I recalled the day when Shon Paul, my brother's best friend, showed up with bullet holes in his Toyota. I remember how calm I was when they unceremoniously nestled the gun they shared into the Blazer's glove box before disappearing for hours. These were unusually brutal events, proximate and constitutive if not necessarily integral to my life. However peripheral, these were not tales that most children of South Asian immigrants would tell.

My lightweight search did not yield a murmur, however, although my quest was admittedly neither thorough nor inspired. There was no death record on file that I could pinpoint, no mention of the shooting in papers local to Beltsville or in the *Washington Post*. No obituary. When I tried to locate information about the crime from the Prince George's County Police Department, my muscles fatigued. My notebooks filled with notations for unreturned voicemails, wrong numbers, dead ends. Searching for Eric required more backbone than I had. Lastly, I began interrogating old pals and found little there as well. One friend had attended the funeral and remembered only that the program announcing his death had an advertisement for chicken wings on the other side. As far as my lazy pursuit was concerned, Eric had vanished.

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Before his suicide at age twenty-six, beat poet d.a. levy repeats this mantra in "Tombstone as a Lonely Charm,"

If you want a revolution  
return to your childhood and

kick out the bottom<sup>282</sup>

Revolution no longer seems desirable or feasible to my adult brain as it grows predictably more conservative each year it is removed from the ardor of self-proclaimed ghetto origins, but as far as aspirations in the abstract, progress is more palatable: a move towards a more integrated and friendly American society, one that relishes variety without romanticizing difference and constructs cultural membership on forms of identity that transcend—yet don't erase—traditionally divisive axes. While some might name this misplaced daydreaming, it is what Vijay Prashad and Robin Kelley call polyculturalism.<sup>283</sup> As opposed to multiculturalism, which often situates itself in a somewhat purist definition of culture that relegates and confines cultural categories to static and “authentic” manifestations, polyculturalism acknowledges the irreversible hybridity of all groups and seeks alliances that pivot on additional modes of identity: ideology, history, nationality, locality, class. Moving away from conventional identity politics, polyculturalism allows—in the way self-ethnography does—for the multiplicity of lived reality.

My memoir attempts to further explore this type of cultural cross-pollination by using memoir to examine how class identity can—circumstantially and never unequivocally—overpower racial and ethnic identity, especially if that class identity is at odds with the general, popular class identity of said group. This in turn helps us better understand the inherent class component of all racial and ethnic identities. In terms of Black identity, aspects of this have been well charted. For example, Todd

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<sup>282</sup> d.a. levy, *Buddhist Third Class Junk Mail Oracle: The Art and Poetry of d.a. levy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999): 206.

<sup>283</sup> Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

Boyd, in his work on race and gender in sports and entertainment, most particularly with the NBA, unraveled how class operates in the term of “nigga,” and how authentic Blackness was often equated with poverty, as well as a hyper-masculinity. This made for complicated results when those seeking to maintain authenticity and kinship with “real” blackness had either left or had never come from that poverty in the first place.<sup>284</sup> Twine, on the other hand, traced how wealthy, visibly Black girls didn’t consider themselves to be Black irrespective of their physical appearance. This was based solely on the weight of their class identity. This was true for them despite having at least one Black parent and *being* Black in terms of racial phenotype. Blackness, for them, was defined by poverty and a want for material things that they did not share.<sup>285</sup> Black was akin in many ways to “ghetto,” marked by a racialized class identity, or, equally complicated, a classed race identity. This approach to the understanding of racial/ethnic identity through a classed lens reappears in every chapter of my memoir. My own youthful perception of South Asian American, as well as mainstream white American, identity as middle-class, led me to search out other sources for identity construction that seemed a better fit. This prioritizing of class identity over racial/ethnic identity is especially unusual for South Asian immigrant

In terms of my life in Langley Park and Adelphi, this definition of blackness as a classed identity rang true enough that it occasionally, situationally overrode

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<sup>284</sup> Todd Boyd, “The Day the Niggaz Took Over: Basketball, Commodity, Culture and Black Masculinity,” in *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media and the Politics of Identity*, eds., Aaron Baker & Todd Boyd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

<sup>285</sup> France Winddance Twine, “Brown Skinned White Girls: Class, Culture and the Construction of White Identity in Suburban Communities,” in *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 3, no. 2 (July 1996): 204-224.

ethnic identity. Whether demanding a Black Cabbage Patch doll or forcing my hair into rigid finger waves that would wilt and fall in hours, I identified my classed experience as “Black,” or at least as non-Indian as it is conventionally conceived. Hair and dolls are matters of preference but, as I have quoted him before, Robert Silhol pointed out lucidly, “Taste is a socio-economic product.” When my brother installed a “system” in the family car, my uncle was appalled not by the impracticality or wastefulness of such an expensive accessory but by how the stereo equipment linked my brother to Blackness in such a patent, audible, inarguable way. Blackness was something to be avoided, one of the first lessons he had learned as an immigrant. My father himself had warned my brother early on against the using the n-word—“they do not like it”—as much to instruct him on how to define himself as much as to keep him out of danger. His resistance to my having a Black doll revolved around his fear that I would equate myself to Black people as much as my desire for one did represented that I could not toss my lot in with white people either. Both were desirable in alternate ways since both, however differently valued, were more American than me.

But this self-identification was reductive of course; the truth was much more hybrid. Even my father synthesized elements—it was only when he noticed some of our neighbors grilling hotdogs that Appa invented hotdog curry because chicken and ground beef were regularly out wallet’s reach. When he was unable to locate legal work outside the embassy he utilized a differential economy when he sold his skills as a mechanic, trolling junkyards for parts and business. His tinkering with cars mixed play with labor much as Robin D.G. Kelley describes the submerged economies at

work in the ghetto.<sup>286</sup> Excluded from the legitimate work force, he maneuvered his weekend hobby into an entrepreneurial enterprise that would sustain our household when he was under-employed, much like his Black and Latino neighbors.

Yet despite this class affiliation that occurred on an individual level, ethnic and racial identity are historical verities that are at least partially constituted and contingent upon external structures that subsume, complicate, or ignore class positionality. Much like the “brown-skinned white girls” from Twine’s research—girls who self-identified as white despite being phenotypically Black—my racialized identity, like theirs, was ultimately subject to society’s broader claims. When the girls reached puberty, they quickly realized that their “racial neutrality” was conditional on how their peers viewed them. They were isolated from dating arenas by their white peers who, however welcoming, recognized the girls as having a raced identity that co-existed with their class identity. Once on campus at Berkeley (where the study began), the “brown-skinned white girls” were forced by their now Black peers to assert a racialized identity that acknowledged the historically, real-politick significance of their Blackness. Their raced identity was malleable, subject to class but qualified—in some ways trumped—by racialized norms and expectations.

Similarly, at High Point, despite whatever social and personal kinship I felt towards those around me because of the absence of dollars in our households and streets, my ethnic identity had currency and consequence in the social reality of public school. The haze of stereotype cloaked me, rendering me brighter and more

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<sup>286</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “Playing for Keeps: Pleasure and Profit on the Postindustrial Playground,” in *The House That Race Built* ed. Lubiano (New York: Vintage Press, 1998).

worthy of forgiveness and attention than the majority of my dark-skinned peers. The seed of this was evident in elementary school, when the lucky curse of favoritism landed me in the Talented and Gifted Program while the bulk of other students with equivalent grades remained behind. And although I was part of the threesome who were thwarted from the sixth grade graduation trip to NY, I cannot but speculate whether the other two—two Black boys whose jeans were often muddied from overuse—were being targeted unfairly as disrespectful when they exercised their wit, as unteachable when they were only bored, as average when they were as bright as anybody who deserved a shot at good teachers and sincere encouragement, and if not, then they were easily as promising as me.

In my schooling the Model Minority Myth came to life as the capital it is, having value, an intergenerational wealth of sorts bequeathed by similar national ancestry—not limited to direct succession—and presumption of what that cultural lineage entails. My parents are Indian. Though the reality of their bank accounts detached their narrative from the common trajectory of most of their cohort, the presumption of my inclusion by way of our shared ethnic identity altered the angle of my route. The privilege was indisputable. Model Minority privilege operated in the dingiest of school buildings and the skimpiest of stakes, providing me an uninvited membership that I could do little to refute, if I were foolish enough to try. Membership has its privileges. Although my parents had scant capital of any brand—it is hard to ascertain whether Amma finished ninth or tenth grade—South Asian privilege herded me into the standard Asian American prototype on the proverbial right course via one of the most standard means: tracking.

My memoir follows its lineage as well. Like most memoirs of poverty—in terms of memoirs canonized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century this accounts for nearly 80 books at least—my memoir treats childhood as mobilization against the threat of its context, and the narrative arc is that of escape. From this approach, my memoir tells a familiar story but it does so through examining the escape-from-poverty narrative in a polycultural South Asian, Black American context that has not been previously examined. What also offers is an entry point into how to discuss the interrelated space of race, ethnicity and class through the specificity of lived personal experience, the immediacy of events both public and private, and the concrete terrain of buildings, books, jobs.

When Appa first arrived in the US, he worked at several fast food joints, what was then called Gino's Chicken—now Kentucky Fried Chicken—and even McDonalds. It is a common starting condition. There is perhaps arguably nothing more American, “the Golden Arches are now more widely recognized than Christian cross,” the act of consumption within its tiled walls “a social custom as American as a small, rectangular, hand-held, frozen, and reheated apple pie.”<sup>287</sup> The role this American icon played in the cultural lives of those around me— my father's introduction to the American workplace, my first and only birthday party, my family's initial exposure to American apple pie, the central locale for youthful socializing amongst my teenaged clan, the sad site of the murderous death of a classmate— imbues McDonald's with social significance; McDonald's acts as a

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<sup>287</sup> Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 5.

symbol of my American experience. How many intersecting lines of culture diverge and overlap in that single space? My memoir, like other forms of life writing, allows us to explore the intricate cultural-personal dimensions of sites such as these, houses for cultural signs, if not cultural facts.

Symbols, after all, can only be metaphors, regardless of how compelling. This type of writing is always hounded by its limitations, the lack of broader empiricism, the porous nature of any single experience or any single version of any experience. Yet such personal accounts also offer a level of specific understanding and insight badly obscured and simplified by work that generalizes about the allegedly shared experiences of ethnic groups. In this way, my memoir acts as one starting point to conversations on the malleability of identity, the irrefutability of class, and the qualification of these statements by the power of social claims and social memory, at once as imperfect and valid as that of a single community, of any one writer's account, or the half recollection of a dead boy who still remains, if only as metaphor.

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